Spårlöst Försvunnen (Vanished Without A Trace)

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by PeanutBrittles

Summary

The title is Swedish, which is a nice nod to the Viking roots of Skyrim. Modern woman falls into Tamriel. Specifically Skyrim. I wanted to attempt a more realistic take on what it would be like to suddenly appear in a violent, medieval magical world like Skyrim for a modern 21st century woman. Basically, it would suck. But also...be pretty? And yeah, really suck. Poor Sarah. But don't worry, Vilkas makes it all better, eventually.

Inspired by the Tenth Walker genre of Lord of the Rings fanfiction. But hopefully without the Mary Sues. Ha.
Creative solutions to vanilla problems, butterfly effect, evil really sucks when you're actually living with assassins, werewolves, blood sucking vampires, soul storing gems and so on.
Years later, as she huddled over a mug of mead, she would reflect on the smell.

It was the first thing she had noticed, here. Arriving. Whatever the hell, or Oblivion, had happened. The tang of pine sap, her ears immediately going numb from the 'brisk' breeze (warm, almost summery air, Solaf had teased her) the abrupt copper smell of blood. Like pennies in her mouth.

Later, it had been the stench that had almost knocked her over, the warm and all too soon welcome stench of civilization. Cows, goats, horses, people...excrement was everywhere. Ripening in the sun, squishing underfoot. Later, with the hard found painful wisdom she was slowly absorbing the more she lingered here, she would look for it, look for the shit, the pebbled droppings of elk and deer and the more substantial spoor of bear and sabrecat lion.

Shit meant life. Shit meant food.

And food was life. Everything here in Skyrim revolved around it. The lowliest farmer scratching in the permafrost to the highest land owning noble lived by it.

Lived by nature's law laid down by shit, food and blood.

It was, she grimaced as the mead slid thickly down her throat (too thick, like soup, she'd never get used to it) the beginning.

The smell was the start, the first clue that golly, Toto wasn't in Kansas anymore.

There had been a fire. Warmth, smoke, s'mores, smiles. Bryce's grin; god, she'd never get tired of her husband's eye-crinkling smile...so white bright against the dark natural tan of his skin. Hot hands on her waist, around her belly, snaking into her pants, covering her mouth when she made too much noise. It wouldn't do to wake up the soft lumpy sleepers in their mylar sleeping bags huddled around the firepit.

She fell asleep later as well, in his arms, lazily counting embers as they glowed white, flaking out like stars into the blackness...

A rough voice interrupted her woolgathering. "Done then? Let's keep moving."

Sniffing, she pushed the almost drained mug of mead away and turned to face Vilkas, the Companion. His smell was blood too; blood and salt and steel. Today, the steel was tempered with the herb green of elves ear and frost mirriam.
Days like today, she particularly enjoyed his smell. Days spent foraging and sunbathing were always preferable to the darker, albeit necessary evil of killing bandits, cave trolls and other monsters that went bump in the night. Grinning, she paid Hulda her gold for the mead and left The Bannered Mare, motioning for the Companion to follow.

"Sure you can handle this?" God, the sky was a glorious blue today.

"Aye," he frowned as she flashed him a brilliant, toothy white smile and pushed open the creaking gates. Skipping down to the meandering cobbled path that led to the tundra plains, Sigrid Farstrider, formerly Sarah Ferguson, hummed a tune for no one's pleasure or understanding but her own.

...mmm, weee're off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz...

************

The skeever brained s'wit was laughing and dancing down the road like a Khajiit acrobat high on skooma.

He had to admire her fortitude, Vilkas admitted to himself as he readjusted his pack and hurried along after her. Last night had been a bad night. Her eyes had that telltale white edge around them as she had knocked back ale after ale, trading jokes and lewd stories with the other Companions. Only the subtle tremors of her hands gave her away, but he knew where to look. They had been together long enough that he could ward off the worst of the fits, the cries she let out at night. Hopefully distracting her with the calluses on his fingertips, he would touch her...alter her dreams to something more pleasant.

Then her cries would turn to a different sort.

Nights like that, he remembered unwillingly the beginning. Literally stumbling across her, he had blinked stupidly in the dank cave upon seeing the torchlight shine, gleaming like mirrors in her too-wide eyes. And no matter how much ale he drank or how many years had passed, he would always recall with perfect clarity the bodies of her family scattered like broken dolls upon the cave floor.

Death and blood and beginnings.

It was how he thought of it still. There had been the beginning, and then everything that had come after. The end of his life, as he had known it, and the start of something wonderful and new and raw...with an outlander who had been Sarah who was now Sigrid.

The necromancer had been adept, but not expert; the bodies of adults and (he shivered in rage) children few enough that he might have lingered in that no name cave even longer practicing his foul spellwork. Had Vilkas taken the other job, the one in Eastmarch, he might have missed Sarah. Sigrid.
His woman.

Even a milk drinking fool would have been taken aback at the ferocity, the single mindedness of her vengeance. Grime covered and giggling, she had taken Aela's proffered dagger to remove her bindings and had stabbed what was left of the necromancer until his face was a red pulp. Chest heaving, she had glared at all of them as Aela cautiously led her out of the cave to a stream to wash up.

It wasn't until his watch in the early morning that he really looked. He might have the soul of a wolf, but he was still a man. Even Aela's eyes had lingered on the shine of her hair, the plumpness of a woman who had the good fortune to never miss a meal. The pure, unblemished whiteness of her skin.

No one, he reflected later on, had that type of flesh untouched by sun or snow. Fear prompted him to examine her as she slept fitfully for signs of vampirism, but his nose could find nothing but fear, shock and rage wafting from her. Not until his senses confirmed that she, it (*whatever it was*) was of mankind that the awareness of lust made itself known again to him.

Blinking in the starlight, he had masterfully reigned in his feelings. She was likely a noble brat, likely 'adventuring' and all too happy to pay a finders fee to be returned to her hold.

He remembered refusing to count the smaller, burlap covered bodies that waited, all too patiently, stacked against the fir and spruce. He had counted them thrice already.

Watching her stroll down the path, singing that jaunty tune that made not a lick of sense, Vilkas readjusted his sword.

...And followed his woman. The Dragonborn.
Chapter Summary

I will admit, I have lurked in the shadows reading fanfic for years. And Skyrim stuff has always been my favorite. After six years, this game still holds me captive and wastes my time. This is my first stab at writing, and I will admit to being heavily influenced by some of the excellent writers out there. Heiwako, Myrielle, Mortigaunt, Zoop, you and so many others have inspired me. I hope to create something that inspires, as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-Before the Beginning, in another world-

"I really want to hit Fairy Falls this year," Sarah mused as her avatar brutally decapitated another Thalmor soldier. "We've done Yellowstone so many times, and I am sick and tired of the same old trails. Oooh...watch this! Bam! That is so damn satisfying, getting that kill animation! Yes yes yes!

Her husband, Bryce Ramirez Ferguson, sighed. "Seriously, sweetheart, pick up Breath of the Wild. Or Bioshock Infinite. Hell, I'll even watch you play Fallout 4 and wrap Nuka Cola labels around some Diet Coke cans for kicks, just play something else." Sarah laughed as he groaned at the sound of another NPC splatted to the clickclickclick of her controller. He continued sharpening his Falkniven, the birch handle gleaming as he stropped the blade with practiced ease.

"You're up to six hundred hours now of gameplay in Tamriel. There can't be anything left to discover."

"There's tons left to do." She mused as she tapped the buttons on her Xbox One controller. Nirnroot, finally. She always had a hard time collecting that one to round up the side quest for Ingun BlackBriar. "I haven't collected all the dragon masks yet, and I'm not done levelling up my magicka for some of the spells I want to try."

"Come back to reality, babe. Maybe with the bonuses from my new job, we can build our own Dragonsreach. You'd like that, wouldn't you? A-line roof and all."

"Trust me - I'd love to build you a laundry room so the clothes don't end up thrown all over the hallway. We could build that chicken coop you've been talking about, and even have room left over for a real garden. I bet the kids would just love weeding."

"Those punks. Weeding builds character." Sarah grinned gleefully as she looted the Altmer corpses for a diamond, two rubies and spell scrolls. "Oh, I love Barenziah's Crown, it gets me so many shinies. Gotta say, it was worth slogging through hours of fetch quests for this baby."
Bryce tested a knife edge with his thumb. "Pffft. The Thieves Guild sucks ass, chica."

"No it doesn't! Well, yeah, they have a billion boring chores to do, but the payout is impressive. And I love the creepy vibe of the Ragged Flagon."

"Mi corazon, it's one a.m and I'm bushed. Put the controller away and come upstairs so we actually get some sleep tonight." Bryce kissed Sarah's cheek and casually turned off the XBox One.

"Noooo! Now I have to find more nirnroot!"

He laughed as she pulled a fake pout. "Come upstairs with me, and I'll let you find something else."

"You liar. You're not tired at all!"

"Chica, I'm never too tired for this. Come on...shhh, here. Let's close their door. Quietly...we can always pack for the trip tomorrow."

A sharp gasp, and a giggle. "...ack. Bryce! Those are attached, you know! Don't squeeze so hard!"

"...Quiet. The kids are sleeping. You wanna wake them up?"

"It's no fun when we have to be quiet."

"Oh baby, I'll make it fun. I promise. Come on."

*******************************

"Mom? Mooommm! Are we going yet?"

Sarah leaned over and snagged the last backpack, double checking the snack bags and water bottles attached to each one. A mob of children poured out of the van, yelling and screaming as they darted across the tire rutted dirt road of Yellowstone National Park.

"Ugh, finally, we're out of the car." Bryce sighed and stretched his back as he yawned. She patted his rear fondly. Eight kids, four their own and four fostered and finally adopted, and they were still in love and going strong. Fifteen years of marriage had seemed like a long time to Sarah's younger sister (perennial bride, in love with the drama of love) but the white hot electricity of their newlywed years had softened to a burning, steady thrum of secure trust and affection. They were both older (heavier, less likely to stay up late) but active enough for this.

And it had been too long. Too long since she had smelled fresh, green things untainted by exhaust or the eyesore of telephone wires and planes screeching overhead. They were going to go far enough away from the tourist-clogged roads that there would be nothing but nature for miles around. Sucking in a deep breath of lodgepole pine scented air, Sarah smiled. She could hardly wait.
"Let's pass out the packs, round them up and get going on the trail." Bryce suggested as the boys milled around the trailhead like restless puppies. Deftly snapping a teddy bear before it could hit the ground and get covered in dirt, she nodded in agreement. After six hours in the van she was just as eager to get moving. The cheerful radio host who announced the weather said they were good to go - 65 degrees, low chance of rain...a sunny day.

She inhaled once again and breathed out, refreshed and ready. "Come on, kiddos! Time to saddle up! We're doing the full loop today...no complaining!"

"But Mom! Sean ate my beef jerky and I'm starving!"

"-Did not! He took my juice, so it's only fair!"

"Break it up." Bryce straightened out the two fighting boys, smiling as Sarah bounced on the balls of her feet. Ready to go. "I think - no, wait. Don't lick that. Gross. Aha! Now we are ready to go! Say bye to the car, kids! We'll camp up at Fairy Falls tonight!"

A chorus of voices in varying octaves chimed as they began walking down the path. "Bye, car!"

"Bye car!"

"Bye internet! Bye-bye civilization." Sean, her oldest, muttered grimly.

"I heard that." Sarah called out, entranced by the sight of a geyser steaming not far off. Damn, she had forgotten her camera. It wasn't as though she'd have any time to actually snap a decent picture anyhow, with a herd of boys to care for. "Bye-bye Netflix when we get home if your attitude doesn't shape up, mister."

Attitude could make or break a vacation, after all.

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-Some time after the Beginning-

The Ragged Flagon was more smelly than ragged. Like all the piss and shit from the entire city and the towns had filtered downstream and had collected right here, in the odious underbelly of Skyrim's criminal underworld.

And it was dark, to top off the stank with a dash of blessed obscurity. Blessed, she told herself, because she didn't want to see any more clearly just what those piles of refused heaped in the corners were really composed of. She nearly stumbled over a skeleton half concealed by rotten clumps of hay, and heard a high pitched squeak as she accidentally stepped on something soft.

Picking up the pace, she averted her eyes from studying anything but the path in front of her after
Ugh, Riften. The city itself reminded her of bread she had bitten into once... only to find little weevil like black specks crawling out. Like that biblical quote about bones in whited sepulchers. Rot amidst ripeness. Which was a shame, since Riften from the outside was a pretty town. Aspen groves with their softly falling golden leaves and the peaceful lake hid the core of corruption that hid beneath the bustling markets. Mjoll and the softhearted Jarl and her brood sure weren't getting anywhere anytime soon, despite their better efforts.

Ultimately, the vibe tended towards odoriferous and skeever filled; tending towards rodents that walked on two legs.

"No, like I said, I have no interest in joining your Guild." Sigrid felt her smile crack at the edges. "I just want to find a man named Esbern who was last seen in the Ratways. Are you sure you don't know where exactly he is?"

Delvin Mallory, even more thuggish and scarred in the flesh, shifted in his seat and scratched his chin. "Yeah, nope. Sorry. If you couldn't hold up your end with Brynjolf then I'm off the hook."

She sighed. In the game, sidestepping the pickpocket quest and avoiding ruining Brand-Shei's life was a noteworthy option for the more altruistically inclined Dragonborn. But ever since she had (eaten? absorbed?) taken her first Dragon soul, her temper frayed more often and more spectacularly.

"There might be something in it for you, if you cooperate." She jingled her septim pouch meaningfully. Blood and shit might make the world go round up top, but down here the almighty septim ruled.

"Well," Delvin snorted and spit off to the side, his bright eyes missing nothing, scanning over her neatly repaired armor...stopping to rest on Skyforge blade strapped to her hip. "I might know which passageway he would likely be squattin' at. But me hands are tied."

"Well, I can see you don't want any trouble." Coins clinked as the small pouch traded hands furtively beneath the table.

"That I don't. And if I were you, I wouldn't go down to the second level. Might end up in a cookpot...or worse."

Transaction completed, the thief sniffed. "Tonilia, is that your stew? Horker stew?" He leaned over and passed gas, muttering out of the side of his mouth. "Second level. Third hallway, fourth door. The one with more locks than a virgins chastity belt, aye?"

Eyes hardening, Sigrid sauntered away, muttering under her breath. Chastity belt? The old dirty coot had probably never laid eyes on a virgin in his life.

But, he was a helpful dirty old bastard. Her recollections of the Main Quest had always been spotty, since it was her least favorite of the many questlines in Skyrim. She vaguely remembered offing Thalmor spies in the Ratway and waiting forever for Esbern to unlock his door (paranoid git). With any luck, the real thing would involve less lightning bolts headed her way and an efficient escape from Brynjolf and his lackies trying to bring back the world of organized crime.
Was there even a way to get rid of the Thieves Guild for good?

She sighed. Dragonborn. Errand girl. She would have loved a day when no one noticed her and nothing was requested, begged or demanded.

Decisions had been so much easier to make back when she had first arrived here in Skyrim. In the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

**After reading and rereading the first two chapters, I really don't like them anymore. This one in particular jumps so far that it feels a bit disjointed. None of the others are this drastic.

I'll keep them for the sake of explanation, but the writing so far is evolving in a more linear style than flashback focused as I initially thought it would be. There is SO much one could do with an Elder Scroll game experience with a modern OC. I will be editing chapters here and there, so as of 5/13/2017 expect some changes to the chapters to keep the narrative logically flowing nice and smooth.

I love you guys. Really, the readers of this fandom have got to be the brightest, most intelligent people ever. Keep the comments coming!
There was no going back.

Sarah had read countless fanfiction about modern characters thrown into Middle Earth, or Thedas, less commonly Tamriel. Many fans online adored arguing about nuance - whether or not the unlucky person entrapped in a fantasy world would understand the native languages, whether or not it was Mary Sue-ish to already have studied combat, and so on.

Would they be attractive? Would they bend the laws of the universe and ensnare that gorgeous Legolas Greenleaf or seduce the bashfully handsome Commander Cullen?

Waking up in the Dead Mans Drink, alone and penniless, with a lump on her head the size of a tangerine was not very promising. 

If this is some sort of karmic joke by God or by a Daedra, Sarah thought viciously to herself, then I am going to defile every shrine I see. Unless, she realized with not a bit of trickling fear, said Daedra could take offense and whisk her away somewhere even more unpleasant.

Cyrodiil two hundred years ago during the Oblivion Crisis would have been far more unpleasant.

As she lay there on the grotty hay stuffed mattress (with straws poking at her skin like little shivs through the rough covering) Sarah stared at the ceiling and tried very hard not to think. Not to think about anything. About how she had gotten here, wherever here really was, and why.

At least their deaths had been quick.

Damn it, her mind really wasn't cooperating today. Sarah purposefully blanked her mind, and then swallowed. It was apparent, from the arrival and subsequent rescue of her person by the Companions of Ysgamor, Skyrim's furry version of the Fighters Guild, that she was indeed languishing in Skyrim.

Fucking Skyrim. How the hell that had happened, she could hardly guess. She had been asleep, and then -

No. She wouldn't think about it. Not yet. Not right now.

Skyrim was better than Middle Earth, she tried to convince herself. Sarah had always indulged a teensy fantasy of being a Tenth Walker with the Fellowship of the Ring. Reading scores of
fanfiction, both good and bad, had only helped it along.

But Tamriel...Skyrim. Skyrim, home of the Nords, current climate of a bloody civil war, filled with vampire lairs and draugr and creepy soul gems and...

*Don't freak out. Stay cool.* Stretching out her fingers and toes, she realized that a few of them had been splinted crudely with twigs and binding cloth. Twisting her mouth, she leaned over in the crude bed and tried to spit the scum in her mouth. More like dried dust, actually...felt like she had been sleeping with her mouth open for days. Convinced she had gotten it all out, she shivered as she tried with her good hand to pull herself closer to the center of the lumpy mattress.

The door creaked open, and what could only be Valga Vinicia walked through holding bandages and a bucket. "Hey, you're awake. You must be blessed by the gods or something. Don't worry, you're paid in full for the next week."

Sarah cleared her throat. Thank God she could understand her; those stories where the hero had to painstakingly learn a completely new non-Romantic language were terrifying. "Thank you for your help. I think my head is..."

"Yes, the worst wound. I see that." Putting the bucket, which Sarah realized was filled with steaming water and a fuzzy green plant down, Valga wrung out a rough washcloth and began cleaning Sarah's cuts and scrapes. Rebandaging the wounds that had soaked through with blood and pus. "You have a strange accent, outlander."

"Do I?" Sarah chuckled hoarsely. "I'd rather thought you were the one with the accent."

"Oh I do." Valga did something that made Sarah gasp, and then she rewrapped the head bandage a bit tighter. "Sorry, got to get the pus out. Yes, I've been told my Imperial voice is still there. Even though I've lived in this town longer than many of my customers have been alive. Pssh. Ungrateful snow backs."

Sarah cleared her throat again. She had definitely fried her vocal cords from...from (don't think about it) and they were making it difficult to phrase the questions she really wanted answered. "Where are we?"

"Falkreath, at my place. Dead Man's Drink. All the places here have death names, its a sort of nod to the graveyard."

She looked down at her stained threadbare tunic. It barely covered her knees. A rough sort of loose pant covered her legs, and her feet had been wrapped in yards of mummy-like cloth in lieu of shoes. Apparently her modern clothes hadn't made it...one less thing to explain, perhaps.

No way home. No going back.

No one to miss her if she did.

Sarah closed her eyes tight and started chuckling, her breath hitching. Valga's pitying look morphed
into a terse scrutiny. "You alright?"

Trying to to constrain the enormous unnamed emotion threatening to erupt in a fountain of blubbery snot, Sarah nodded. Tears managed to leak out despite her efforts, tracing warm paths down her cheeks.

Well. She was doing a bang-up job of holding it together. She was a freaking bawl-bag. But maybe her tears would prompt the Imperial (shit, she was really here, wasn't she?) to be more forthcoming.

"Tell me, Valga..." Sarah mumbled, wiping her nose on her sleeve and wincing at the scratchy cloth. Valga instantly looked cautious, and Sarah remembered she hadn't been told her name. "Sorry, must have heard it earlier. Did ah, did anyone else make it out of there? The...the cave? The Companions would have brought them here as well."

Sympathy warred with pity in Valgas dark eyes. "No, dear. You were the only one they brought out alive. I'm so sorry."

"I see." A gruff chorus of yelling and laughter and the stomping of heavy boots sounded, along with the slamming of the inns main doors.

Valga shot her another look, and pushed her back onto the bed. "I've got to go. Sleep now. I'll bring you a potion later, if you're awake."

Numbly, she watched the Imperial gently close the door and looked around the room. There was her bed. An unevenly sawed end table and rough wardrobe. Water dripping from some moss growing in the cracks of the walls beside her.

Sarah dimly remembered reading something about moss being placed in the cracks of cabin homes in ye olden days (and wasn't that something, to have been transported to the land of no toilet paper and gory death) because moss blocked drafty gaps and insulated the home.

It probably absorbed the incredible amount of water in the air here as well. If she turned her head a little more, she could see a wisp of fog snaking its way across the floorboards where there were more cracks than board. Sarah remembered the family trip they had taken to the Olympic Peninsula of Washington, where the fogbound forests were literally dripping in ferns, moss and waterfalls. She'd thought it beautiful at the time.

Oh God. Tears streamed out of her eyes as her mind unwillingly flashed the events of the previous few days before her minds eye. Bryce. The kids. The blood. God, all the blood. More than she'd ever seen.

_Dammit, don't think about it, really don't think about it...don't think don't thinkthinkthinkthink_
Death and Sarah had already been acquainted. She had seen death in its various forms, drowned, decapitated, buried, and 'crispy crittered' as the charming firemen of Rapid City called the burn victims. She had served in the Pennington County Search and Rescue team near the Black Hills in South Dakota for years in her spare time.

Sometimes, the people she was searching for had been alright. Cold, thirsty and scared, but none the worse for a night out in the forest.

Most weren't so lucky. About three fourths of the time, the calls Sarah was sent out on ended up in body recovery. She had hated the drowning victims the most, the rubbery skin so distended with water and bloat that dental records were often required.

_Congratulations, death and reanimation by necromancy. You beat out all the other types in my book._ God, the clouded eyes of her children staring vacantly, bodies swaying in a ghastly simulation of life. Helpless, hobbled with leather strips and gagged. The cooling, stiffened limbs of her husband contorting in jerky motions, mouth slack and unspeaking...

No matter how she screamed, begging for him to speak, only speak and tell her this was just a nightmare, baby, don't worry...

She shivered, as a water droplet plopped onto her forehead. _Magic._ Of all the fucked up things to be real in this oh-so realistic and yet fantastical place.


Sarah clenched her fists. They were beyond caring, now. But she was still here. That first night, with the chaos and confusion as they had awakened to find a necromancer calmly tying and transporting the bodies of her babies, all she could do was drool and pin him with her enraged gaze.

Never mind _what the hell_ had happened. When her mind had awakened from apathy and the dull numb shock, she would address the question of dimension jumping, Daedric interference and possibly have a little chat with Savos Aren, current ArchMage of Winterhold. Why not? _Off to see the wizard_, an inane voice giggled somewhere in her skull.

The Mass Paralysis spell was a bitch to cast, she remembered watching the necromancer sweat as he recast it painfully every half an hour. Interesting that he was strong enough to do so, that was Expert Alteration if her hours playing as a Dunmer BattleMage were any indication. The bastard was probably an Altmer, judging by his dirty blonde hair and bloodshot green eyes.

She hoped he was rotting in the cave still, face smashed in like a watermelon. No one like that deserved burial near her babies. Near decent people.

Of course, she didn't care about the improbability of dreaming herself into Skyrim at that point. She snorted. _Like any of this was even real._ This was a shitty nightmare, she wanted to wake up immediately, smell the woodsmoke, see the tall pines of Yellowstone and begin the giant task of
feeding the bottomless pits that were the appetites of her boys. This...weirdness reminded her of the

time she and Bryce binge watched The Walking Dead and she began having nightmares of beating
off snarling zombies and rescuing her kids from hopeless situations. After that horrid episode where
the kid and his mom got eaten on camera, she stopped watching.

The blood pulsed in her temples, made tighter and more painful by the goose egg lump. Her hands
ached. Her back was sore, and she had to pee soon...by the looks of her bedroom, she was going to
have to do it in that little basin over in the corner that absolutely reeked and she was not looking
forward to it.

_Real. Real. Real._ All too real.

Dead.

They were dead. Her husband and babies had been killed while she watched. Dead and probably
being buried in the massive graveyard of Falkreath, while she lived. Why hadn't she died as well?

Shit.

This wasn't a dream. She scrubbed at her eyes, but no matter how hard, how painfully she
pressed...the wet and rough little room reappeared before her eyes.

_Be rational. First things first. Think about your situational awareness...what you have. Where you
are. What just happened. The W's...think think think._

She had been rescued by Vilkas _(_creepy gray silver eyes, were they really that light in game?)_ and
Aela, more beautiful and predatory than her NPC avatar had ever been. Her memory was jagged and
punched, recalling snapshots more than a flowing sequence of events. She remembered.

Bedtime. Bryce. Embers like stars in the night air. A sudden rush of wind. The penny-iron rot of
blood. God her head hurt. The babies? THE BABIES.

_Real. Real. Real._

She turned over as much as her splinted hand would allow and cried.

_REAL. REAL. REAL._

Chapter End Notes

_Sorry not sorry for allowing Sarah to understand Norse, or whatever language the Nords_
of Skyrim speak. I do love those stories where they endure countless agonizing months of learning a new language or two (ScriptrixDraconum's amazing work comes to mind) but I cheated and gave her an accent. Everyone gets accents. Ten voice actors for everyone in Skyrim? Please. (Not that they weren't talented, but still.)

If I were suddenly flung into a fantasy reality I would be royally freaking out. The age old questions of what happened, will they miss me, can I get back? Etc, etc and so on. Sadly, Sarah won't have any angst over family left behind in her old life, because seriously, have you played Skyrim? The body count is waaay up there. You can't go for a stroll without tripping over skeletons, draugr, reanimated zombies, and even bits and pieces of people gnawed on by animals. Sarah will come across the wonders of life in Tamriel later. For now, backstory. And backstory, to spur her character into learning actual goddamn combat and getting her out of a very real depressive funk, will be TMIT.
Runil, Priest of Arkay of the monstrously sprawling graveyard in Falkreath, had a pleasant face. Sharp and pointed, like all Altmer (she assumed, she had only seen one other) but drooping with soft, lined wrinkles. Like an anorexic shar-pei dog. Sharpness and softness in a singular, alien face.

He had been kind as well, handing her the small satchel with a pat to her back and a gesture to the shrine. "Perhaps it will give you peace, my child. I will be holding services outside if you feel you have more questions that I might answer.” He left the small cottage, quietly closing the door behind him.

Sarah took a deep breath. So far, Runil's house smelled the best out of all the huts in Falkreath. Beeswax candles and dried herbs managed to overpower the stench of open sewer and moldy rot that pervaded the rest of town. Well, she hadn't had the pleasure of visiting the Jarls Longhouse; but if Siddgeir was the Jarl, she'd pass on that pleasure. Her knees scraped the planed wooden floor as she knelt and opened the satchel.

...and discovered her ring. Her and Bryce's wedding rings, carefully cleaned by the looks of it. And at the bottom of the satchel, a still-stained and raggedy plush Hiccup dragon toy.

Had Adam still been holding it when he was taken? Sarah wondered dumbly as her hands shook, squeezing the rings until they bit into her palm.

She sat like that for what seemed like hours, though it may have been mere moments. The candlelight flickered on the stone ceiling as Sarah contemplated everything and nothing.

Someone had saved these. Knowing they would mean something to her, instead of hocking them to the nearest peddler.

She had to ask.

But first, a prayer. To Arkay. She shivered. Having lived a semi devout life as a former Catholic school girl, she had attended Easter and Christmas mass and thought little of it afterward.

But, if she was here (HERE, really, in Skyrim. Part of her just giggled. Another bit of her was screaming. She shut that bit deep away, to inspect later when she had the luxury of falling apart) then that meant that the gods were real. Arkay listened to prayers. And healed.

Because, man, did her head hurt. She could feel the fine tremors and groggy heat she always associated with fever. Her head pounded beneath the bandage, already grimy with sweat and blood. Healing would be good. Then, then...

She would thank them. Him.

It must have been them who gave instructions for burial of her family, who saved the rings and toy for her later, who paid for her shelter, food and care. After puttering around Dead Mans Drink doing simple chores to bide her time, she’d noted the menu prices and had come to realize that the hundred or so gold septims the Companions had spent on her recovery was no small fee.
She would thank them, and pay them back.

Quest marked and given, she thought bemusedly. Looking up at the blackened sundial of Arkay's shrine, she thought about things (stuff and things, the giggler supplied)

About life, and death. And rebirth.

"Thank you, Arkay, for your watch over the graves of my children and husband." She cleared her throat, voice still rough. "If you truly look after those who have lost, help me heal, so that I may work, and travel, and pay back my rescuers."

"And..." she inhaled raggedly. "Give me the strength to...to learn how to protect others, in order to keep what happened to me from ever happening to anyone else."

As Sarah bowed her head, a prickling tingle enveloped her entire self. She didn't see any threads of white light like in the game, but the shrine seemed to glow a bit brighter in the candlelight. A feeling of peace pervaded the tiny hut.

Feeling better than she had since the beginning of all this, Sarah stood. Her fingers stretched on their own accord, headache gone, aches and pains removed to feel an astonishing wellness. Even the twinge in her hip, an old sciatic annoyance, had been healed.

She found Runil outside, planting nightshade (she had asked to confirm what the dusty violet flowers were, just to be sure, because they were everywhere here) near the new graves that rested near the end of the path.

Mouth dry, she handed him a scrap of parchment Valga had offered her earlier that day. "Here are the names, Priest. Thank you for all your hard work. And...thank you for saving the rings for me."

Runil's sparse eyebrows shot up. "Saved? Nay, I usually bury those who enter here to their rest with all effects in place. Vilkas, one of the Companions, you may remember...he handed this to me with instruction that you were to receive it when you were well. And you look well, my child."


"I'll admit your peculiarities have been...amusing, child." Sarah blushed as she recalled the latest incident where Delacourt the bard had gotten her drunk on Cyrodilic brandy and she had taught him all the words to 'Hooked on a Feeling'. Blue Swede had never sounded so good as it had on Delacourt's lute.

She had jumped on the stone rim of the firepit in Dead Man's Drink and danced wildly, everyone clapping and cheering her drunken fool self on. Now, whenever she ran errands to Gray Pine Goods, Solaf gave her a sly wink. Damn him.

"But no matter," he continued kindly. "Please, take this." He pressed a heavy necklace in her hands. It could only be an amulet of Arkay, with a small heavy sigil of the shrine looped at the bottom. Chewing her lip, Sarah unlaced the ends and slipped the two wedding rings on either side of the pendant. There they gleamed, looking like they belonged.

"It will aide you if you somehow become injured again, although Valga will not appreciate you undoing her hard work." Runils eyes crinkled again in a smile. "Go with Arkay, my child. Life is far too short...do not waste it."
"I won't." Hefting the satchel up on her shoulder, Sarah started up the path towards the rutted mud street that was the hub of Falkreath. Stopping suddenly, she turned back to the old priest. "Runil, I know that you served in the last war. As an Altmer mage."

Runil's back stiffened where he had bent over the plots of nightshade plant. "Oh? Have you found my journal, then? They are regrets I do not intend to forget, if you wouldn't mind returning it to me."

Sarah huffed. "I am definitely not ready to risk my life in some mountain pass. Not yet. Maybe never."

She paused, considering. "I understand that this life must be peaceful, especially after the war. I can't imagine what that must have been like. Particularly a war with mages, and magic." Shivering with sudden cold, she blocked the sudden snapshot of the necromancers staring, dead eyes bisected by a dagger. Her handiwork.

Noticing his mouth slowly turning downwards, she added "Why not practice restoration magic, if you truly want to atone for your past? And don't ask how I know," she warned as Runil's mouth opened. Mouth snapping shut, he peered at her.

"Those are dangerous questions, child. The townsfolk have finally become accustomed to my presence...a non magic-wielding presence. I am not sure how they would greet my efforts to aid them in other ways."

Sarah shrugged. "You won't know if you don't try."

"Perhaps not." Came his quiet reply.

"If it means that much to you..." she shuffled her booted feet in the loamy dirt. "I owe you for the graves, and the stone markers. If I can find your journal, I will. I promise."

Runil nodded, once.

Suddenly restless, she turned without another word and began jogging back to Dead Mans Drink. Eleven days had passed since she had awakened, helpless in Valga Vinicia's care.

It was time to repay her debts.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus points if you get the 'stuff and things' reference. You know you did.
Chapter Summary

In which Sarah Ferguson becomes Sigrid Farstrider, discovers Moon Sugar (potent stuff), travels with a Khajiit caravan, and learns how little she knows (even less than Jon Snow, as it turns out).

Can I just say, I love the voice actors for the Khajiit. They have almost a dusky, Adele like quality. I would pay money to hear them sing over most of the bards.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sarah had, in what she had started thinking of as her 'previous' life, been considered a passably good outdoorswoman. She went hiking in decent shoes, brought a fully charged phone, always let friends or family know where she would be and for how long, kept an eye on the weather and could make a decent fire given some time and if the wood was dry enough.

She knew nothing.

Sarah knew that now. NOTHING. Less than nothing. Her brain was an addled mush of modern living. It might as well have been packed full of tundra cotton for all the good her previous bush crafting skills did her here in Skyrim.

For starters, it was freezing cold. Sarah had encountered winters on the prairie where her eyelashes froze together at thirty degrees below zero. Here, spit bounced. Here, if you left your mug of ale out long enough in the cold, it froze within minutes. The Nord villagers in Falkreath often waltzed about in nothing but light tunics and leggings, claiming the spring breeze was so pleasant this time of year. Sarah thought it was bracing and made Valga laugh when she had asked if there was such a thing as fur underwear. "Yes, but can you imagine washing it?" Valga guffawed.

Hell, she wasn't even in the Pale and the cold had been unbearable, on that first night by herself.

Bilbo Baggins had been better prepared, she mentally complained as she hid under the drooping boughs of a wayward pine, struggling to light the damp tinder she had painstakingly collected. It was just too damn damp here, the rain (which sometimes turned to slushy snow at night) had soaked into everything. She had managed to find some small branches protected from the wetness under the heavier evergreen trees, but what was not soaked to the root was often covered in green, slimy mold and curling ferns.

Oh, for a lighter and some dry firewood in nice plastic packaging, she thought fondly. And maybe some hot chocolate with marshmallows, a big burger with everything on it and fries on the side. If only she had saved enough for another night at an inn. Even Delphine might have taken pity on her and let her stay for five gold septims instead of ten. Maybe, and then maybe not. She had been crusty and ornery enough in-game without testing that theory here.

She had worked her ass off in Falkreath running errands, cooking and cleaning at the inn, even trying her hand at chopping firewood. Her previous experience with axes had been entirely limited to
splitting neat, sawed off rounds with few to no knots in the wood. Here, the logs came gnarled and moss coated...and as her aching knuckles and wrists protested, more knots than actual wood. Bolund had sneered at her efforts, but Solaf had just laughed. "Keep at it, and you'll eventually become more proficient, Breton."

She hadn't the heart to correct him. Her blisters hurt too badly to summon a witty comeback, and even if she had one she wasn't sure what it would be. Surely she could pass as a Nord here? In her previous life (there she went again, like she was never getting back) her height of 5 foot eight inches was considered decently tall. Here, the Nords came in two sizes: giant, and mammoth. Maybe she could plead half blood status? She began amusing herself by imagining what different blended races might look like. An Orc and Altmer baby might even be cute, she reasoned.


But daydreams could kill time only so far. At last, Sarah had finally saved up enough to afford some essentials on The List, as she called it in her head. The List entailed the most basic supplies needed to keep her alive:

THE LIST:

- A full set of leather armor in good repair, with quality boots being the highest priority. (She had tried on the iron armor only to take a step and fall over, much to the amusement of Lod).
- Enough healing potions and cold resistance potions to last until Whiterun (she hoped).
- One functional bow and a quiver full of arrows. Not that she'd had any success in practice, but it couldn't hurt to keep trying.
- One short sword or dagger for close quarters combat, reasonably sharp.
- Three days worth of travel rations (mostly ale, bread, cheese and dried fruit. Food here in Skyrim tended to be remarkably fresh and delicious, or the complete inedible opposite. Surprise!)
- One small, precious bag of Moon Sugar, for the purpose of begging passage with a Khajiit caravan. Any caravan, actually, that was willing to have her. Horses being far out of her price range, she figured that if she could catch the caravan that traveled from Markarth to Whiterun she could at least be protected halfway through her (increasingly desperate) journey.

With a tiny fire finally burning albeit weakly, Sarah shivered and wrapped her leather clad arms around herself. If only the decent furs had cost just a bit less, but the moon sugar (deemed absolutely necessary for bargaining with the cat people) had swallowed up her savings. Plus, the cheapest furs had a mangy, skunky aroma. When she had asked Solaf why certain smaller animals smelled so rank, he had shrugged and smiled. "Just as you'd rather eat nice salted beef than roasted skeever, I'd rather spend a bit more for a proper bear pelt than a ragged goat or wolf throw. Always pay for quality if it touches your skin, woman."

If only bear fur didn't cost thirty septims, she thought sourly as she prepared for what would surely be a long, sleepless night. Awake, cold and alert for wolves, blood sucking vampires, man eating werewolves, bandits....

Huh. Maybe she wouldn't have such a hard time staying awake, after all.

*****

Her luck changed considerably with the rising sun. As she forced herself along the road after that miserable night, she came across Ri'saad and his band of Khajiit traders.

And thank God for that. The game had been deceptively quick when it came to traveling distances. She estimated it had taken her an entire day just to bypass Riverwood and camp outside the trail that
might have led to Bleak Falls Barrow (it was tempting, but she passed by Alvor and company without a single peep other than a stoic nod. She had already gotten too many strange glances by calling strangers by name in Falkreath and a delay couldn't be helped.) At this rate, her rations would run out. And she was starting to feel in her chest a pang of loneliness, as Sarah had never (don't think of it) been alone for so long in many, many years.

The moon sugar netted her some raised eyebrows and approving stares (though it was hard to tell with Khajiit facial features being what they were.) Payment accepted, they deemed her acceptable traveling company and continued what they estimated to be two days journey to the outskirts of Whiterun.

Within an hour, she had settled into surprisingly friendly banter with the guard Khayla and the female trader named Atahbah (who seemed especially appreciative of the sweet gift/bribe.) Ma'randru'jo (what a mouthful) the well dressed and rather prissy male was more aloof. Grizzled leonine Ri'isaad led the group in silence, ears pricked and searching for signs of predators ahead.

Atahbah playfully danced back and forth along the road. At times, the red furred Khajiit even swiped at a passing butterfly. Khayla had left a large litter (her term, not Sarahs) of siblings back in Elsweyr and had been invited by Ri'isaad to share in the wealth that surely would be brought by selling goods in Skyrim. Didn't she also teach the Sneak skill, Sarah wondered idly as she took in Khaylas cumbersome steel armor. Apparently they all had hidden depths here.

The first night had been an education, as well as a bit of a culture shock. Having contributed what was left of her meager food stores, Sarah sprawled in front of the fire feeling full and warm from what Khayla called 'elsweyr fondue'. Kind of like regular cheese fondue, with a sharp aftertaste like brie with a caramelized nutty flavor.

The Khajiit dipped everything from bits of bread, carrots and even fish in the bubbling pot. Soon, flat hand drums and bone filled gourds were brought out, and Atahbah danced as Ri'isaad and Khayla sang something vaguely Arabic sounding in their slurred, raspy voices. Maybe more Bollywood than Arabic? The sonorous chanting was definitely lulling her into a sleepy trance, helped along by whatever they had done to that fondue.

It was glorious, weird...and comforting to be traveling with a group. She had half expected to be robbed blind and left in some ditch (based on the truth of certain stereotypes in Skyrim, Ashkari didn't know shit) Ma'randru'jo relaxed enough after ale and fondue to beckon Sarah closer and actually began braiding her hair.

"It is such a lovely color," Khayla hummed thoughtfully as his clawed fingers gently separated the cinnamon brown strands. Too buzzed to care, Sarah slumped almost completely in the cats lap as his nimble fingers swiftly wove a ribbon (red, Atahbah insisted) into her hair. Khayla brought out a wooden wind instrument and a reedy, quivering melody filled the air.

"Indeed. This one thinks that thought should be given to what Sarah wishes to do once we have arrived at our destination." Ri'isaad slowly ended drumming with a few taps of his padded fingers.

"Thoughts? Like what?" Clicking his tongue, Ma'randru'jo gestured at Sarah to get up from his lap. She sneezed as his tail flicked her nose. He reacted with a toothy grin.

"As to what Sarah should pursue as a venue of work in Whiterun. So far, this one does not see that Sarah has any plans beyond repayment of debt." Ri'isaads claw tapped meaningfully on the ground. "This one has told you of our inability to enter the cities and towns of Skyrim without inviting violence. We are not trusted within the Nords walls...and yet business is transacted and wares are purchased." The old cat thrummed in thought. "This one thinks Sarah should choose a new name for
a new life, and leave Sarah behind."

"Oh, yes!" Atahbah hissed. "This one agrees! Sarah is so foreign, like a Breton name. If one wishes to be accepted, one must look and act the part. Sarah must become a born and bred Nord." She swayed in the firelight, the gold rings in her ears clinking together.

"What Nordic names appeal?" Khayla murmured, throwing a couple of furs towards Sarah. She brushed blades of grass and bugs off the furs and shrugged.

"Hmm...it's not a terrible idea," she spoke slowly. No going back, only forward. She could address the hidden fear that this was still just a nasty dream later. And maybe find out if skooma was worth becoming addicted to, if only for peace of mind. "I kind of like the name Astrid." Suck on that, Dark Brotherhood. If she ever actually ran into the lovely assassin (HELL no), at least she'd have a conversation starter.

"Astrid!" Ma'randru'jo hooted. "A pretty flower? No, this one needs a name that speaks of something the Nords respect. Sigrun, perhaps?" His left paw unfurled to reveal a dancing ball of light. Her sleepy eyes tracked it, widening as glowing butterflies of light wisped and floated away. How about that. Magic could be pretty. "Helga?"

"How about Sigrid?" Sarah muttered sleepily, already laying her head on the musky furs. The magical butterflies slowly dissolved into nothing. Pleasant to think that Skyrim had harmless magic, along with the mangling and malevolent kinds. The night sky was inky black, showcasing the strange galaxy and double moons (Masser and Secunda, she remembered vaguely). Grey smoke rose in spirals and whorls, dissipating into the cold tundra air.

Sigrid started with S, like Sarah. Sigrid had been the name of her Boy Scout, do-good Nord warrior woman...one of many avatars begun and discarded in favor of the dastardly sneaky types Sarah always enjoyed playing. Her heart thudded with sudden guilt as Sarah suddenly realized that if she ever magically made it back to her reality that she would never again be able to play as a vampire, thief or murderer again. Once, the caravan had fallen silent as they passed a burnt down cabin. Curious, she had ignored the silent pleas of Khayla to stay close and drawing near, had seen enough. Pale, dessicated bodies flung in unnaturally still poses. A bandit hideout, most likely, judging by the brazen show of stacked mead bottles and rotting food carcasses.

They all had their throats slashed open, with no blood pools or splashes in sight.

"Sigriiid..." Khayla hoomed thoughtfully. "This one likes it. A battle name, a blood name. Sigrid Short-Strider." Her fangs lifted in a cat-smile, her husky laughter trailing behind her as Sarah mock-glared at the furred guard. She may have fallen behind a few times due to her lack of stamina, but that was uncalled for.

Sarah, newly christened Sigrid, only smiled sweetly when Khayla awoke the following morning with a earsplitting yowl to find a decapitated skeever head placed lovingly on her chest armor.

Chapter End Notes

The Swedish name Astrid means 'godly strength', but Ma'randru'jo can be forgiven, as an aster is a small bluish flower that sounds somewhat similar to astrid.

Sigrid, in Swedish, means either 'beautiful victory' or 'conquering advisor'. Both are
En ny dag gryr (A New Day Dawns)

Chapter Summary

I see there are lurkers out there, reading, not commenting, but also giving kudos and bookmarking this, my very first work.

I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired this.

This and more. Please comment. Constructive criticism, excitement, censure, whatever. I like knowing what I'm doing right and wrong, and keeping the characters believably true is important to me.

I'm already rereading parts of this and thinking WUT, this is NOT how it sounded in my head. My head has this gloriously cohesive narrative that flows...

It is you, the experienced fanfic readers job to be sure this story stays un-constipated. Keep that in mind, my lovelies.

And with that...Vilkas POV!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were days, Vilkas reflected, that the daily rhythms of Jorrvaskr revolved smoothly, like a well oiled Dwemer automaton. Wages were paid on time, warriors received adequate discipline and training, boredom was kept at bay and the ledgers tally promised a surplus of septims for all.

He snorted. Then, there was today.

The warriors awakened to find the main fire burned out to cinders, ashes smoking and food unprepared. Aela had entered Tilma's room to find her shaking with fever, the dark room soiled with the scent of sleep sweat and urine. Tilma had been put on bed rest, and the burnt offerings (courtesy of Torvar, who was never allowed near the firespit again) had them all on edge picking gristle from their teeth. Two fistfights had already broken out, and there had been muttering and sidelong glances until Vilkas set them to running laps around the perimeter of Jorrvaskr with much grumbling.

The whelps were due to be tested in their battle forms today, and he had no time. The accounts required balancing in order to pay Eorlund his weekly tally, Pelagius had reminded him twice that the grocers fund needed attending to, and he had a sinking feeling that Jorrvaskr's wealth was slowly running out. No thanks to the appetites of the warriors themselves; he reminded himself again that Tilma needed an assistant, for her sake as much as theirs.

Not only that, but there was a surplus of work that required intimidation rather than brawn or finesse. What did it say, Vilkas wondered as he made his way downstairs with a tray for the old man, about them now that the majority of their errands consisted of beating some milk drinker who cheated on his woman into submission?

Peh, the glory of Jorrvaskr. The future (and his stomach) seemed achingly empty.
Clearing his voice, the armsmaster respectfully waited to hear a croaked 'enter' before he trespassed upon Kodlak's private rooms. The Harbinger straightened from his chair, shakily pulling a fur onto his lap as Vilkas cleared empty mugs and the remnants of yesterday's meals to make room for the new tray.

"Greetings, Master."

Kodlak reached for his mug of ale, took a sip and began hacking and coughing. Vilkas averted his eyes as the old man shook. It was hard to see the atrophy slowly consume his mentor and friend. It was the way, the way of things as they aged. But it hurt to see such a mighty blooded warrior reduced to this.

Vilkas hoped he wouldn't survive to see himself become a shaking shadow, fed broth and hidden away in the bowels of a warriors hall.

"If you wish, we may continue our discussion from before." The old man hunched over his plate, sensitive wolf nose wrinkling at the smell of burnt meat and egg. He picked at it unenthusiastically as Vilkas launched into a recital of what the residents of Jorrvaskr had accomplished in the last month.

Much of the work was rote; killing wild animals that had found their way into residents homes, the request for a mammoth hunt, several requests for bodyguards and debt enforcement.

Thug work, no more fit for the ancient brotherhood than banditry or mercenary work.

But septims were septims. He finished, gazing at the dirt embedded in his palms as Kodlak painfully swallowed the last burnt roll. "Vilkas, it is well. But have you given thought to my last personal request?"

"But, I still hear the call of the blood," Vilkas despaired. Looking back down, he shuffled his boots against the worn stone flags of the floor. Not this. He would have given the old man his heart on a platter, twin to the Daedric heart pulsing on Kodlak's trophy table. It would be a simpler task.

"We all do. It is our burden to bear...but we can overcome." Kodlak looked at him meaningfully. Exasperated, Vilkas exhaled in a huff. "You have my brother and I, obviously. But I don't know if the rest will go along quite so easily." Even now, he could deny him nothing. Kodlak, Harbinger, the closest he had ever quite come to respecting as a father figure (he would not think of Jergen).

Holding off the change, remaining indoors and abed when the moon shone full and round, calling to him...

But if Kodlak believed, then Vilkas would have faith.

Even if his faith chafed and itched, like a welt rubbed raw.

"Hmph. Leave that to me." Wrapping his furs more closely around him, Kodlak sniffed the drafty air. "A stranger enters our halls," he cautioned Vilkas, who craned his neck to see a timid figure approaching.

Clad in torn leather armor that had clearly seen better days, the woman carried a whiff of anxiety, hope and...he inhaled shallowly, the sweet cloying scent of moon sugar.

Great. Another Torvar, a weight dragging the great name of his hall through the mud. His shoulders stiffened as he glared at the woman, who seemed familiar somehow.

"I would join the Companions." Her rough voice had a studied calm.
Kodlaks eyes shone brightly, reflecting the candlelight. "Would you now? Here, let me have a look at you." He gestured her forward. Stepping into the light, she hesitated and at Kodlaks impatient movement, removed her helmet.

Long auburn braids spilled out as she shakily pushed back the weight of hair from her nervous gaze. Vilkas felt his heart drop.

It was her. The fat noblewoman from the necromancer lair a month and a half ago.

Had it really been only that long, he mused, sharp grey eyes taking in her despondent air and newly acquired bruises hidden beneath dirt. The woman (he still couldn't decide which race of man she was) literally shook with something that smelled like...anticipation? She wore nothing under the faded armor, which must have chafed like hell if she walked all the way here. Vilkas could see red marks where it had rubbed her white flesh raw. His eyes followed the curve of her hip, visible through the poorly fastened buckles. Forcing himself to continue his perusal, his grimace deepened into disgust.

One of her shin guards had been fastened crookedly on backwards.

Oh, this wouldn't do. This wouldn't do at all.

"Yes, perhaps. A certain strength of spirit."

"Master, you're not truly considering accepting her?" Vilkas interrupted, feeling the first stirrings of panic. The woman startled, then shot him a dirty look. He glared right back, a permanent frown etched on his lips. All they needed right now was another wet-behind-the-ears whelp to feed and train. And the last thing he wanted was distraction. Of her sort.

"I am nobody's master, Vilkas. And last I checked, we had some empty beds in Jorrvaskr for those with a fire burning in their hearts."

"Apologies," Vilkas insincerely sniffed. If the woman was a prime candidate to be his new Shield Sister, then put a golden flower on his hip and call him Dibella. "But, perhaps this isn't the time." He folded his arms, pointedly tapping the wolfshead worked in metal on his chestplate. "I've never even heard of this outsider."

Her full mouth turned down at that, hazel eyes narrowing in suspicion. Vilkas stared right back at her unlovely, muddy hazel eyes and stupid unruly hair. Finding faults, like the small scar on the corner of her lip, kept him from examining the surge of (What? Restlessness? Memories? Lust?) guilt that was slowly soaking into his awareness.

How many of the little ones had been hers? He remembered (despite all his best efforts to drown it with ale) she had screamed until her voice gave out, open mouth howling wordlessly as she had hit Aela repeatedly. Trying to get to the bodies of her bairns, who had fallen like puppets with their strings cut once Vilkas' blade had spilled the mages intestines on the dirt floor.

Kodlak stirred, glancing to the side of the room where he kept stacks of bent and battered books. "Sometimes the famous come to us. Sometimes men and women come to us to seek their fame. It makes no difference." He traced a beaded braid on his lip with an arthritic finger. His eyes shone knowingly in the candlelight. "What matters is their heart."

The woman smiled at that, her straight white teeth shining in the dark smoky room.

"And their arm..." Vilkas cautioned. The old man seemed strangely focused on the woman, Hircine knew why. It was not for him to question (much).
"Of course." Kodlak harrumphed. "How are you in battle, girl?"

"I..." She paused and looked to the side in what could only be shame. "I have much to learn."

Shit. It would have been much easier to talk Kodlak out of this...this bad idea, if she had only boasted. The Harbinger often waxed poetic on the virtues of a humble heart in a warrior. True enough, the chair creaked as Kodlak leaned over, a knowing smile on his lips. "That's the spirit!"

Turning to him, Kodlak took a sip from his ale. Was that...a twinkle in the old man's eye? "Vilkas, our armsmaster here, will get started on that."

"Aye." Vilkas knew a dismissal when he heard one. But the sour ache in his gut grew stronger as the whelp took a deep, shaky breath of relief. "Not here. Out in the yard. Come on."

Shor's bones, what a day.

*************

Sarah/Sigrid P.O.V.

Sarah (no, it was SIGRID now) hurried to keep up with Vilkas who was storming up the hallway. His long strides took three of her steps to catch up to. Something scratched at her calf, and she hopped on one foot, trying to reach the itch and accidentally colliding with Vilkas who had stopped by the door to the stairs.

The man was built like a brickhouse. It felt like she had walked smack into a cement wall. Rubbing her cheek sheepishly, she wondered how heavy all that padded steel was to wear around all the time. She felt, rather than just heard, his breath sigh above her and looked up. "Dawdle on your own time, whelp." He snapped, his cold grey eyes furious. She looked down and nodded.

The others (was that Athis? Damn, he was stacked as well. She didn't know that Dunmer could carry that much muscle. He still looked downright scrawny next to Njada Stonearm though) looked up as Vilkas stomped over to the doors that led to the training yard. Managing a weak smile, she received sullen stares in return, with only the mountain of a man that must be Farkas looking truly interested in the proceedings.

Carefully stepping over the threshold, she managed to sneak a glance at the outdoor dining hall and armory (was that also in the game? Reality was blurring the lines for her more and more) before Vilkas halted right in the center of the dirt packed yard. Worn burlap dummies dotted crumbling stone walls, interspersed with round wooden targets and what looked like boxes of chalk and coiled rope.

Oh, if there was rope climbing as part of this test she was DEFINITELY going to fail.

She swallowed as he gestured for her to pick a weapon from the rack. Lips thinning with resolution, she strode over and picked up a one handed sword. Probably SkyForge crafted, with surprisingly detailed runes and spiral grooves in the pommel. The weight felt good in her hand.

Atahbah had tried teaching her the bow, with predictably frustrating results. But the sword had felt more natural, made her feel more in control. Sigrid smiled. Hah. Knew those marathon sessions of watching the Lord of the Rings trilogy would pay off somehow. Right.
"Just have a few swings at me so I can see your form." Vilkas grunted as he pulled his greatsword into an opening battle stance. *Shit, that was a big sword.* More like a claymore.

"Don't worry, I can take it."

But can I? She mentally censored herself. Time to do this. If Vilkas kept to the script, he'd rough her up a bit, let her get a few swings in and then sent her on her merry way to 'sharpen his sword.'

And boy didn't she blush a bit under her newly acquired tan, wondering if the euphemism held true in Skyrim as it did in Game of Thrones. Unless that bit of dirty fiction (*The Lusty Argonian Maid*, her mind helpfully supplied) meant what she thought it meant. Spear polishing indeed.

She bet he NEVER had to sharpen his own spear, alone.

*Whoa there, girl. She would not be exploring that vaguely remote possibility. 'Not even three months dead, and you're moving on from Bryce, just like that?* her inner mental bitch sighed.

Guilt flooded her with adrenaline, steadying her sword hand. "Let's do this." She sneered back, readying herself for a lunge.

Her sword bit into his blade with a metallic *thwang! clunk!* as he immediately disarmed her. Her borrowed sword spun lazily into the dirt.

Looking almost bored, Vilkas gestured to the weapon. "Pick it up. And try again."

A curl of frustrated anger clenched her fists as she stomped over and regripped the blade with a huff. She'd show him. No matter that she'd never held a sword in her life before all this, or that she had never felt more helpless and out of her element. She'd wipe the smug smile off that piece of shit. Here she was, prepared to humble herself, to repay her debt in any way possible, and this asshole wasn't even giving her the courtesy to treat her like a threat?

*The thundering, fart sniffing twat waffle.*

She was gratified to see Vilkas' ice grey eyes widen momentarily as she thrust the pommel into his gut. He oomphed, and moved maybe two inches backwards.

Knowing he was probably ready for whatever she could think of to hurt him, Sigrid lifted the sword in an arc, sweeping it down on what would have been Vilkas's head, had he not moved almost lazily, swatting her sword down with a glance of blade.

So, she punched him.

It hadn't even been a good punch. She had the sense to keep her thumb outside of her fingers, as Bryce had taught her, so she wouldn't break her own hand against someone's face. But hell, damn bastard, shit it still hurt more than she thought it would.

His head snapped back with the force of the hit, slowly lowering down to pin her with his astonished gaze. Dammit, he barely looked fazed by her hit. At least she had erased that stupid grin off his face.
Blood trickled from one of his nostrils. "All right, that's enough." He sighed, smearing the blood with the back of his hand as he wiped it away.

She cradled her aching hand and tried not to grind her teeth. "Not bad." Vilkas took her blade and set it back in the rack. "Next time, it won't be so easy."

"You might just make it. But for now, you're still just a whelp to us, new blood. So you do what we tell you." His grey eyes narrowed at her hand dangling uselessly by her waist. "Here's my sword. Go take it up to Eorlund to have it sharpened."

He hefted the battle blade up and placed it into her good hand. Good god, what was this thing made of? Sigrid laid the flat of the blade (which was as wide as her hand) on her shoulder, where it wouldn't bite into her only set of armor. Vilkas smiled mirthlessly. "And be careful, it's probably worth more than you are."

She sputtered, at a loss for words as Vilkas turned on his heel and sauntered back into Jorrvaskr. Leaving her with his sword. Which she now had to sharpen.

Sunlight shone through the fluffy white clouds, dancing in what promised to be a beautiful clear day. Sigrid blinked stupidly, and then startled as her abused leather shin guard finally fell off her leg into the dirt.

Backwards, she noted.

Damn, what a day.

Chapter End Notes

I always figured joining the Companions with the initial fetch and carry commands (So what do you do, fetch the mead? LOL) was similar to military hazing in all its brutish, trick playing glory. Lets roll with that.

**Also, yeah, I know in game that Vilkas uses a sword and shield to test the newcomers form. It never made sense to me though. I mean, he wields a mean two handed blade and is a master trainer of that skill. Even with practice weapons, I think he can handle the slash and hack swordplay of a modern chick who doesn't have a clue, right? But whatever. He's Vilkas. He does what he wants.
Vad jag inte kan glömma (What I Can't Forget)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sigrid had begun a new List of Things To Do.

Item one: She had to achieve some degree of physical stamina and strength.

Being a whelp in Jorrvaskr was not an idle occupation. She had never fetched so many jugs of mead, sharpened so many swords and axes (after one sniggering joke about sharpening HIS axe Torvar had been stared down by Farkas, who simply loomed over him until Torvar muttered an apology and stalked away. Sigrid had baked Farkas a jazbay pie. A big one.)

The Companions had a daily schedule that kept her exhausted and practically asleep before her head hit her furs each and every night. Mornings began with a rude boot kick to the bed by Njada, Sigrids new least-favorite person ever. The Stone Arm then led the new recruits in a series of calisthenics, such as push-ups, crunches, balancing postures that looked suspiciously like yoga (until they were told to do them on an upturned shield wobbling precariously on a log. Pass on that.) Then, they all ran twenty laps around what was termed 'the yard', a treacherous rocky path that circled Jorrvaskrs bulk and the much-larger than in game (Sigrid was noting a trend here) training area.

Then, after a brief breakfast (usually porridge, meat and ale) came weaponry and tactics.

Vilkas was a hard taskmaster. Aside from a much abused textbook (which they were forced to share) Vilkas lectured them on battle strategy and survival. They were each tested on their various weapon forms. Much like the kata of a martial art, they were fluid and memorized patterns of engagement that looked easy, yet surprisingly difficult to master.

Athis flitted across the yard like a shadow, his blade twirling so quickly that no new recruit ever emerged from a session with him unscratched. Farkas was the most patient, slowly but surely teaching one and two handed weaponry to any who would learn. Njada taught the art of blocking with a weapon or shield (though Ria silently whispered that her head would do just as well)...Sigrid always made herself scarce for those lessons. She had actually been dragged to a blocking class by none other than Vilkas himself (who had begun abusing Shor's bones, limbs and inner body parts far more often with the arrival of the strange newcomer) who insisted that if Sigrid was to train with a sword, she could not leave herself open to attack.

Sigrid learned that the most fatal areas to linger in dungeons and caves were the openings and doorways. She was surprised to see the amount of stealth that was actually taught (although magic was, unsurprisingly, not encouraged among the Shield siblings) and one of her favorite afternoons was spent stalking the mammoth through the grass tundras of Whiterun Plain. Aela, their teacher for the day, taught them how to track prey by observing prints and the way the grass was twisted and bent underfoot. The whelps learned about wind direction, how scent changed or was entirely eliminated when one traveled through water, how to place an arrow through the eye of a creature to kill it instantly and mercifully.
Sigrid would have enjoyed it far more had she not been the butt of what was becoming the newcomers favorite pastime - hazing Sigrid.

First, it had been her few possessions stolen while she slept and hid in the dusty rafters. One morning, instead of a boot there had been four buckets of water unceremoniously dumped on her, as she jerked awake spluttering in rage. She was teased about her heavy accent (not that anyone in the Companions had any room to talk. She was finally growing accustomed to the Nordic almost sing-song lilt of the common tongue, but she had to focus to understand Ria. She was pretty sure she had gone through all of Athis' insults before comprehension happened there, too. Morrowind must have been a bitch for an outlander.)

There had been a bad moment when she had stood toe to toe with Ria, screaming about what she was going to do to the Imperials pretty face if her goddamn amulet of Arkay wasn't returned, immediately. That had been handled by Vilkas, who unsurprisingly sent her off to do more trivial errands. The one where he had ordered her to find a magnet for a Dwemer cog had her scurrying back and forth through the different districts of Whiterun, generally annoying the townspeople with her questions until sundown. Arcadia (the nicest person here so far) had gently let her down by telling her that dwarven objects were not, in fact, magnetized.

Soon, very soon, she thought darkly... Vilkas was going to have something unfortunate happen to him.

Item two on her List of Things To Do: Earn and save enough septims to pay back the (undeserving, brutish) Companions for their assistance.

Though the wisdom of doing so seemed to grow less and less important over time. Especially after her first job.

Shaking in rage, she stomped down the ancient corridor and knocked at Vilkas' door.

"Yes?" The door swing open to reveal Vilkas clad in nothing but a loincloth, rubbing his hair with a rough towel. Sigrid stared. Water droplets ran down the line of his collarbones, trickling into the dark hair that trailed all the way down his taut abdominals to...

"Shor's beard, are you going to stand there and breathe heavily all day, or do you have something to say?" Vilkas demanded, jerking Sigrid out of her frozen state. It really wasn't fair for someone as nasty as Vilkas to be so...lickably swole. She sniffed and focused her glare on his grey eyes, where it was safe.

"Yes, I do have something to say. What was that?" She demanded, hands on her hips.

"Ah, the job? If it was too much to handle for your first time..." Vilkas said with a passably straight face. He had sent her to the hut of Olava the Feeble, who was occasionally convinced that a skeever had taken up residence inside her home, chewing her food and breeding. Paranoid and grim, Olava was convinced of its existence and had told Sigrid that the skeever must be found and killed.

There was no skeever, had never been a skeever, but damn wasn't it fun to see Sigrid's face turn purple as the woman shook with inarticulate fury.

"There was nothing! I had to take down that woman's entire pantry and spoon collection (and believe me, no one needs that many spoons) just to search for invisible droppings and mend holes in her
walls!" Sigrid held up her hands, caked with clay and daub. "I didn't even get paid, because I didn't..." she slapped his chest, leaving clay marks..."find...the goddamn...SKEEVER!"

She stood there, chest heaving as she belatedly realized that slapping her Master at Arms with a mixture of dirt and poo was probably not the wisest course of action.

Luckily for her, Vilkas was currently struggling with a mixture of admiration, mirth and irritation. She had spark, all right. He had been worried that the fight might have been beaten out of her due to her past...entrapment, what with all the wide-eyed cringing and lurking in shadows the woman had done the first few days here (save for that memorable punch to his face. He needed to teach her how to swing a real uppercut one of these days. He'd be damned if any of his students ever threw such a weak milkdrinker's punch like that again).

Unluckily for Sigrid, his irritation won the fight. "Out, woman. I'll deal with you later. Just get out."

Glaring at him from her diminutive height, Sigrid huffed and stomped away towards the underground hot springs that circulated near the whelps quarters (another pleasant surprise that wasn't included in her playthroughs. The hot baths had been hollowed out from a cave network that she suspected was linked to the Underforge. After a hard day of labor, she had fallen asleep in there once, until she found Athis and Torvar leering at her nakedness with no shame whatsoever. That never happened again.)

Vilkas sighed, and looked down at himself. He would wash up again as well. Perhaps he would send her on an actual job this time. He didn't know how why he derived such entertainment from her irritation. Seeking to have her bright optimism knocked down a peg was perhaps a dim reflection of his own self. It was unkind, and unnecessary, to torment the new blood further. Even if seeing those white teeth stretched in a smile was more torment for him than anything he could do to her.

He shivered as his skin cooled under the cleansing motions of the washcloth. For not the first time, he pondered where she had hailed from, with that unnatural smile (so even and bright) and that skin that was slowly turning freckled and browned in Skyrims weak spring sun.

Who was more of a monster? The wolf, or the man? Different pleasures of the flesh.

Vilkas did not look forward to the answer.

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Item three on The List: Alchemy/Gold

In Skyrim, Sigrid remembered, some of the easiest ways to get the septims rolling in was to find the transmute spell (probably in one of the bandit camps north of Whiterun) mine a ton of iron ore, and sit there casting the transmute spell turning iron ore into silver, then gold. Then, combined with the random jewels found trekking across Skyrim, she would have smithed necklaces and rings and then enchanted them to sell for a shitload of gold. It also raised her smithing and enchanting skills.
considerably, bang for buck.

Or, considering Sigrid was showing absolutely no signs of magical talent anytime soon, there was alchemy.

Sometimes, in the months following her arrival at Jorrvaskr, she had an afternoon or two of freedom. Rarely, Vilkas and the others of the Inner Circle (all caps, she thought gleefully in her mind, because really, the werewolf thing seemed like such an open secret. Skjor, the grump, and his squeeze Aela were always lurking off to their 'secret' tunnel) went on more complex, higher paying jobs. Usually kidnapped citizens, or recovery of lost family artifacts. That sort of thing.

That left the new bloods to their own devices, sometimes for days at a time depending on their luck. She never felt quite welcomed by the others in her new quarters. Especially after the hell they had put her through; there had been stares and muttering that followed her for months, only recently abated. Even now, Sigrid kept to herself.

Athis whittled, carving toys out of blocks of wood so skillfully Sigrid was surprised he stayed on to fight as a Companion at all. Torvar did errands around town until he had enough gold to get stupid drunk, which happened at whatever inn or bar was unlucky enough to host him before he ran out of septims. Ria sewed, Njada snored, and Sigrid took to wandering the plains outside of Whiterun to gather ingredients for alchemy.

Which was a massive disappointment. She had run into the Khajiit traders a couple of times since they had dropped her off (with good natured teasing and ribbing about her new status as Companion's slave drudge, screw them). None of them were exactly proficient at alchemy, but Ma'randru'jo knew how to cut, dry and store lavender, tundra cotton and thistles for storage and for later use. He also spent an afternoon taste testing some truly foul concoctions she had brewed as experiments, only wincing manfully (catfully?) a few times. Alchemy was far harder than it seemed in the game, with a full chemists lab of glass beakers and bowls, tuning forks, and bizarre apparatus she wasn't even sure had a purpose other than bewilderment.

Arcadia had been nice, but firm. "I can't waste my stock on experiments unless you pay, dear." She had gently but forcefully pushed Sigrid outside her shop, then. "Why don't you try something else with those herbs? I'm sure you can be creative."

And thus had her beginnings as Whiterun's newest merchant begun.

It had begun with a quiet moment in the chill of what passed as early summer for Skyrim. Tying up her bundles of herbs, she lifted her eyes to gaze in awe as the sun slowly descended. It painted the jagged ice capped mountains a glowing gold, brushing the clouds with a violet pink haze and lighting up the rocky tundra. It was so wildly, achingly beautiful that she sat down and stared until the last wisp of light sank into the west.

Her mind clearer and quieter than it had been in weeks, Sigrid remembered suddenly an open market fair she had attended years ago. It was a Renaissance faire type event, with the usual legs of turkey and axe throwing contests one would expect. But a few of the stalls had specialized in historical goods and trade. There was one stall that smelled like an entire garden distilled into five square feet that sold soap and wreaths.

Sigrid genuinely grinned, crushing a stem of lavender between her stained fingers. Soap making was a science, and she had no idea how even to procure lye, but...

From that time on, whenever Sigrid left to gather Arcadia's order of ingredients she needed (because she would pay for product but never for bum potions) she also gathered a massive amount of
bundled lavender and (because it was pretty) red and blue mountain flowers.

At night in the main hall, when everyone was busy getting buzzed with mead and telling stories by the fire, she wove reeds that she had cut from the pond near Dragonsreach into spiked wreaths. Once the lavender bundles she had hung over her bunk had dried (Athis claimed that she would ruin their reputations, making the most fearsome warriors of Skyrim smell like posies) Sigrid tied the lavender and mountain flowers into the body of the wreath.

She didn't sell many at first. Sitting near Carlotta Valentia's stall (she was good natured enough not to mind the side business) Sigrid displayed her wares, silently pleading for someone, anyone to buy something not entirely needed for survival. It wasn't until Ysolda and Sigrid became deeply involved in a conversation about the properties of lavender (and the repellant effect the strong smelling herb had on mice and insects) that she started seeing her wreaths disappear.

Over the summer, she made more lavender wreaths. Eventually she became more creative and used glowing mushrooms, dragons breath and her favorite: snowberry and tundra cotton. She amassed enough gold that she bought ribbons from the caravans to weave in the reed spokes of the wreaths. Sigrid raised the prices. They sold out even more quickly.

Times like these pleasantly windy, summer days when the heat beat down on the market and Sigrid actually felt warm, she thought of Item number four.

Visit the College of Winterhold, to see if they could get her home.

She knew it was a long shot. Portals to alternate dimensions were sketchy enough without the memories of the Oblivion Crisis still whispered as firelight tales. She had timidly broached the subject of daedric realms with Athis at one point, who had stopped carving long enough to shoot her an amazed stare. "Magic? Do I look like a magician to you? Any random s'wit knows to consult an actual mage for questions like that."

It was just as well. The chances of her returning to her time, at the time she left, were about as likely as waking up in Yellowstone with Bryce blinking awake next to her and eight happy boys shaking her shoulder, clamoring for eggs and bacon. She swallowed as their faces flashed in her mind, then ruthlessly pushed them back in her mind, locked the box and pocketed the key. Later. She could always fall apart later.

She had saved, she estimated, about seven hundred septims from her labors. Sigrid had been putting off the moment when she would present Vilkas (and Aela) the one hundred and twenty five gold septims she estimated had been paid for her recovery in Falkreath.

How to go about it was an entirely different matter.

Ever since the day when she had opened the door to a dripping, shirtless Vilkas she couldn't look him in the eye. Her mind unhelpfully triggered that (glorious) picture every class she tried to concentrate in, every sword form she struggled to fix in her muscle memory. Every evening she dutifully wove her wreaths, ignoring the steadfast, untroubled stare Vilkas seemed to grace her with the more he settled into his nightly mead.

It wasn't embarrassment as much as shame that kept her head down and eyes averted, these days. Months. Mere months had passed since she had been a married woman. Happily married. Sigrid had
grown skilled in crafting the fantasy that Bryce and the kids were waiting for her back at home. That this was just a sabbatical from real life, an extraordinary chance to experience the most vivid recreation of her favorite game for a time.

That Bryce and the boys were slowly decomposing in that silent graveyard was a panicking thought. She squelched it.

But buried secrets never remained so for long.

"You know, confronting my brother with what has you all bothered shouldn't be that difficult," Farkas informed her one day as she lay gasping on the floor of the training yard. Damn, the hulking werewolf was swift on his feet for such a big man. He had taken a special interest in her training after one day when Sigrid had tripped in the training yard and nearly impaled herself on Ria's eager sword. Grasping her hand, Farkas had yanked her arm almost out of her socket and sternly scolded Ria for going full contact in the ring. Sigrid had stammered her thanks, aware of Farkas' twin glaring silently from the eaves of the porch. Farkas had only smiled knowingly, clasping her fingers in his paw of fist. "Better watch your back, newblood."

Since then, Farkas had taken over teaching her swordplay from a grateful Athis. He also, strangely, never missed an opportunity to touch her during a session...grasping her wrist to show the correct angle of an overhand chop, or twisting her hips with both hands to give her more force in her swings.

And Vilkas, ever present and watching with those inscrutable pale eyes. He was, Sigrid thought sourly, biding his time until she screwed up again.

She picked herself up, dusting off the (new, well cared for and properly fastened) leather armor and refusing to look at Farkas.

"Hey, look at me." Sigrid sighed, and looked at his placid face. Farkas, like many other people here she'd come to suspect, truly had hidden depths. The writers at Bethesda, she thought amusedly, had been good but not thorough. There had been a lack of dimension in the game, for the true complexity and layered emotional baggage everyone here had simply stunned her sometimes. And no where was this more apparent than with the resident village idiot.

Farkas tended to hang out around Carlotta's vegetable and fruit stall on his afternoons off. She initially thought he was there simply to eat (which he did, often and with gusto) but found that most of the time the mountain of a Nord was awkwardly bent on his knees, playing hand clap games with the child Mila and bringing her what she believed were small bears, wolves and eagles carved by Athis.

An icebrain, she supposed, wouldn't have the shrewdness (or, she suspected, the patient, plodding kindness that was all Farkas) to get on Carlotta's good side by befriending her child. Sigrid sometimes caught the heated glances they would send each other across the market, and many nights she could see Farkas slipping away silently...well, as silent as someone who probably stood six foot eleven clad in steel plate could be... to be seen at breakfast in the same set of clothing, tired and smiling.

Good for him.

But this unusual perceptiveness was not helpful, today. Farkas seemed to be searching her face for something. "What?" She wheezed, hands on her knees as she regained her regular breathing pattern.
"Where they your family? The ones put to rest in Falkreath? Vilkas thinks so."

Suddenly she couldn't take in any air at all. The suspension of belief she had so skillfully woven for herself over the many months spent here wavered. Torn, mended, re-torn. She swallowed, then met his gaze (the grey eyes somehow more warm than his brothers, like hot stone).

"Yes. Yes, they were. My...my husband, and children."

Farkas ponderously sat down on his haunches, gesturing for her to sit as well. She flopped back in the dirt, rubbing at the sweat on her neck. "All of them? Aela spoke of many bodies there."

"No. There was...we had four kids, er..." she chuckled weakly as Farkas' eyebrows shot up. She frequently forgot that American slang for children, or kids, meant something entirely different here. Namely, infant goats. It had taken a while for her to stop referring to the children milling around the market district as baby quadrupeds. "Children. I had four, with my...my Bryce. We adopted four more boys later."

Farkas sat silent and immobile as a statue next to her. Wiping her forehead, she forced her mind to remain peacefully blank.

"You should tell Vilkas."

"Farkas, I..." she groaned as she stood up from the ground, stretching her back. Farkas rose as well, returning her practice sword to the rack and sheathing his own. "I don't know how. I've tried so hard...to avoid thinking about it. And I feel awful, because I want to say so many things."

His gaze was solemn. "Like what?"

Sigrid shrugged, annoyed. "Like, thank you? You killed that son of a bitch. Damn you for not coming sooner. And...sorry? Sorry you took the time to care? I couldn't even pay you all back for the inn and the food until recently. And," she cleared her throat. "And now I have the septims, all ready to go. And I can't find the words." Sigrid fingered the amulet around her neck, twisting the two rings that hung on either side of the pendant.

Farkas tracked her movements, eyes softening. Then he let out a gusty sigh.

"Fine. Its not my place anyway to get between you and my brother. But you should know," his gaze locked on her, commanding her attention. "...that I think you're both wasting your time."

Stepping closely, Sigrid was greeted with an intimate faceful of furs as Farkas hugged her, her feet leaving the ground as he grunted fondly. Satisfied with his cryptic message, Farkas put her down and winked. "Maybe think some more about what you want to say, before saying it. That always helps me." Then he wandered off, leaving a tired and bemused Sigrid staring after him.

Bending to retie a broken lace on her shinguard, Sigrid abruptly realized that Vilkas was watching her, face expressionless. He must have seen the entire thing.

"Shor's bones, there was nothing 'between' her and the Master At Arms of Jorrvaskr. She sighed. Nothing but a history of enmity, debt and (she gulped) some very guilty fantasies she most decidedly was not going to think about tonight, alone, in her bed.

Damn to Oblivion, she did not need this distraction. If she were to survive in this brutal place, she had to train fast and hard. To learn the things that every child here took for granted, and grind the
lessons learned here into her slow, giftless muscles.

Without distractions.

Chapter End Notes

The shield balancing exercise is something the Romans did for training purposes. I'm not sure if they did yoga on said shields, but hey. That's quite a picture.

Farkas teaches both one and two handed weaponry because in the game, his stats are actually better one-handed. I wonder if it has something to do with being a werewolf? Interesting stuff.

Also, having two Master trainers (Athis and Njada) being Companions but not part of the Inner Circle has always seemed strange. You'd think masters of their craft would be at the tippy top of the pyramid. The bit about the accents is a nod to the Swedish language, which indeed has a sing-song tone when spoken.

Think of the muppet Swedish Chef and his cheerful gibberish. Yep. That's what I think Nord probably sounds like, with maybe some more growl.

Would Dunmeri be Russian sounding and slurred? Hmm. Food for thought.
Chapter Summary

I hated this chapter, so I rewrote parts of it.

I'm not really super into songfics. They have their place. Music is an incredible medium to convey emotion, and I can see why a lot of writers try to evoke a feeling by bringing in a song.

I admit, I watched A Knights Tale before writing this. R.I.P. Heath Ledger.

Falkreath, Sigrid decided, was the place to be during Skyrim's brief, hot summer.

The sun, which had slowly grown obnoxiously hot in Whiterun since there was NO shade anywhere to be had, was tempered here by cool evergreens and towering rock monoliths. Never truly blistering hot, the mossy rocks were pleasant places to rest on the trail. Flowers and ferns peppered the forest with pops of unexpected color, and the busy villagers all wore smiles and hailed Sigrid as she shook each hand personally.

She had requested this job in Falkreath, knowing that it would be one of the few chances to meet up with old friends. Gratitude was one of the feelings she intended to nurture here, and there was plenty of opportunity for it. With the hot sun baking the muddy trails and roads into something resembling a proper street, Sigrid found herself actually enjoying the festive atmosphere of summer. Falkreath may have had several gloomy naming conventions, but even the painful string of stone stacked graves couldn't keep her down today.

Bolund, whom Sigrid privately called the grumpy brother, had been hassling the fine ladies of Dead Mans Drink and refusing to pay his tab. He had refused to be intimidated into proper behavior, and her mouth quirked as she remembered the satisfying pressure of his lip splitting against her knuckles. Farkas had taught her well...brawling was actually fun now that her daily regimen of pushups and log pulls had increased her strength (the Navy Seal's Hell Week could not compare to the back breaking tutelage of the twin Companions.)

Wandering over to the graveyard, she could see Kust weeding the gravestones, with Runil resting on a stone bench.

The priest of Arkay did a double take when he noticed Sigrid, smiling and walking down the path. "Child, is that you? I hardly recognized you."

"I spent the summer toughening up," Sigrid quipped. Extending her arm, she deposited Runils long lost journal into the old Altmer's wavering hand. "Here you are, as promised."

Runils golden gaze scanned the tome thoughtfully. "...I must say, after our last conversation I did not think you would actually venture into the mountains to recover this for me. Thank you."

She grimaced at the memory. The climb had been slow and careful, but not difficult. Not until they had entered the dark rocky depths of the mountain pass had a screaming sabrecat surprised her (and Aela, who insisted on traveling with Sigrid for reasons known only to herself.)
Aela was still guffawing hours later at the sight of Sigrid messily heaving up her lunch over the warm corpse of the mountain cat. It had been luck more than skill that had saved her, as she had raised her sword instinctively (mentally gibbering in fear) after all those months of practicing battle forms. The enormous cat had lunged and impaled itself on her sword, crushing Sigrid and dying almost by accident.

The Companions would never let her live it down, if they knew. She knew how it worked by now, anytime a shield sibling erred in judgement or common sense the story was bandied around the hall. Shame encouraged the offender to never repeat the sin again. A practical convention as Skjor had unsmilingly warned her, those who repeated mistakes often took other Shield siblings down with them. It had taken three bottles of Honningbrew mead (and a promise to eventually tell everyone the tale of her first kill at Jorrvaskr, at a time of her choosing) but Aela promised to be silent on the subject. For now.

"Well, you helped me when I had nothing to give in return. So thank you, and I hope it was worth it." Sigrid leaned on a tree, breathing in the fresh air. Sun motes floated in the bars of light streaking over Bryce's grave. She noticed that the battered plushie dragon remained fastened on the tiniest gravestone, secured with leather strips. She wiped her eye, stupid dust.

Runil smiled, wrinkles blooming on his weathered cheeks. "For me, it is of great worth, yes." His eyes turned sly. "I hear you have made other friends as well."

Sigrid burst out laughing. "Oh no! Damn that Valga and her running mouth!"

Her first stop in Falkreath (after kicking the shit out of Bolund, first things first) had been to rush into the Dead Mans Drink and hug a squealing Valga Vinicia. The eager gossip had been thrilled to see her invalid friend hale and whole. After a few bottles of Cyrodilic brandy (the good stuff, Nord mead had a texture not unlike gutter sludge) alcohol loosened Sigrids tongue and she came clean about everything that had happened since her departure. The ice cold first night, Khajiit music, her initiation into the ranks of the Companions of Jorrvaskr, her rise as Whiteruns newest entrepreneur (Even Solitude had caught on and was ordering her wreaths long distance. She had decided to do small batch orders, since her time was devoted mainly to training and working for her shield siblings. Maybe Carlotta would take over the business for her? It had become a major thief of time.)

Delacourt, the resident bard, had wisely waited until Sigrid was fully inebriated to pounce. "So, friend, do you have any other music you've been waiting to teach us?" He pled hopefully.

Sigrid took another swallow and blinked. She could kind of understand. The instrumental music here usually had a good beat. Mikael back in Whiterun (insufferable brat) played well enough to warrant repeated visits to the Bannered Mare, despite the ass pinching and sly winks. But the songs usually tended towards 'Ragnar the Red' or 'The Age of Oppression' or aggression. Whatever the singer meant it to mean. Sigrid didn't feel like opening the can of worms that was the Civil War just yet.

Somewhere, somehow an unlucky Dragonborn was being captured and led to Helgen for an execution that would never happen. She'd kept her ears open for news, casually asking for gossip from Helgen and surrounding villages so as not to raise questions.

Still nothing. Nervous anticipation coiled her her gut. She drained her mug and motioned for more, Valga spilling a bit as she grinned lopsidedly.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I have a really good one jus' fer you, Delly." She slurred, the brandy far more potent than the watered down ale she had grown used to back at home.

(Home? Her mind supplied fretfully. Yes...home.)
Standing up unsteadily, she gestured for Valga to stand as well. "Do as I do, m'kay? Goes like this...here, give me th' drum."

Later that night, Runil and the other locals clapped and cheered as Sigrid, Delacourt and Valga treated them to a hearty rendition of Queen's seminal classic 'We Will Rock You'.

Who cared if the guitar solo lacked panache when played on the lute? The thud-thud clap quickly caught on, and Delacourt made up some of his own verses on the spot.

Still epic.

Still strong.

Oh yeah. Debts were being paid, ass was being kicked, and (Sigrid grinned and belched appreciatively as Solaf and Valga danced, stomping and yelling, in a circle) she had gotten to spend one glorious afternoon planting a certain type of mountain wildflower at the graves of her loved ones.

Mountain briarhearts. And if she watered them with her tears, well...no one was there to mock her either.
"A dragon! I saw a dragon! It flew right over the barrow!"

Sigrid froze midstride, dropping the mountain flowers she had been gathering in shock.

"What's the holdup?" Aela padded up to her, green eyes darting to the woods and river in search of a threat. The huntress had declined the invitation to party at Dead Mans Drink last night, instead choosing to spend a night visiting 'friends' in the woods. Sigrid was not a betting woman, but if she was, she would have wagered fifty septims that Aela had indeed visited friends of the furry sort. Probably had a regular werewolf jamboree.

She amused herself with a teensy fantasy of huge, hulking werebeasts wearing mob caps and sipping tea from dainty china as she also casually checked out their surroundings. Riverwood moved slowly in the haze of summer heat today, with the clang of hammering metal coming from Alvors smithy as well as the kchunk! Thunk! activity from the log-splitting waterwheel. Children splashed in the river shallows, searching for minnows and dragonflies and shrieking as they chased a barking dog in circles.

The outburst had come from Hilde, mother of Sven. Sigrid slowly turned and walked back, seemingly to the Riverwood Trader. Aela followed, green eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"A dragon, you say?" Sigrid spoke softly. Sven passed by with a load of firewood and scoffed. "If you keep telling these tall tales, Mother, no one will believe you!" Hilde puckered her wrinkled lips and peered at the sky. Her nervous energy was affecting the huntress, who began shifting her weight from foot to foot in anticipation of a fight. "It's true! Flew right over Bleak Falls Barrow!"

Shit. Oh shit. Double damn and hell.

"Aela, how many potions do we carry between us?" Sigrid hurriedly pulled down her satchel and began rummaging through it. Aela sighed and looked through her pack as well. "I'd say about fifteen health potions, some stamina for you Farstrider."

Sigrid just rolled her eyes, too focused on making sure she had extra bandages, potions and ale. Word had got out from the Khajiit caravan of her darling nickname and the Companions had given her hell for it (except for Vilkas, who snorted and returned to staring at the fire). Eventually Athis proposed a change from Shortstride to Farstrider, which he claimed reflected better on the Companions. She didn't complain. Hadn't known he cared.

"Honestly, Sigrid, what has gotten into you? We left at the break of dawn, just as you asked, to return to Whiterun in all haste. I don't see why we're changing plans now." Aela huffed, readjusting her bow as the dozens of arrows rattled in their quivers.

"I have to do something. Her hazel eyes shone with sincerity as they locked on Aelas, both totally ignored Hilde who was blatantly eavesdropping. "Hilde!" The old woman nearly fell over. "Hilde," Sigrid continued, "I need you to tell Alvor and Gerdur to prepare hot boiling water, clean bandages and to gather ointment for burns. As much as possible. And make up your spare beds. I'll be back when I can."

Curiosity got the better of her caution. "Young un', they'd have to have a fair good reason for
interrupting the days work. What shall I tell them?"

Sigrid smiled thinly, pulling the Skyforge steel sword slightly out of its scabbard to test the edge. Still sharp.

"I'm going to change things, and bring home Ralof and Hadvar. Both of them."

The trail was rough and uneven, but Sigrid and Aela flowed fast and silent like fleeting shadows towards the eastern mountains. Months of training had resulted in the round, wiry hardness of muscle replacing the softness of her previous life. She had hardened, like a wooden spear sharpened in the fire coals and tapered to a razor edge. She no longer complained (to herself, since everyone else stared blankly) about the lack of toilet paper, coffee, or automobiles.

She was the wind, and the wind had no barrier when it hunted.

Her memory of the hours spent playing Skyrim, like much of her life in South Dakota B.S. (Before Skyrim) had been fading as she pushed the memories further in the back of her mind. For her own mental health as much as anything else. If she thought about how much she had lost (no don't think about it) then the nightmares where she woke up the other new bloods screaming and thrashing happened more and more.

Sigrid was pretty sure that she had what Bryce had jokingly called the 'I lived through shit' mental disorder PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Bryce had nights (thanks to two tours in Iraq in the 101st Airborne Division) where he woke up shivering and covered in sweat. Sigrid, then Sarah, had made it her personal mission to come up with creative ways to distract Bryce. It had been downright fun turning his focus to pleasure, creating new memories that chased away the shadows on his face.

Sigrid slipped, her ankle turning slightly on a hidden root. She grimaced and continued running, scanning the mountainside near Helgen for tell tale signs of smoke and the glow of banked fires.

There would be no Bryce for her here, no one to channel the nervous trembling energy that kept her up at night and ruined her dreams.

Who could she tell? Who would believe her? Coming through a wormhole, or space time continuum to land, dead asleep, in a clearing oh so close to a wandering mage. A serial killer mage who had killed her family and played with their corpses for research.

Sigrid wondered if there were any jobs to be had that killed rogue necromancers. She would go out of her way (bloodlust must be catching, with the turn her thoughts often took of late) to relive that moment of freedom and stab, stab, stab...

Torvar had made multiple offers to be 'bedmates' (she had only laughed, as he blushed in offended anger) and Anoriath the Bosmer hunter had developed a friendly, teasing rapport with her. Every day she made her way down to the Plains District he called out "Sigrid, my love! When will you stop denying yourself and come live with me? Just think...." He wiggled his thin eyebrows..."All the meat (he clicked the 't') you could ever eat!"

"Not today, Anoriath. I'm very selective about my cuts of meat, thanks." She always laughed in response. The descriptions of raw meat and the promised offers of seduction varied in lewdness day by day, but she enjoyed the fresh banter.

Ah. They were here.
If her memory served her correctly, she wrinkled her brow as Aela huffed to a halt next to her, this cave south of Helgen was the exit to the overplayed beginning game sequence. This was where either Hadvar or Ralof led the escaped prisoner to freedom, Riverwood and glorious open ended sandbox gaming.

This time, she would save them both, if she could.

They were right where she thought they would be. Hadvar had managed to kill the bear, but had taken a major slash to his side and was lying on the ground near the carcass, shaking with fever. At a nod from Sigrid, Aela kneeled near him and began pouring alcohol over the open wound. The career soldier hissed in pain as Aela then applied pressure with a wad of clean cloth, murmuring to him all the while.

Ralof was worse. The Stormcloak armor of quilted padding and chainmail had not deflected the swords and lightning bolts of the Imperials he had fought to reach the exit. Gaping wounds from electric shocks marred his formerly handsome face and skin, melting into the more ragged burns of searing flame. She carefully tipped a healing potion to the Nords lips, watching him swallow painfully.

"Th-thank you, woman. H-How did you know we were here?" His bloodshot blue eyes blinked wearily.

Sigrid frowned. "It would take too long to tell..." her eyes darted around the cave, just now noticing the bodies both Nord and Imperial slumped in the stream, partially hidden by rocks. "Is there anyone else who made it out of there?"

"No," Ralof sighed, pushing himself slowly to his feet. "None made it out alive, save Hadvar and I."

Her frown deepened. "Thats odd." Where in flying falmer was the Dragonborn?

Aela crept up to Sigrids side. "Their wounds will fester if we don't lance the boils and begin treating the burns," she spoke quietly. Her shield sister nodded. It couldn't be helped...hopefully Hilde had successfully passed on her warning and the families of Riverwood were prepared for their arrival. It would take days of bedrest and healing, but they would both make it, if she and Aela hurried.

It did not help her sense of foreboding that there was no Dragonborn needing potions and bandages here. She had kept her expectations open, knowing the other prisoner could have been any race, age or sex.

But no one? It was a bitter disappointment, and now, a prickling fear.

Had she changed things by somehow ending up here?

Shor's bones, she hoped not. Skyrim sorely needed a Dragonborn.

As Sigrid pulled Ralofs arm over her shoulder (she didn't even register the blood, sweat and body odor that only a year ago would have made her squick with disgust, good soap was in short supply here) she realized that there were many lives in Skyrim that could be saved, just like these men from Riverwood.

It was not a comfortable thought. Gods, she had no desire to be painted a seer or prophet, but what if she changed the plot of the game and made things worse? Having the foreknowledge to change their fate and doing nothing would be awful, but meddling with unknown results? She swallowed, thinking of Aventus Aretino, starved and alone, praying in a dimly lit room over old bones.
Sweet Mother.

Oh, gods. The Dark Brotherhood. The Thieves Guild, with that tit Mercer Frey. She shivered, thinking of the massive castle to the north commanded by Harkon and his vampire court. The Penitus Oculatus, personal guard of the Emperor of Cyrodiil were about to get a nasty shock, if the assassins guild were up to what she knew could happen.

The Empire (she snorted, making Aela look at her in surprise) had certainly made a mess of things in Skyrim. They managed, in the most rudimentary sense, the cities and towns of Hjaalmarch, the Reach and Haafingar, collecting taxes and dispensing justice with the few squads of Legionnaires left on patrol. But most of the Imperial forts and watchtowers were crumbling and empty. Villagers fended for themselves with crude axes and handmade bows against beasts and bandits. The empire lacked an understanding, or desire to know the culture and traditions of Skyrim's Nordic people. She had become accustomed to the almost constant racism of most of Skyrim's citizens, hearing ethnic slurs uttered casually at market or in the stables. It was not, she reflected, only the hostility of the Nords that was responsible for the caustic environment of the day. She had seen many Imperials and Mer sneer openly at the Nord festivals of Kyne and Shor, imitating what Sigrid thought were beautiful festival dances with bawdy mockery and thrusts.

She idly wondered what Vilkas would have thought of the political correctness of modern America. Micro-aggressions, pride parades, places where people lived and died without ever seeing a dead body. Her lips lifted in a fond smile as she imagined him, war paint and all, sitting on Jimmy Fallon's couch, completely out of his depth as the host pelted him with questions.

She wondered if he would have loved Italian food, or Mexican.

Shaking her head, she refocused on the task of placing her boots carefully on the path. Ralof could only limp along, so she bore most of his weight as they started down the path that led to Riverwood. Like the decline of Rome in her world (and wasn't Cyrodiil based, at least loosely, on the rise and fall of Rome?), the Empire's power had waned to the point of obsolescence in Skyrim. But the Stormcloaks were few in number, stretched thinly over the north and east.

It would take a significant change to tip the scales on either side.

Since there seemed to be no Dragonborn (yet), Sigrid wondered what would be the catalyst for that change.

'Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof,' Sigrid thought bemusedly. Let tomorrow keep itself. She had enough to do at the present moment.

But, she wondered idly as Aela lifted Hadvar into a fireman's carry over her shoulders (he had passed out from his wounds, poor man) if she wouldn't regret doing something to prevent the loss of innocent lives.

The whispered rasps of 'Sweet Mother, Sweet Mother' echoed in her mind. A susurrus of voices...children, men and women weeping, shrieking and begging, sent to Sithis.

Judge, jury, executioner. Didn't they deserve more than a prayer and token payment to an evil god?

Perhaps, she would destroy the Dark Brotherhood after all.

Chapter End Notes
The option to save both Hadvar and Ralof never existed in the vanilla version of the game. I'm not sure you can choose both in the mod that I took the idea from, either. The mod is called An Alternate Start and allows you to entirely skip Helgen, if desired. (Oh I desire. I have played so many new characters that I have the opening sequence memorized.)

But yeah. You find both Hadvar and Ralof shaking on the ground in the cave and give one of them a health potion and poof! You've started the main quest.
I flämtdande andetag (In Gasped Breaths)

Chapter Notes

Mature, sex explicit chapter ahead: be warned. One of more to come.
And if you are under eighteen, please skip this chapter or at least think carefully about not reading it. I don't want to go to the special hell. I hear there are reruns of Walker: Texas Ranger there.

Water hissed over their bodies as the surf broke on the beach. Uncaring of the gritty sand, Sarah undulated beneath him, gripping his hair as his hot mouth found her neck. God, this second honeymoon idea was worth all the time spent planning, paying astronomical hotel fees and arranging babysitters for an entire week. Free to eat, sleep and fuck when they wanted, Bryce and Sarah had been like voyeuristic teenagers.

The warm press of his callused fingers palmed an exposed breast, dragging down the sensitive skin to grasp her hip as they moved together. They had christened the bed, the wall, the shower...finding this beach miraculously absent of tourists had been a godsend. Beach sex was always on her wish list. Her legs curled around his calves, seawater and sand punctuating each broken moan and gasp. Silk and lace, fucking hell the sand was driving her crazy. But Bryce took her mind off of that, sucking as much of her sunburned breast into his mouth as he could.

Throwing her head back, Sarah blinked at the Caribbean sun pouring over the shallow sky blue waters, unknowing, uncaring. All her senses were filled with Bryce and the single ruthless pursuit of the welling tidal climax that couldn't be better than...

Breath hitching, she raked her nails up Bryce's lower back, urging him on as she gripped his hair. Licking the shell of his ear, salt and sweat mingling on her tongue, she was gratified to hear him gasp. He was everywhere in her, and she was consumed by him, with him.

She never wanted it to end.

Feeling rather than seeing his lips curl into a smug grin, she lost all control as he knowingly pressed once against her swollen clit. The rhythm of their hips stuttered and fell out of sync as she crested, peaking on an electric white hot wave of pleasure. Blinking her eyes against sunbursts of unnamed colors, Sarah exhaled raggedly and clung to Bryce, who found his own release seconds later with a shuddering gasp. Clinging to his broad shoulders, she held him close in exhausted bliss. His hand came up to tilt her face to his for a lazy kiss...

...only to see smeared warpaint and lightning gray eyes dilated in a triumphant afterglow.

Vilkas gave her a smirk as he slowly lifted his bulk from grinding her into the sand, as everything went dim.

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Sigrid awoke with a start. Hearing the soft snores of her roommates, she eased back down into her
bed, biting her lip as her soaked cunt ground against the soft fur with every careful movement.

Being married (happily married) for fifteen years had had its ups and downs, but coming from an active sex life to this drought had had its repercussions. Sarah covered her eyes with an arm and groaned silently into the fur covered straw mattress.

These dreams had to go. Especially the ones where a stubborn swordsman played the starring role. Obviously her fertile imagination had been overacting what with the dream fodder she had walking around. In a land where physical prowess often meant the difference between life, death and your next meal, every man and even most of the women sported physiques that would have made any bodybuilder proud. Sarah Connor's biceps (of Terminator fame) had nothing on Aelas arms, shaped by a life pulling sixty pound bows and dragging hundred pound elk to be butchered.

Nearly everyone was impressively swole here. It was incredibly distracting, given that as high summer came and went men had begun to walk around shirtless. She had nearly swallowed her tongue when she spied Farkas dunking his head into the rain barrel, trying to cool off. The man was truly impressive, with tattooed runes coiled around the meaty curves of his spine and shoulders.

She had even dreamed once of being turned over Jarl Balgruuf's throne and fucked mercilessly in a strange fantasy where she (the humble serving girl) had brought the wrong brand of mead to her lord. She winced as vague memories of her dream recalled her pleading to be punished, she'd be a good girl, ugh god why.

What was WRONG with her? Clearly too many perusals of 'The Lusty Argonian Maid' had gone and rotted the logical Vilkas eschewing side of her brain. She knew Athis had been up to something when he claimed it was the simplest, most useful book to practice reading Tamrielic script. The devil tongued s'wit.

Nevermind how smooth and sharp the dusky planes of his elven features would feel under her hands, hot tongue slipping into her mouth as she moaned...his armor hastily unbuckled and then...

Torvar turned over in his bed opposite hers, releasing a rumpled fart and snort. A distinct stench, like rotting cabbages, wafted over.

Well. That killed off any desire to relieve her frustration in bed.

Stealthily easing herself out of the communal room she padded quietly over to the bathing cave.

With all the sharp noses in Jorrvaskr, bathing off the sleep sweat and sodden proof of her filthy imaginings seemed wise.

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There was something wrong with him.

Vilkas leaned back against the stone lip of the bathing spring, idly flexing his sore limbs. He inhaled the humid mist that had a tinge of lavender clinging to the familiar sulphuric smell. Those damn wreaths again. Nearly every door mantle in Whiterun displayed an ornate herb scented wreath. The floral fragrances were pleasant to the villagers, but to Vilkas' sensitive nostrils they held the astringent bitterness of a medicinal potion.

And, he sighed, sinking deeper into the misty water, they reminded him of their creator.

Sarah and Aela had arrived later than expected to Whiterun, even though they had clearly ran in full armor all the way from Falkreath. Without stopping for refreshment or rest, they had climbed the
steps to Dragonsreach, only to return to Jorvaskr to collapse into bed from exhaustion. The house servants whispered the next day that the audience with the Jarl had lasted for several hours as his Dunmer housecarl interrogated them, then deployed several city guards to an undisclosed location.

Her face, relaxed in slumber, was soft and innocent like a child. More like the pale, trembling woman he had dragged from a bloody cave that winter than she ever allowed in front of him. Not lately.

All that next day, Vilkas was occupied with balancing the ledgers and paying the many merchants and craftsmen who supported the warrior hall their due. Kodlak had receded further into his rooms with time, poring over dusty books with a strange hunger in his rheumy eyes. The old man had remained strangely mum on the newest of the whelps and her substantial progress over the last few months, smiling secretively and urging further training upon her and the other newbloods.

Restless from a day spend sitting hunched over a candlelit table, Vilkas had taken his midday meal out to the Sky Forge. Eorlund didn't mind his best customers sitting among the tidy stacks of armor, weaponry and supplies, as long as they kept their voices down. The view from the battlements encompassed a vast area of tundra, reaching all the way to the mighty roots of the Throat of the World.

He had been disrupted from his reverie by a cleared throat.

There she stood, tall and proud, although he noted her left hand trembled slightly as she raised the bag of septims nearly to his eye level. He leaned back slightly, eyebrows lifted. "This is for you."

"What for?" He looked at her face instead of the funds. He had become accustomed to her many moods as he studied her face night after night in the dull smoke of the fire. Happy, irritated, contemplative...it was now habit to see her lips quirk in an all too ready smile and feel his chest ache. She never smiled like that for him. Not like she did for Farkas.

Vilkas loved his brother, but he would happily have picked a fight with him for how...hands-on his twin seemed to be with the strange outlander.

"Its a repayment of my debt." Clearing her throat, she lifted her chin defiantly. "Paid in full. One hundred twenty five gold septims. I asked Valga Vinicia of Falkreath and the priest Runil to be sure, since you...left me with them."

He had not thought of it that way. The call to clear out the necromancer's lair had come from an outlying lumber mill that had lost three workers mysteriously in the night. Dogs had tracked them to the cave, and money raised to rid Falkreath hold of yet another unscrupulous magic wielder.

Sarah...or Sigrid. Whoever she was, the woman and her family were simply victims caught in the middle.

Not unlike himself and his twin. (A great black hole and a lot of rage.) Vilkas still couldn't remember before his sixth winter what had transpired in his childhood to make Jergen lead them here, of all places. They had been fortunate, as she had been with him. The cave had sparked an unwelcome spark of memory, of flame and shadowed smoke. He dimly remembered lying back to back with Farkas as a woman hummed a soothing melody. Flares of memory, nothing more.

It mattered little. If it assuaged her grief (and released some of the deep tension and anxiety he smelled most often around her these days) then it was money put to good use. His rough fingers brushed the flesh of her inner wrist as he took the pouch, nodding his acceptance. Sigrid shivered suddenly, her face reddening as she mumbled something that sounded like 'thanks' and fled.
Whatever all that was about. He was tempted to take a deep breath and sort through the pheromonal cloud of emotions spiking in the air, but a sudden breeze put that out of his mind.

"You're daft, boy. You both are."

Vilkas turned to face Eorlund, who had ceased sharpening his tool and was looking over the armsmaster with a critical eye.

"Aye?" Vilkas hoped his face was as bland and stoic as his voice.

The old smith harrumphed and turned back to his work. "Youth is wasted on the young," Vilkas heard him grumble as he thoughtfully strolled back to the desk piled high with work.

And the awkward, flighty behavior had only gotten worse with time. He had straightened up from bending over a whetstone just last week to catch sight of her face awash with a full blush and Aela snorting with laughter. The huntress had merely kept laughing when he shot a beseeching look her way. "Oh no," Aela had shorted. "This is all on you. Figure it out yourself. I thought you had Ysgramor's brains, if not his balls."

Recalibrating his awareness back into the present, Vilkas yawned. His eyes at half mast, he dazedly noted the candle stub had almost burnt completely out. With a rush of water, he stood up, reaching for a drying cloth that had been immediately to hand...

...and grasped the softly curved fleshy parts that could only be present on the fairer sex. "Gah! Oh shit, oh shit...what happened to the light?"

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Chapter End Notes

HAH! Made you scroll down for more!
Bröstvårt

Chapter Summary

This chapter title is a charming Swedish word for nipples that actually translates to something like 'breast warts'.

And you thought you'd never learn anything useful browsing fanfiction.

Again, mature, explicit sex, etc etc. You know the drill.

Steely eyes pinned her in the dim light of the bathing room as she froze in place, her breast fully enveloped by a very real, very male hand. Hardly daring to breathe, she swallowed and shifted her foot on what felt like a bath towel as Vilkas blinked slowly, his gaze raking down her naked and exposed body.

She had not been the sort of woman who was overly proud of her appearance, before. Sarah's stocky figure, compact limbs and elongated torso were the end result of good Scots Irish and German stock breeding. Child bearing hips, her mother had proudly proclaimed, and slapped her on the ass (at her wedding. She thought she would die). Once she had cared enough as a teen to flaunt her then-trim figure in bikinis and cut off shirts, but four pregnancies and fifteen years later, she was twenty pounds overweight with the stretch marks (war wounds, Bryce fondly called them) to prove that she had carried life within her. Her poor belly was a punched in bowl of striated doughy flesh.

Shocked didn't even begin to cover her reaction the first time she caught sight of herself in what passed for a real mirror here in Skyrim. Workmen had been transporting a polished Dwemer mirror to Dragonsreach that had a lustrous bronze sheen. It caught her eye. When they leaned it against a wooden pillar, arguing with the maidservant over which room it rightfully belonged to, she had cautiously looked herself over.

Even fully dressed in her leathers, she could tell her post baby plumpness was gone. Entirely. Weeks of small portions while travelling along with the heavy physical activity had whittled what remained of those last stubborn pounds, transforming it into sleek muscle. Her cheekbones were defined in a way that had taken her younger sister an entire compact of contouring creams and wizardry to achieve. So was the Irish pale skin she had despised over. Instead she had burned, then tanned a slightly darker cream and had, she realized with an ironic laugh, been entirely doused in freckles (head to toe. She checked herself out later) from a life spent outdoors in the sun.

And her hair had grown as well. Kept in a long plaited braid, it tickled the gooseflesh of her ass as she unconsciously raised her head to look at the man who seemed to loom large, taking up seemingly all the space in the small room. His breath puffed on her cheek as the candle light created pinpoint reflections in his pupils.

Deeply inhaling, his mouth twitched, and he pulled her (by the breast, oh my god, why wasn't she punching him) closer. Grasping her chin with his other hand, the Nord paused to pull in a lungful of mist laden air. Resulting in a full body shudder as he curled his impressive height over her body, both hands sliding down, the calluses catching on her dimpled skin as a cold draft breezed through and fanned the candle briefly brighter.
She would not look down. He was a fucking werewolf, he could smell fear and probably lust. She would NOT look down at the sudden presence of Vilkas' male interest jabbing into her thigh.

Feeling lightheaded, she put a hand on his chest and pushed. Wet, matted chest hair gave under her fingers, and his breath rushed out of him in a heavy sigh.

The candle went out entirely, plunging them into darkness.

Seconds ticked past as Sigrid clung to whatever scrap of mental fortitude she still retained. His hands (one of which was idly rubbing circles on her hip) were the only sign that he was awake or even aware of what was going on. Hot breath mingled in and out between the space that separated them. Not much space at all.

Jarred out of the trance she was slowly succumbing to, she smelled herself in the air as her swollen cunt leaked pathetically down her leg.

His grip on her hips tightened, and then suddenly he was crushing her against the flagged stone walls of the bathing room.

Gods fucking hell.

It was like her dream, only real. Humidity poured from him as his mouth nipped furiously at her ear, her neck, moving south to latch onto her collarbone where he worried at the tender skin with his teeth. A finger dipped inside her engorged entrance, slowly pumping in and out with every catch of her breath.

She didn't realize until he ground his cock against the cleft of her pussy that she was speaking in garbled moans, quietly begging, explaining. A torrential downpour of words spilled from her lips as he slid down her body, lips licking the salt from her chest as she gasped out how guilty she was, how lonely, how good this felt, god, how tormenting her dreams had been.

A hoarse scream arose from her clenched teeth as his tongue licked her in one long swipe.

"Woman, you have to be a bit quieter than that." His amused chuckle drifted from where he kneeled between her legs.

He was holding her up against the wall by sheer upper body strength alone. Sigrid was sure if he let go, she would slide boneless down the wall and collapse into a puddle of need. Motherfucker, she was swollen and wanting and if he didn't do something, anything soon, she would be on him. Her cunt ached like a throbbing bruise.

Two fingers joined the one that had slid inside her and her knees buckled. His thumb circling over her bud, she gasped in gulps of superheated air. He was winning her, slowly, methodically, though she could sense the coiled tension radiating from his rock hard arms as he held himself back.

But Sigrid was a newblood of the Companions. She feared no man.

Shivering in anticipation, she reached down to where he kneeled and grasped him, pumping his cock once, twice in her tight fist.

The hand that he had been using to hold her still during his ministrations lifted to pull her braid around his fist. Slowly, with great focus, she could feel the air move around them as he lay her down upon the now soaked bathtowel. It was so dark she could barely make out his form hovering over her, hands touching, lips tasting, biting down on a spot on her hip that made her forget to breathe.
"Woman." His almost inaudible query barely penetrated Sigrid's mental fog, and she inhaled sharply as something long and velvety hard glided across her lower lips.

"Yes..." she whispered as a hand tangled itself in her hair, the other one lifting her leg as she bore down on his cock, imploding with pressure and knife edged grief and surprised joy as fuck, sweet fucking hell, as Sigrid threw a massive mental fuck-you at all the fear and doubt and terror barely kept at bay, waiting at the corners of consciousness.

Panting harshly, Vilkas covered her mouth with his and she forgot everything she ever knew.

*****************************************************************************

They explored each others bodies in an almost drugged wonder until just before dawn.

After that explosive first impact, they had escaped unnoticed from the bathhouse to one of the larger caves. The tunnels were used almost exclusively by the Companions, Vilkas explained, and the cave he had chosen had a ragged gaping hole almost directly overhead, the glow of starlight enough to see by until morning.

The flood of words he had unlocked from her earlier had slowed to a trickle. But he was, gradually, responding. And in his quiet rumbling as they shared memories, he was removing an armor Sigrid didn't know existed.

"I don't remember much of anything before Jergen brought us here." He admitted, slowly tracing his fingers up and down the silky smooth underside of her thigh. Vilkas had discovered that she was ticklish in the space behind her knee, and had derived an almost childish glee from making her clap her hands over her mouth as she shook with laughter.

Pride swelled his chest. He had made her laugh. Free and clean, her face finally unguarded and bright like the sun.

"Did you ever ask what happened, before Jergen went to fight?" Sigrid turned away from him, guarding her legs with an impish grin as she pulled one of the drying cloths they had stolen over her hips. Lips quirking, Vilkas pulled her into his arms more tightly.

"No. As a child, I was in awe of Jergen and Skjor, great veterans of the war. Especially Kodlak. I saw no reason to ask until much later, and by then the chance was long gone." He smoothed the tangled nest of her hair away from her shining eyes. "Farkas...we are closer than I think we would have been, merely as brothers. As shield brother, he has protected my back for many years, as I have him." He sighed, eyes going distant as he moved slightly away. "All these years, and nothing has come between us, until now."

Frowning, Sigrid pulled the fur more snugly around her. She didn't want to examine the anxiety suddenly bubbling in her gut when Vilkas pulled apart from her. Dammit, not even the morning after and he was regretting it all.

Did she regret sleeping with him?

It bore examination later. But what had they been discussing.

Ah. Farkas.

Suddenly, his stony glares during her training sessions with his hulking brother made more sense. Oh Dibella...he had been jealous.
"Vilkas," Sigrid spoke slowly. His face remained impassive as she drew closer to him. Her small hand slowly glided over the arc of his hipbone, walking slowly to his stiffening half-erect member. "I think..." she grasped him, his throat bobbing as she slowly lowered herself to glance up slyly behind a reddish mass of locks. Frozen in place, he didn't dare to move.

"...You..." her tongue swiped a line from base to tip "...Are..." He arched his neck, throat cording in silent bliss as her mouth enveloped him.

"...a skeever shit." She nipped at his foreskin, dancing away with laughter as he hauled himself on his elbows to stare incredulously at her.

"...and an idiot." She primly cross her arms, hip jutted at an angle. "You'd best explain yourself," he grunted fiercely as he wrapped his hand around her ankle and pulled her, laughing, into his lap.

"If you truly regret this," she sighed, leaning heavily against his shoulder. "Then I will be sad, but I understand. This has been...really sudden. For me as well. But..." she turned slightly only to see his face in profile, stoically fixed upon the skylight filled with stars.

"Well..." her fingers slowly entwined with his, stroking his unresponsive hands. "I have to say, Farkas is not at all my type. So if he has been interested in me, he is out of luck. Though I doubt that's the case."

His grey eyes thawed from steely ice into something almost warm. "Woman." He cleared his throat, removing his hands from hers. "We should return to Jorrvaskr before sunup."

Disappointed, Sigrid sighed. She should have known that...all this... was far more one sided on her part. He was beautiful and wild, his body scarred and perfect.

And though her form had been refined, like ore into a weapon, she turned away to shield the view of her own stretch marks still visible upon her belly.

Would he still have chosen to speak with her like this, had she not chosen to bathe alone so late last night?

"We should." Slowly standing, she winced as blood rushed into the raw parts of her womanly center. Ambivalence wasn't a mental space she was familiar with; Sigrid had preferred to think in black and white long before, when she had been merely Sarah.

But it had been like a dream. A good dream.

Where would they go now, with this?

Looking at him as he stretched to his full height, lit only by the light of the stars, he felt as cold and distant as before.

He had been inside her, under and over her...had even mentioned the memories he barely remembered himself.

But still...they were strangers to each other.

Holding each others gaze, they left separately to return to their respective quarters. Sliding silently into her furs, she was grateful for once that the nightly ritual of drinking at the fireside kept her fellow warriors dead to the world.

When Njada Stonearm complained at breakfast about the water that some inconsiderate ass had
splashed all over the floor of the bathing room, Sigrid caught Vilkas’ eyes and flushed until her freckles disappeared.
Agent Sanyon of the Third Aldmeri Dominion truly despised the province of Skyrim. Every frozen river splashing into his boots, every smelly beast that beset his subordinates and slowed their patrols to a crawl. Every Nord.

Stubborn, knuckle dragging blasphemers. He couldn't stand the sight of them.

Sighing as he readjusted his hood, Sanyon was approached by one of his scouts. Flanked by the two of his battlemages, she gestured to her burden. "Report." He barked. They had just returned from their survey of the wilderness surrounding Lake Ilinata. Sanyon's instincts had not been proven wrong yet - he was eager to find what he knew must be a hidden Shrine of Talos in this forsaken wilderness.

"This may be something of note, sir. I've never seen this type of craftsmanship before." Spreading out the odd assortment of items upon a ledge of rock, the scout stepped back and folded her hands behind her.

The Altmer leaned closer, almost unconsciously. Fascinating.

Most of the items were mere scraps that hinted at finer origins, but what remained was intriguing enough.

One brilliant red tunic, with perfectly symmetrical seams. Material that was more finely woven than any he had previously seen outside of the Summerset Isles. Thick cotton leggings dyed a faded blue, with ridged seams studded with buttons of dwemer design. He lifted a small flap at the opening, only to frown as the small label was written in an unfamiliar script. Curious.

One device that emitted light when a lever was pressed, of a material he was unfamiliar with. An alien rectangular glass device with a fine web of cracks on its face. He could not decipher its purpose, no matter how long he stood, brows furrowed.

And lastly, one finely tooled knife of high quality steel, still in its leather sheath.

Sanyon caressed the antler bone handle. This, more than any of the other strange artifacts, proved that the local Nords were up to something. A weapon of Nord creation despoiling what was surely the preserved remnants of a Dwarven cache, treasures long hidden?

Sanyon smiled grimly, golden eyes narrowed in triumph. He would just have to have a little chat with the residents of the closest community of inbred cave dwellers. The items had been found carelessly kicked under a bush near a stream, the scout explained. There was evidence of a skirmish, with dried blood and disturbed earth leading not far to a small cave. The mages had emerged,
appearing slightly nauseated as they explained the contents were surely that of a practicing necromancers dwelling and bodily remains.

Some lucky snowbacks had escaped what was sure to be a lingering, painful death. Sanyon tapped an elongated finger against thin lips. The presence of the strange devices and obviously worn attire eluded the Altmer. But only for now. It was such an interesting diversion from his normal patrols.

The cave with its nearby stream was not far from the dung heap he had overheard the Nords refer to as Falkreath. He was sure the previous owner of the items must have made a glancing impression upon the locals, for the path that led from here could only lead to the most logical conclusion.

There was something out of the ordinary afoot. Something that, once discovered and delivered to a certain leader of an embassy, was sure to net him at least a promotion.

Perhaps even a new role further south, away from the boredom of these wretched freezing wastes?

Sanyon hefted the cracked glass like creation and, prying the back away, could see the fine miniscule geometric craftsmanship therein.

Promising indeed.

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Some people didn't think he was smart.

Anyone who was fool enough to mention their opinions soon found the error of their ways, Farkas mused as he observed the newest whelp taking out her frustrations on a wooden dummy.

But sometimes smarts didn't seem to make much of a difference in the end. Sure didn't seem to be helping his brother out. Instead of his usual spot overseeing the practice in the training yard, today Vilkas was doing rapid sets of pushups in full armor. Unusual.

Sniffing the air, Farkas sorted out the smells in the air, singling out his twins unique scent and...

Oh. Well thank the gods that finally happened. The scent of lupine musk and sex blending with the lavender oils Sigrid favored hovered around his shield brother, potent enough that Farkas was confident they had finally worked out their differences in a most satisfying way.

Although it didn't seem that Vilkas was especially happy. Not like Farkas was, when he had exhausted himself with Carlotta. Sweet, warm Carlotta. He couldn't get enough, some nights. Her sweat perfuming the smoky hut as he covered her mouth with his hand, stifling her moans. Didnt want to wake the child sleeping not twenty feet away in her trundle bed. It made the nights all the more a challenge as the giant man did his damned best to tease out the moans, cries and, his favorite, breathy gasps of his name. No matter how she complained later, he knew he was forgiven when her face relaxed, joy warring with good humored exasperation as she caught sight of him.

The corner of his mouth twitched, otherwise his face remained lazy and relaxed. He imagined that much of the gossip spoken around him was due to his inattentive appearance. Tilma prided herself on knowing the inns and outs of the workings of Jorrvaskr, but Farkas felt truly invested in the well
being of his fellow warriors. His pack. His family.

Looking dumb was a good way to hear things, to puzzle out the truth when folks were too wrapped up in their own heads to see a good thing and not pick at it. Like some he could name, Farkas scratched his head thoughtfully as Vilkas swore a foul oath on his last pushup.

Sweat, desire, lust, regret. Snorting, Farkas shook his head and took a fresh lungful of air to dispel the confusion of scents. Love was easy, when over thinking didn't kill it dead. But then, Vilkas was good at killing things.

Turning his head back to his student, he sighed and cracked his knuckles. Her form had improved, and Farkas nodded slowly as Sigrids practice sword sharply cracked the wooden beams in quick succession. She dropped the sword after a particularly vicious pommel strike, rapidly punching the burlap head until stuffing flew, floating in the breeze.

Farkas frowned.

Looked like frustration was contagious today.

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"Bet you twenty septims they made the beast with two backs last night." Skjor chuckled.

Aela sighed happily as his fingers stroked through her mane of silky red hair. That newblood was as troublesome as the huntress imagined she might be.

Good. Aela stretched languorously as Skjor stood up and began fastening on his wolfs head armor. Things had certainly been dull here before her sudden acceptance into their ranks. Kodlak did have a sharp eye when it came to promising talent. The old man may be wrong about certain other things...

Heaving a put upon sigh, the huntress donned her armor alongside her mate. Silently working in tandem, they buckled and tightened each other to satisfaction, the work made light by the familiarity of time. Skjor may have been two decades her senior, but the grizzled veteran complemented her in ways that only the weight of years made evident.

She sighed. And as a were, he was magnificent. Becoming part of the pack had given the drifting, aimless Skjor purpose. In more ways than one, she reflected, memories of countless matings fresh in her minds eye.

Running in freshly fallen snow under the fullness of Secundas light, rolling, nipping at her mates tail playfully...

Kodlak was a fool. But, she amended, a fool who had tired of the hunt. A fool who felt the weight of the gaze of his ancestors from the halls of Sovngarde. She would not begrudge the old man pursuit of his desires; Aela certainly bore her own.

Huffing, she followed Skjor to the main hall, nodding at the awed wave Ria offered and smirking when Athis merely nodded, crimson eyes slitted in calculation. That one had promise.

Almost as much promise as the skittish, ever smiling stranger. She had never seen a new blood rise through the testings so rapidly...the woman attended to everything she did with a cheerful fervor that
was positively infectious, working steadily towards each goal placed before her.

Not always...Aela frowned. There were nights when cries floated down the hallway from the whelps quarters. Mornings after, her usually vibrant hazel eyes turned sad and dull. She would sit on the steps of Jorrvaskr twisting the rings on the amulet she always wore around her neck, rocking slightly.

Her strange moods, flat accent and odd customs (she washed often, with expensive soaps and salves) as well as her burgeoning friendship with Farkas alienated her from her fellow warriors. The jealousy, intrigue and avoidance the others outside the circle felt for the strange one was entirely evident to one who saw with her nose.

She smiled evilly. Attraction as well. Slimmed down and hardened by training, Sigrid was still one of the most vital women Aela had ever seen. Few that were unrelated to Jarls ever had the privilege of the soft pale flesh and skin unmarked by wind and sun that Sigrid had possessed at first sight. Even the new creases and freckles on her face bore tribute to the woman's zest for life, apparent to all who viewed the swing in her step, the joy in her gaze as she traipsed up the steps to Jorrvaskr bearing her armfuls of greenery.

Not even Vilkas, who had slept with the better half of Whiterun's available womenfolk, was immune.

Aela had nearly barked a laugh when she had walked into the bathing chambers that morning. Vilkas had not been careful. He should have known that his pack would know instantly with a whiff just what Kodlaks favored pup was up to.

Aside from running on all fours that is.

Feeling suddenly tired, Aela sat at table and bit ferociously into a shank of venison. The twin brothers may have been won to Kodlaks view of things, for now.

But she had someone in mind that might tip the balance back in Hircine's favor. Sigrid slammed the door as she strode to the table, stuffing bread and cheese into her pack, her features twisted in an uncharacteristic frown.

Raising her eyebrows meaningfully at her mate, Skjor caught on and paused demolishing the heap of roasted potatoes and slaughterfish before him. "Ah, there you are Sigrid. It seems your time has come. A fragment of Wuuthrad has been found."

Yes, they would eventually see her way of things, Aela mused as the new bloods shock morphed into intrigue and pride. Skjor explained her trial, marking on her map the clearest path to Dustmans Cairn.

Another Companion of the beast blood would certainly make the twins think twice. Aela busied herself with her meal to disguise her glee as Farkas led Sigrid, still quietly asking questions, out to the waiting road.

Ah, yes. The patient hunter always got her prey.

Chapter End Notes

Sanyon is an actual NPC you can find in Falkreath hold.
"Qiilan us diilon!"

"Hah! A fight!"

Lifting her sword with leaden arms, Sigrid stumbled after Farkas as he rushed headlong into battle. Shadowed tunnels crept with draugr, shambling slowly to where the Companion and whelp held them at bay.

As her sword slashed, ripped and tore at the tough mummified hides of the undead, Sigrid felt heavy, limbs held fast by quicksand. A pleasant numbness had stolen over her, which made it all the easier to lunge and thrust her sword into a charging Silver Hand warrior.

His wild war cry cut off with a gurgle as jets of crimson blood pumped out of his severed neck, the man dropping jerkily to the floor like a broken doll.

There was no time, and no sensation left in her limbs as she calmly uncapped and swigged a stamina potion. Wincing at the sour juniper tang, Sigrid spun slowly searching for any remaining foes, feeling relief as fresh strength coursed through her limbs. Grunting, Farkas pulled his great sword out of the last Silver Hand corpse with a sucking pop.

"All right then?" His face cast in shadow, Farkas slowly approached her, idly cleaning his sword on a fallen warriors furs.

Blinking up at him in the dim torchlight, the giants mouth suddenly gleamed with a maw sharp with yellowed fangs.

No...another blink, and Farkas' features righted themselves. He peered at her in concern.

"Lets get moving. We're close to the end. Stay sharp." He cautioned as they approached a forbidding door.

She could hear the rustling of the dessicated dead beyond, and swallowed.

Her first kill, her first real death had been...messy. She had been surprised by the orc, bellowing with greataxe raised as she tore her eyes away from contemplating the draugr scattered on the tomb floor.

Farkas had held her hair back as she heaved the contents of her stomach up, until nothing but bile remained. She had been driven back by the orcs furious onslaught, barely holding her own until an opening in its guard had her blade biting through the burly olive neck.

His bowels had loosed in death, and as she wiped her mouth and grimaced, she could smell nothing but the shit. The sweat of her fear. The dank staleness of the walls closing in on her.

Shit and blood and death.

"First kill, eh." His heavy hand patted her back soundly. "Well done."

Sigrid stared at the head, which looked smaller now that it was separated from the body. White tendons and red gristle dripped ichor as she realized she was looking down what had been the esophagus.
She had killed, killed a living, breathing being. Her breath came out in shuddering sobs.

Turning to her with a health potion, Farkas frowned. "None of that. He would have killed you, if you hadn't fought back."

He handed her the potion and motioned for her to drink up. "Eyes on the horizon, newblood. Don't think about it right now."

Nodding in agreement, Sigrid stood up, feeling heavy with grief. Innocence lost, never to be regained. There was no going back, only forward. Dipping her hands in the rapidly cooling blood, Sigrid traced the path of tears under her eyes and down her cheeks. Farkas huffed his approval

First kill. First blood. And now, her first war paint. So much had been lost to her. Now, when and if she cried, she would have to repaint it again, and again.

And she didn't, until the end. Coasting on a blank numbness that felt eerily free, Sigrids arms spun whirling blade patterns memorized by countless hours of repetitive practice. Only instead of the straw stuffed burlap dummies and wooden planks, steel tore red gaping wounds in flesh both dried and hale.

She felt a faint perk of surprise when (she should have remembered this was coming) Farkas shifted, bones and muscles snapping and popping as they coalesced into something monstrous and black as night.

He made short work of the Silver Hand who had taunted him, surrounding him with a ring of razored steel and arrow tips. Massive paws, killer claws for the feed, Sigrid thought dumbly as the werewolf emitted a bellowing roar, mouth jutting with fangs the size of her fingers as huge swipes from clawed limbs took them down, fast.

Disney had no part in this. Fear trickled past the barriers of her mind as she reflected on the Companions questline. If she could prevent the deaths of those she had begun to consider family....

Would Skjor, and Kodlak still die? Was she going to be forced to partake of the beast blood to save Kodlaks soul?

Gods, there had to be a better way.

She bet transforming hurt like a bitch.

She waited in stunned silence, war paint ruined and streaked in fresh blood smears as Farkas leapt into the shadows, returning moments later as a man.

"I hope I didn't scare you." She noticed he was keeping his distance, and a part of her appreciated that.

Feelings returned with a vengeance later, as she leaned shakily over the stone table where rested a small chip of ancient steel. The fragment of Wuuthrad. Her trial borne, her passage into the ranks of honor and valor assured.

Why did she feel such foreboding? The freedom from sensation had been so refreshing. She didn't want to examine her feelings, any feelings, about what had transpired today, or in the past week. The sweet aches that randomly tightened her vaginal walls were slowly disappearing. And, she reflected sadly, so was she from his notice as well. Vilkas hadn't even glanced her way when Skjor had announced to all the trial of her proving.
No. None of that.

Her sword had taken the lives of twenty three men and women. Silver Hand, torturers, no better than bandits.

But, she amended, living things. That had met their end (screaming, gurgling, choking on blood) at her hand.

The dried husks of draugr piled on the floor where they fell, sometimes two or three deep. Farkas didn't even look winded. The big man was eyeing the edge of his blade, testing it with his thumb and sighing in dissatisfaction.

Scooping up the fragment, she wrapped it carefully in a clean scrap of linen and secreted it away in her pack.

In the corner of her eye, Sigrid saw that the back wall was actually a Word Wall, deeply grooved and etched in the clawed script of the dragons. Faint blue light glowed, then faded, glowing brighter as she approached as if in a dream.

"Hey there, you going to throw up again?" Farkas called out.

She drew nearer, transfixed by an awful certainty that her mind begged to be disproved. As she placed a shaking hand on the stone, the last of the adrenaline flowed out of her veins, only to be replaced by terror as a low rumbling chanting reached her ears.

No.

No, it couldn't be. Not her.

She wasn't even from this fucking world.

The voices roared in a triumphant crescendo as rushing winds were absorbed into her stunned form. Fire licked at the corners of her mind, wreathing her thoughts in death, war and dragonflame.

Yol.

Shaking, Sigrid turned to her shield brother who stood, head cocked and eyes narrowed, looking her over for visible injuries.

"Its...nothing." She drew in a lungful of stale crypt, then breathed out an exhausted sigh.

"Didn't seem like nothing going just now." Damn it all. He wasn't going to let her get away without an explanation.

And what was she supposed to say?

Hey, so it turns out I may be your cultures version of a soul eating Superman who fights literally by yelling weird shit.

That would go over so well.

"I don't want to talk about it." Tears leaked out despite her best efforts to hold them back (God, she was such a weakling). Not a day, and her blood paint was ruined by a milk drinkers weak, womanly tears. So full of shit. No way she was Dovakhin. Dragonborn. Savior of Skyrim.

Sigrid had barely survived her first dungeon crawl, and now this? If the powers that be thought she
was ready for Blackreach, much less a dragon fight, they would have to wait.

"I mean it, Farkas!" She snapped as he pulled back his outstretched hand, looking hurt. "I am so done. So done. This is all shit. I just..." she sniffed, feeling her features crumple into what was surely an epic ugly cry face. Great.

"I just want to go home!" She wailed, illusions of self control be damned as Farkas' warm bulk surrounded her in a hug. She was getting tears and snot along with bits of dried guts all over his furs, but he didn't look like he minded. He stunk to high heaven himself.

"Nothing makes sense, Farkas." She sobbed like a child as he awkwardly patted her back.

Minutes later, her tears finally ran out and she sat on the steps overlooking their handiwork of death, numb once more. Dimly she realized that they were both filthy, coated in dust encrusted gore, with slashed rents in their furs. She realized she was bleeding from half a dozen shallow cuts, and was faintly thankful the Silver Hand had not favored poisons.

"Come, then." Farkas stood with a sigh. "You did well. It's time to return to Jorrvaskr." Squeezing her shoulder, his solemn dirt streaked face broke into a slow smile.

Sigrid patted his hand. In the echoing chamber of her silenced mind, weak gratitude eased out, taking the edge off of the bone deep weariness that rode her.

She shot him a tiny grin back. She had done it.

Sigrid was now a Companion.

Golden sunlight painted the worn wooden shingles of the roofs yellow. The mountains that cradled the vast tundra that housed Whiterun Hold also glowed, finer and more precious than gold in the fading light of day

This was his home, Vilkas reflected with a swell of pride as he stood at the steps overlooking the Wind district. There was no place more worthy, no hall more valorous in Skyrim than this.

A pale moon, fingernail thin, rose slowly from the jagged horizon. Wincing, Vilkas alternated squeezing his fists and clenching his feet within their steel reinforced boots. Damn, but resisting the call of the blood was far more difficult than he imagined it would be.

The smallest things reminded him of his loss. Snow glinting from mountaintops brought back the exhilaration of running through fields of winter snowfall, ice crunching beneath his paws. And the unsatisfactory fights he had picked with Hrongar among others had done nothing to cool the fire in his blood. He swallowed, remembering the graceful ease of dagger like claws ripping tearing through flesh and mail alike, hot spurting blood fresh and iron rich, swallowing, rending...

Normally, seeing the work of his fists gasping and bloodied beneath him at least made him crack a smile.

But smiling any smile recalled her, which just would not do.

He had even, after walking past the drying bundles of herbs and flowers hung in the new bloods quarters, taken Saadia to bed again. Among the women he occasionally visited when the need struck, the Redguards sultry smile and come-hither air had required hardly any coaxing at all. On hands and knees, stripped to all her dark loveliness she had glanced behind with a knowing smile as he divested
himself of his armor.

He didn't care at all, he told himself fiercely as he chased away the image of pale freckled skin with Saadias velvety cunt and cries of pleasure, finding his own release more rapidly than he would have liked.

He had no further desire to stay, though the Redguard woman cajoled and teased, fingers torn away as he strode back to the streets of Whiterun. Back to Jorvaskr.

No matter that the beast burned within him, still.

If it was truly his wolf, and not the man. Grimacing, he continued searching the roads for the arrival of his twin and what would be the newest Companion, if she had survived her trial.

Not that he cared. Because he didn't.

As sun dipped low and light faded, stars slowly appeared, twinkling in the vast expanse of sky. Two figures slowly trudged their way up the steps towards him, reeking from here of grave-rot and body odor.

Damn. His eyes narrowed, taking in the fragment clasped tightly in hand, fresh blood painted on her proudly impassive face. Blooded, tested and triumphant.

Looked like she was his shield sister, after all.

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"Come. We've been waiting for your return."

All she wanted, Sigrid sighed mentally, was a shower and a bath. A hot bath. What she wouldn't give for a modern washing machine, to have the luxury of throwing all the stenchy underclothes and furs into a herculean spin cycle and forget about it all.

But Farkas prodded her onwards, and so she followed Vilkas.

He led them past the freshly lit torches upon the rock path to the training yard, where everyone had been gathered. Even Tilma stood, weathered face splitting in a grin as she caught sight of Sigrid and Farkas approaching.

Smiling in welcome, Kodlak Whitemane stood without support in full wolfshead armor. Swallowing trepidation, Sigrid stood at attention as Farkas took his place next to his twin. Aela nodded at her. She nodded back in a bob of her head, aware that many of the eyes around her reflected the light rather than absorbed it.

Like animals.

"Brothers and Sisters of the Circle..." Kodlak intoned. "Today we welcome a new soul into our mortal fold. This woman has endured, has challenged and has showed her valor."

With grand sweep of his arm, the Harbinger called out, "Who will speak for her?"

Farkas stepped forward. "I stand witness for the courage of the soul before us." He did not smile, but his eyes warmed as they glanced at Sigrid.

She hoped barfing all over his boots still qualified her as brave.
"Would you raise your shield in her defense?" Kodlak stood tall.

"I would stand at her back, that the world might never overtake us."

"And would you raise your sword in her honor?" The Harbinger queried.

Farkas nodded. "It stands ready to meet the blood of her foes."

"And would you raise a mug in her name?" Sigrid noticed Athis and Ria shifting on their feet, looking distinctly uncomfortable. Torvar, seemingly less drunk than usual, met her gaze, with no aggression for once.

Farkas continued in practiced tones. "I would lead the song in triumph as our mead hall reveled in her stories."

"Then this judgment of this Circle is complete." Her chest swelled with pride as Sigrid looked around the faces, solemn and strong, surrounding her.

"Her heart beats with fury and courage that have united the Companions since the days of the distant green summers." Kodlak's voice rose and fell, deep and strong. She relaxed minutely. He wasn't going to keel over anytime soon, at least. Despite how frail he seemed, compared to the others.

"Let it beat with ours, so the mountains may echo and our enemies may tremble at the call." Kodlak gestured in finality, face cast in the flickering shadows of torchlight.

With a rumbling echo, the Companions of Jorrvaskr saluted, clapping right fists to left shoulders.

"It shall be so."

At a nod from the old Harbinger, Sigrid stepped shakily forward and deposited the fragment of Wuuthrad in his waiting hand.

Judgement complete, the others slowly melted away, talking quietly amongst themselves. A few, such as Aela and surprisingly, Athis, came forward to congratulate her.

Clasping shoulders in the Nord way, she tamped down her feelings of inadequacy. She was going to enjoy the moment, no more. She had few reasons to celebrate, but this had to qualify, didn't it? She'd think about the Word Wall later.

"Well, girl, you're one of us now. I trust you won't disappoint." Kodlak stepped forwards when the rest had disappeared. She could make out, from the corner of her eye, Vilkas and Farkas speaking softly in the shadows. Oh no.

"So..." There was no helping it. She'd have to ask now, or risk suspicion when she showed a marked lack of surprise at her later induction into the beastblood. "You are all werewolves?"

Kodlak hmmphed, his creased brow furrowed. "I see you've been allowed to know some secrets before your appointed time. Yes, it's true. Not every Companion, no, only members of the Circle all share the blood of the beast. Some take to it more than others."

The Harbingers eyes followed the broad back of Skjor, who was laughing at something Aela was demonstrating.

Damn and double damn. Was she pretending to vomit?
It looked like some stories were going to be told earlier than Sigrid would have liked. It was nice while the peace lasted, she thought depressedly. Soon, all the Companions would be laughing about her weak stomach.

Eyes on the horizon, she reminded herself. "What do you think of all this, Harbinger?"

Like she didn't know.

"Well, I grow old. My mind turns towards the horizon, to Sovngarde. I worry that Shor won’t call an animal warrior as he would a true Nord warrior. Living as beasts draws our souls closer to the Daedric lord, Hircine. Some may prefer eternity in his hunting grounds, but I crave the fellowship of Sovngarde."

Kodlak's gaze grew distant. "But," Sigrid prodded, "...Isn't there a cure?"

His rheumy eyes blinked. "Yes, but it’s no easy matter. But you don’t need to share the worries of an old warrior. This day is to rejoice in your bravery, and speak to Eorlund for a better weapon than..."

He gestured with a wry twist of lips. "Well, whatever that is."

She hefted her blood stained steel sword and for the first time that day, really grinned.
Eld och Vatten (Fire and Water)

Leaning against one of the massive carved wooden pillars of Dragonsreach, Sigrid counted the logs in the massive firepit.

Sixteen big logs and twelve small ones.

Oh, she could count them again, she sighed with boredom. She had already counted the designs in the woven carpet, well, the bits visible beneath the massive tables and chairs.

But Proventus Avenici the steward was still arguing with that blowhard, Hrongar. Unlikely that a spat between those two would resolve itself anytime soon.

In and out. Get the bounty, drop it off at Jorrvaskr, and I'd have the whole afternoon free! Sigrid murderously caressed her spare dagger. Aela could be a literal bitch sometimes.

Bet she simply didn't want to wait around, as Sigrid was doing now...waiting. Interminably. Forever. Waiting.

Companions little errand girl, she thought with a huff of derision. Glorious valor, her ass. Not that the jobs were much better for the others in the Circle. Skjor and Vilkas were off guarding some rich merchants caravan of goods. Farkas had been called upon to settle an argument about land rights between farmers as a kind of warrior liaison.

Even Athis and Ria had been sent off to kill some sneak thief who was stealing chickens in Rorikstead. Probably Falmer were to blame. And she, newblood no more, was stuck clearing bandit camps and cashing in the bounties.

And all their stuff. So much stuff.

Adrianne Avenicci was starting to greet her by name, as her best customer and newest trainee. Sigrid had successfully sold the designing rights and mercantile patents (who knew, right?) of her wreath making enterprise to Carlotta Valentia. The fellow widow was thrilled for a chance to earn hard money, and had agreed upon a percentage of earnings to belong to Sigrid.

Who in turn, put every last septim right into her martial training and remedial smithing skills. Instead of wandering the tundra cutting blooms, Sigrid could now be found hammering at Earlunds precious Skyforge or, more rarely, repairing bloody finds at Warmaidens forge.

She worked hard, late into the evening until the coals of the forge provided her only light. Sweat soaked her back and streaked her brow. Hammering, sharpening, tanning, it was all necessary and with grim focus she learned it all.

Maximum effort. Deadpool would be so proud.

Not that there was much to show for it, as of yet. The cold bite of autumn was growing noticeably in the Wind District, and business was brisk for fur pelts and wool. Her savings were still pitiful...only about a thousand septims that neatly rotated into fixing constantly destroyed armor, weapons and training fees.

Septims may be the root of all evil, but even evil had its day. With a generous bribe (and coercion on her part) she had convinced an unamused Vilkas to hire on the beggar girl Lucia as Tilmas assistant.
Tilma the Haggard was now Tilma the Well Rested. With a sweet roll for Sigrid whenever she saw her. And Lucia, clean and growing plump on Tilmas generous portions, waved at her each time she passed the dining hall.

Not that she'd had to twist Vilkas's arm, much. Sigrid shifted awkwardly. Things had been strained between them, with one word answers and hardly any willing interaction at all.

He still watched her during the morning training sessions, ghost grey eyes tracking every move until she squirmed self consciously.

But he never commented to correct her form. Never touched her. Sigrid had the impression, at times, that he was working up the nerve to say something to her.

Her lip curled. She'd given him enough of her time and tears.

She traced the flaking blood on her cheeks.

Let him stew. Alone.

Idly drumming her fingers on a chair, she rewarded Dagny with a smirk as the little brat glared imperiously at the Companion.

A hooded figure stalked out of the mage Farengars quarters. Wait, wasn't that...

She stood taller, thoughts of teasing Dagny forgotten.

Shor's manly tits, it was Delphine.

Oh, she reflected as she ran to the mages room, bounty forgotten. This was bad. Very bad.

With an unmanly yelp, the pompous mage lurched back as Sigrid dove at his table, frantically clearing pots of ink, quills and scrolls to reveal the Dragonstone.

Ignoring his protestations, she scanned the translations the Breton Blade had left, grateful for the nights spent laboriously learning the written tongue of Tamriel.

Athis had been a spiteful, unbending teacher, but at last she had been deemed a barely adequate scholar, at least in the Dunmers view.

Shit. Shit shit shit. Dragons were coming back from the dead.

She knew what would come next. Irileth stomped over.

"Farengar! You're needed at once. A dragon has been spotted over circling the western watchtower."

"Really? What was it doing?" With a dirty glare and a harsh push out of his quarters, the court mage practically tripped in his eagerness to get up the stairs after the Jarls bodyguard.

Sigrid stood, chewing her lips in thought.

Mirmulnir would not wait for her to gain Jarl Balgruuf's trust. Obviously, Delphine had raided Bleak Falls Barrow. Which meant the timeline was changing yet again.

Which meant she could not fall behind.

Checking her stock of healing potions and her array of weaponry, the newest Companion headed off
to fight a dragon.

Finally...something exciting. Terrifying (shit, a dragon, she prayed she was prepared enough) but something she could prove to be proficient at, to herself, if no one else. Her pace quickened.

Aela was going to be so jealous.

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"By the gods...you're Dragonborn!" The surviving guard of the western watchtower squawked. The other Whiterun guards (some still smooth cheeked and far too young for this) cautiously gathered around Sigrid in awe.

The show was over, Sigrid thought wearily. It had been a real fight. She could still see in her minds eye (and her future nightmares) the guards feet kicking weakly as he disappeared down the dragons gullet. But persistent slashes and chops had finally worn him down. Mirmulnirs bones were all that remained, still steaming from their otherworldly flesh stripping spell.

Whatever that was. Perhaps a byproduct of the dragons resurrection? Ash to ash, bone to bone?

Yet another question for Paarthurnax, once she made it up to the summit of the Throat of the World. Not that he would love her for killing his fellow dovah, but then not everyone elected to live in peace.

Some chose to burn.

"Yes, Dragonborn. So it would seem." She sighed, then coughed, smearing ash and sweat even further into her hair.

'Yol' had seared from her with an acrid blast of flame, leaving a numb tingling on her lips. She thought dispassionately that the trail of fire had burnt at least twenty feet from where she stood, still smoking at the grassroots. Good to know her limits.

Sniffing at a clump of burnt hair, she wrinkled her nose and took off, heedless of the whispering guards.

Arcadia was making a fortune off selling Sigrid her herbal hair tonics and creams. After her first few months of bathing every other day, Aela had pulled her aside one spring morning and informed her that her odd cleansing habits made her seem...overly preoccupied with cleanliness.

Most Nords washed their bodies twice monthly, at best. Sometimes right before festivals, she also noticed a dearth of body odor as well, so obviously she wasn't the only one who cared.

Yet she understood...the labor of washing the thick woven garments, underthings and furs was such that it was put off until one could put it off no longer. Laundry day was a big, fat pain in the ass, often accompanied by the forlorn wails of children as they were forcibly dunked as well.

And some abstained all year round. Sigrid gave them a wide berth. Torvar, for instance, had a miasmic yeasty cloud that followed him.

Rather like Pigpen from Charles Schultz's Peanuts cartoon. She wouldn't be surprised if he had flies buzzing around him as well, but she never drew close enough to find out.

Practicality won over fastidiousness, and now Sigrid stuck to a weekly ritual of cleansing that she anticipated with gusto.
The bathing cave having lost its appeal of late, she had asked Aela if there was a fresh spring or waterfall near enough that it wouldn't be a burden, but far enough away that being spied upon was unlikely.

And boy, Aela had delivered. She had discovered a craggy outcropping of rock behind the massive base of Dragonsreach beyond the city walls.

Partially shielded by bushes, there was a cold but clean stream of water that fell ten feet into a deep quiet pool ringed with ferns and mosses. Peaceful. And private.

When Sigrid called out for the huntress to join her, Aela had scoffed at first. Didn't a healthy layer of dirt hide scent from prey? She wouldn't give up any advantage when stalking elk or bear.

But after watching Sigrid splashing merrily in the waters, skin pinked and glowing, the huntress deigned to swim and became hooked. They now took turns weekly washing their hair and keeping watch for unwanted guests.

Sigrid found after a few weeks that shivering in the glacial water had improved her tolerance for cold. Not that she'd ever approach Nordic immunity, ever (how did they do it?) But she felt confident that the winter storms she dreaded would not be the hardship she feared.

The weekly ritual dip also increased her strange friendship with the descendent of Hroti Backblade. Sigrid knew she was being weighed and measured. The huntress often joined Sigrids jobs without asking, surprising her with questions about Farkas...even teasing her with references to Vilkas, which made her cough and blush up to her hairline.

Goddamn nosy bitch. Not that there was anything Vilkas related to speak of...it had been a full month at least since her initiation into the Companions. She had seen him once talking with Ysolda at market. She had been laughing coyly as he whispered something in her ear. She felt a pang of longing. That ship had now sailed.

For such a close knit group of fighters, drama seemed to crop up more often than she would have expected. Oblivion broke loose when Aela discovered Sigrids knowledge of the Circles true nature.

Abandoning stealth, she outright demanded to know what Sigrid thought of the Harbingers plans.

Nearing the green edged waters of the hidden falls as the sun set, Sigrid sighed. Aela had been furious when she replied that she had no intention of becoming a werewolf.

She had not seen her since. Another that Sigrid had considered a friend, lost.

Beginning to strip off the rank, smoky layers of leather and fur, she turned sharply at the careless snap of wood.

Where a moment before had been nothing but empty space there was a hooded and cloaked Altmer. He stood smiling in triumph, flanked by four cronies.

His almond amber eyes glittered brightly in the dying sun.

"Ahh, Sarah I presume? How marvelous to finally meet your acquaintance. Anytime, gentlemen."

Frozen by the sound of her old name, she reached for her blade lying in the grass when she heard more than felt a sharp blow to the side of her skull.

Stumbling, her thoughts spun stupidly with pain. Sigrid could feel herself falling ever so slowly as
her sight dimmed, blackened.

Then, finally, there was only silence.
Ett näste av tvivel (A Nest of Doubts)

The month of Hearthfire after the newest Companion had been tried and found worthy to join their ranks was not one of Vilkas' finest.

Farkas was disappointed in him. His brother rarely spoke, never so much as hinted at the night he had lost all self control and filled the bathing cave with the careless scent of sex. Vilkas had few rules, but one had had adhered to all his life had served him well: never sleep with a fellow Companion. He had heard enough bard tales of familial dishord to have no trouble keeping Jorrvaskr apart. Until now, that is.

Sex was like an itch that had to be scratched. A bodily function, like thirst or hunger. He allayed it at will, with little thought after. He made no promises and said no goodbyes. The Companions were family enough, and at times it was all he could do to keep his closest friendships from imploding.

He loved his brother. The larger twin had always, in Vilkas' mind, been the better man, even the better warrior, for he fought methodically and calmly as in all things. Kind, patient and solid as stone. Ever since they were pups, Farkas had been larger, slow enough in response to adults that they had clucked their tongues and branded him an oaf. But Vilkas, small and ferocious even as a boy, had constantly scrapped with the town children over the question of his brothers intelligence.

The quiet censure he found in the grey eyes that mirrored his own troubled him still.

He had been impressed against his better judgement, the armmsmaster mused as he continued running laps in the predawn light. Sigrid's perseverance and dedication did her credit. She had come a long way from the trembling, plump female crudely fitted in throwaway gear. As he had observed her in the practice yard, she had grown graceful with the ease of long practice, movements almost like a dance in their cadence.

And although he knew he had no right, not after how he had ended things, the shape of her in that armor made him sweat.

Evidently she had overcome her fears in the draugr's lair. His twin had described the blank, stone-faced expression Sigrid wore as she efficiently put down all the Silver Hand in her way, falling apart only later when safety allowed. Dealing death made its mark on the most hardened soldier. She had watched Farkas' back and protected him well enough. Had passed trial, and as Kodlak's deep voice spoke the welcoming edda, he looked upon her stoic and dirty face with well concealed pride.

Though he did not understand the icy vacuum of silence she battled in, for simmering rage fueled Vilkas in most things.

Especially when it came to matters of the heart. Restlessness plagued him, tied to a deep seated ache that Vilkas blamed on his promise to Kodlak. He had not assumed the guise of his beast these last few months.

It had not been without effort.
Throwing himself into the workings of Jorvaskr was less than helpful. Tasks that had been satisfying and necessary had become stultifyingly boring. Ledgers were balanced in speed and with less care than usual. His students avoided him on and off the training field, wary of his quick temper. And he found himself, more often of late, pounding his frustrations into the gravel road, running laps until he finally tired.

And always, the newest Companion was absent. When seen flitting around the hall, she walked head down and quickly, with no smiles for any save Farkas, and sometimes Tilma and the girl she had browbeat him into hiring.

He had almost drawn out that discussion, merely to have an excuse to be close to her. Like, he scoffed at himself, a boy pulling at a girl's hair for attention.

Vilkas may not have agreed with his Harbinger, but he would follow orders. Holding back the transformations was like meat stuck in his craw, uncomfortable, but he would endure.

But no matter how he slaked his lust with the comely females of Whiterun, Vilkas could not outrun the twisting worm of dissatisfaction nesting in his own heart.

And of course, the old man noticed.

Kodlak Whitemane was mere months from being bedridden, he thought with some sadness as he brought two mugs and a bottle of spiced wine down to the Harbingers private rooms. And yet he was still perceptive, for one who spent his days in his rooms poring over books.

"Ah, there you are son." No matter how many men he had fought in combat or beasts he had slain, Kodlak had always called him that. Or in a more chiding tone, boy. Warming with his masters regard, Vilkas sat heavily in the seat offered to him and poured the wine for them both.

"I worry," Kodlak began with a sip of wine, "of the many nights spent away from the hall of late."

Vilkas felt his skin heat beneath his warpaint. "Training only eases the urge to transform so much." He took a measured drink. "Inns and taverns are a welcome diversion."

"Come on now boy, you know what I mean." Kodlak's creased eyes bore down, seemingly into Vilkas soul. He shifted uncomfortably. Damn, he never had supposed the Harbinger would want to talk about...this.

Vilkas sighed. "My blood runs hot, of late."

"So it does." Kodlak hmmed, drumming his fingers idly on a weathered volume. "You have the true heart of a Nord, Vilkas. But even the bravest of men consider their actions."

Averting his eyes, Vilkas took a long pull of wine, foreign spices tingling his nose. "I...Harbinger, are you certain this is the conversation you wish to pursue?"

The old man's chair creaked as he laughed quietly. "You know, I was a young blood once. Hard to believe, I know. And I discovered in my youth that when it comes to women, as with war, brave hearts beat lesser ones."

Vilkas blinked. Of all the turns this conversation could have taken, he was receiving...advice.
Kodlak continued, seemingly not noticing the Companion's silent misery. "Also with women and war, the underhanded and honorless may seem to win. Though it is an empty victory." He coughed, sipping at his wine with evident enjoyment. "So, boy, how have your conquests been of late?"
Pouring more wine, Kodlak eased back and viewed the very-uncomfortable warrior with some amusement.

Well. Damn. It seems Kodlak’s aged nose was still sharp, after all.

"If you're referring to that...that thing with Sigrid," he began awkwardly, only to have Kodlak wave him off. "Don't, Vilkas. I know enough of that particular battle." He sighed. "What I'm getting at, young man, is this. Do these nightly encounters make you a better man? A better warrior, desiring to protect and defend?"

Kodlak finished his wine in a smacking gulp. "Or do you feel ensnared, doubtful? Does this lessen you?" The elderly wolf tapped his chest. "A good woman is a sheath to your sword, son. You guard her, adore her and she gives all the richness of life in return. But," Kodlak's mouth turned down. "...a witch will take, and take...until you realize you have been brought to ruin by the very thing you sought to cherish."

Vilkas relaxed slightly, frowning in thought.

Ysolda's gentle reminders had eventually borne fruit. Vilkas had finally brought her a mammoth tusk, and the reward had been memorably pleasant, if not quite satisfying. Nights ended with her soft pleas for him to stay, sometimes with weeping. Ysolda would accuse him of unfairly taking advantage of her. Which left Vilkas, as he cleaned up and left the lovely Nord with her arms folded tight, unsure of what exactly it was she expected of him.

Saadia was no better. Every time he dared drink at the Bannered Mare, she would be there at a ready arms length, smiling seductively and leaning over so that he would not miss the deeply cut bodice she always wore (for him alone, she had chuckled richly). The Redguard had some truly exotic ideas for the bedroom. Which, although enticing at first, had quickly become tedious as he grew weary of her strident demands to be choked, teased, and spanked.

It was nothing like it had been with her. Sigrid...Sarah had been genuine from the start. His cock stiffened slightly at the remembrance of her need, driving him mad from the smell alone. That night, the thought of leaving had not occurred until the dim light of dawn had encroached upon his awareness.

"Fear does not become us, Vilkas." Kodlak restoppered the spiced wine, then leaned forward to place a weather beaten hand on the armmaster's knee. "And a true Nord never backs down. I know you will do the right thing."

Stepping out of the drafty rooms and closing the door, Vilkas strode towards the upper stair. And in his chest, buried amidst the snaking nest of doubt and guilt, there fluttered the gentlest sigh of hope.
They began with simple questions.

"Who are you? Where you you hail from? What is your purpose in the province of Skyrim?"

Over and over. The Altmer voices, male and female, had an upper crust, almost British flair, Sigrid thought. Except that the liquid, mellifluous tones she caught snatches of were distinctly inhuman. She lifted her hand to touch her head, which pulsed like a hammer beating an anvil. Found that she was bound, hand and foot...spread eagled on a wooden slab tilted down, tied with leather strips until she was wide open and vulnerable. Like the Vitruvian Man frozen in time.

And, with a cool breeze prickling her flesh, she realized she was stark naked.

Weak flickers of firelight ebbed in and out of her vision. Her lips were cracked, dry with thirst. Something was wrong with her vision. Grey cobwebbed shadows chased themselves in her sight, like a hare pursued by a wolf.

Blinking repeatedly, her eyes watered in the smoke of the dimness around her. A cave, maybe. A room? Barely, she could make out the bulky figures of tables similar to the one she was bound.

Then, blackness.

No way to tell.

In what could have been moments, or hours later as she slumped in her bonds and lost moments of awareness to the dark, something she never thought she'd see again was lifted for her to view.

"What is this? Its purpose? Speak up Nord!"

Straining to focus her gaze, Sigrid saw the shattered glass face of her Samsung Galaxy phone.

The modern technology had not borne up well under the Thalmors' experimentation. The case had been pried free, and bits of silicone and plastic had flaked away, leaving depressions filled with grime.

The glowing orb-like eyes of the Thalmor holding the phone were close, scrutinizing her every reaction. With a shudder of revulsion, she slowly turned her face away.

She was rewarded with a tight slap. "Filthy Nord..." The Altmer hissed, sharp face tight with fury. "In time, your entire race will be eradicated!"
Leaving the dim circle of her visibility, the Altmer's clipped voice rose and fell as he conversed with unseen others.

Feeling lightheaded, Sigrid sagged against her bonds and with dim relief, fell headlong into a deep sleep.

It would be the last rest for what felt like an age.

A tidal wave of frigid water, hurled from a bucket jerked Sigrid awake from an almost sleep.

The water running down her face hurts. Feebly she licks the water droplets, tongue darting out. It takes maximum effort to crack her eyes open, and when she does, she wishes distantly that she hadn't.

Sigrid has not moved from the table they had strapped her to. Distantly, she could hear the rustling of robes as figures paced and murmured quietly, out of reach.

Her hands are the first thing she sees. Curved in a horrid parody of claws, her fingers swollen like purple eggplant — she remembers, vividly, the cracking they'd made as each bone had been broken —curling in on themselves so that the tips of her fingers graze the inside of her wrists.

Three of the fingers of her left hand pulse in agony. That's right...after revealing the other clothes and the lamp that had miraculously survived her entrance into this world, she had been punished for her stubborn refusal to speak.

She had howled and wept later, when with superheated pincers they delicately peeled off her fingernails.

And, Sigrid shuddered in the biting cold. They had enjoyed it. Cold, high laughter echoed around her. And though she could not see her tormentors in the dark of her hell, she had regained her vision just enough to wish she was blind.

The body a mere few feet away from her lies limp in its shackles. Bruises of blood pooling on the undersides of pale thighs, arms and neck reveal that Valga Vinicia, her dull brown eyes wide and unseeing, had been dead for some time. Flies buzzed out of her gaping mouth.

Her friend was missing her fingernails, too.

Sigrid's feet are no better, as her battered nerves remind her; her blackened toes are bent at awkward angles, her ankles swollen and stiff like iron. The broken bones ache; worse is the spiking agony that throbs with each heartbeat, as if every muscle of her arms and legs is cramping at once, a vicious pain that goes on and on and on.

She was going to die.

So much for being Dragonborn. Someone else was going to have to aide the poor sods of Skyrim in fighting back Alduin and his forces. Although, an unhelpful voice echoed in her mind, it wasn't as though the powers that be had been dealing favors her way as it was. Look at her now.

At least she could see Bryce and the boys again. If they were even in the Halls of Shor, or Daedra, or sent back to whatever heaven they had to have earned in their brief, precious lifespans. Where they
were, she told herself peacefully, she would find them. She would go.

But...wrinkling her mouth, her tenderly swollen lips bleeding with each movement; Sigrid still had something. A secret weapon, yet unused.

The Altmer mage who dared lean over her to display her dead husband's Falkniven knife had shrieked beautifully, over and over, beating the flames from his hood as 'Yol' roared forth from her bloody lips.

They gagged her with soiled rags after that.

Time passed on.

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Sixty beats per minute. Her heart was slowing. No idea how many hours, days had passed. Time moved impassively, eternally here.

Only the flame, and the lightning, and the ice to mark the time.

They had been incredibly thorough in their investigations of her person, so much that one female mage had exclaimed with surprise to feel the metal cord of her IUD, her intra-uterine device, still intact deep within her.

She would, she thought viciously, kill the man who had made her orgasm exquisitely over and over, lightning sizzling from his fingertips delicately touching her cunt as he laughed mockingly over her sweating, furious face. He had counted. She would slice into him as many times as he had violated her.

Kill kill kill. Kill him dead.

But the woman had been politely distant, for a Thalmor. She had not joined in the laughter at her expense; nor later when they collectively analyzed their findings of the insignificant details of her person and previous belongings. Had even removed the gag, though the woman was wise enough to secure Sigrid's face in a vise, forcing her throbbing jaw straight forward and up while performing her analysis.

Thinking longingly of the fire barely visible in the next room, she lay still and uncaring as the Thalmors questing fingers pulled the copper cord to and fro. She no longer shivered with the cold. Fingers and toes had lost their feeling long ago, she could feel the tendrils of ice snaking their way up her limbs, stealing the very warmth of her blood.

She would have told the mage every known location of the Elder Scrolls in Tamriel for a drink of water.

"It's..." she coughed weakly "...it's a method of contraception. Birth control."

"How crude." The Altmer sighed. "Of course, we have spells for that type of thing. I guess it does no good to remove it." Long, tapered fingers were wiped quickly on a wrap of linen, and with quick footsteps she disappears.
Breath visible in the cooling air, Sigrid closes her eyes. Devoid of the desire to see, she waits for what must surely come.

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She has nearly finished counting the stones in the shadowed ceiling above her when she hears a very distant scream. Strange. She is not the one screaming, so she tilts her head in mild curiosity.

Another scream and a great clashing crashing metal noise and abruptly Sigrid feels the stab of forgotten fear, because it is closer than the first sound.

More clashing, more screams and high pitched cries for help, along with a booming discharge of sound that sizzles. She blinks, stunned by the thunderclap of noise echoing around her tomb.

The noises of the metal clamor are so close to her now, maybe even in the same hall as what she knows to be her little stone room she shares with poor Valga.

Valga, who didn't even laugh at her jokes anymore. Something dripped from her mouth onto the floor.

Sigrid giggled breathily...drip, drip, drip...

She can hear the man's shouting voice clearer now.

"Sigrid! Gods, Sigrid! Where are you, woman?"

The man's voice melds with the metallic shings and booming crackle of magic, creating a resounding echo that deafens her, oh she can't think, why can't she think think think...

Sudden silence. The lock on her door rattles—and then it clicks—mildly interested, she looks towards the entryway...

And the door swings open with a clap-bam to reveal a wild eyed giant of a man with beautiful grey-white eyes. Like a huskie, she thinks abstractly. Pretty pretty eyes. The man walks carefully in the room, dripping red dots all over the stone flagged floor. Upon seeing her laid out upon the table, he becomes like a statue.

"...Sigrid?"

Chapter End Notes

I don't hate 'all' Thalmor. I happen to think Runil, Priest of Arkay (who has been featured in this story previously) is amazingly chill. Reminds me of Paarthurnax, with his desires to atone for his sins in the Great War and serve the Nords.

But the Thalmor are blatantly racist and genocidal. Even towards their own kind. Remember Malborn, the Bosmer elf who helps the Dragonborn during the Thalmor Embassy quest? His entire family was wiped out by the Thalmor for daring to question the rulers of the Summerset Isles.
Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Playing as a mage in Skyrim is a bit like being Superman - eventually with leveling, you can become waaay overpowered and smash just about anything to the point that the game becomes boring.

What would Altmer think about the generally magic-shunning Nords?

So...yeah. What happens to Sigrid is definitely within the realms of possibility. Poor Sigrid.
I would rather be ashes than dust!

I would rather that my spark should burn out

in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry-rot.

I would rather be a superb meteor,

every atom of me in magnificent glow,

than a sleepy and permanent planet.

The function of man is to live, not to exist.

I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them.

I shall use my time.

'Credo' - Jack London

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Vilkas wasn't sure, those first few days spiked with loss of sleep and fear, that Sigrid would survive to reach Whiterun.

No one had noticed her absence, until Tilma's apprentice timidly peeped up, asking where Sigrid had gone to, for she was supposed to go over Lucia's letters with her at supper.

Aela had left earlier that week, snarling under her breath that she was leaving to back up Skjor. Kodlak had merely shaken his head in sadness. Gallows Rock had been a beehive of activity for the Silver Hand for years now...yet the leader of the Circle had yet to give the command to wipe them out, stating that further retaliation against the Hand would only result in more death.

Skjor had reluctantly obeyed, until now. Krev the Skinner was a mighty prize, and the veteran chafed at his inability to avenge the deaths of countless fellow werewolves. Friends, all of them. And where Skjor ran, Aela followed on the hunt.

Who else could go, to look for the woman? Farkas would not return for four days time. Athis and Ria were still nursing wounds gained by clearing out an entire cave of wretched Falmer. Njada had just been called to clear out a bear trapped in some farmers cowpen. And Torvar-

Vilkas frustratedly kicked a snoring Torvar, lying in a puddle of his own vomit. Useless. The sot was not always dead drunk, but to be so unreliable, now, when he was sorely needed...

The Master at Arms would have words with him, later.

Pulling out the ruff of his cloak collar in a furry halo, Vilkas stepped into the deceptively gentle
snow, the first of Frostfall.

It had been two days and three nights, and she had not returned.

Not away for any job, that he knew of.

Missing.

Checking that his massive two handed blade, greater than the height of a child, was strapped securely in its scabbard to his back, Vilkas sniffed the frost cold air, seeking. Finding the thin thread of scent hidden in the tapestry of smells...ghosted with sunshine lavender that was purely Sigrid alone.

The scent-thread beckoned him outside the city gates. Someone had seen her. Someone would know. The city guards (children barely taken off of apron strings, babbling about a dragon, only the gods knew why) knew nothing, had not seen her enter or leave these last few days.

Shuffling his gear to lay more comfortably, he huffed a sigh and broke into a steady lope. If he did not quicken his pace, the Nord could cover countless miles this way.

Lavender and sun. Freckled skin. Sleek bark brown hair, whipping around the practice yard in a ragged braid.

She had called him a skeever shit, yet smiled, afterward.

He'd find her, if he could.

Snow fell more thickly, clouds shielding a dying sun in a silvery haze.

Only prey waited.

******************************************************************************

He had not expected this.

Covered in the syrupy stink of elf blood, Vilkas gaped at the woman, filthy and giggling, strapped to the torture table.

Barely recognizable. Much less as his shield sister, proud and strong.

With hesitant care, he had unwrapped the swollen sausages of her wrists and ankles. His heart sank when she looked upon him dazedly with no recognition. Blood boiled at the sight of the damage done, greenish-plum bruises and half healed burns marring her skin in a patchwork quilt of pain.

He'd kill them again for that, if he could.

Vilkas' nose (and persistent stubborn questioning) had led him to the cragfaced Bolund, lumber worker of Falkreath's waterwheel mill. The milk drinker had dared to sneer at her name, in front of the Companion. He smirked. Fisticuffs led to a faster spill of answers, and Bolund -squeaking around his bloody, broken nose - informed Vilkas of the Thalmor troop that had infiltrated Falkreath.

Imperiously demanding any knowledge of someone named Sarah Ferguson.

It had been the work of another eternal day to track down the decrepit Imperial fortress that had crumbled, like week-old cake, into the surrounding evergreens and rocks.

Five Altmer. Four mages. A single scout. Unsheathing his greatsword, Vilkas had smiled widely,
exposed teeth lengthening, fang-sharp in response to the bug-eyed fear the Thalmor sentinel guarding the door gave.

Sweet perfume, that fear, beckoning to his inner wolf.

He'd indulge his craving, this once.

They had all died too quickly, arcing ice spikes and fire bolts deflected by fur padded steel and quick footwork. Accustomed to finding his way through the maze of tunnels from exploring countless similar fortresses, he flowed through the stronghold like a poisoned river. Relentless. Unstoppable. In pursuit.

The thread of sunshine and lavender grew stronger as he burrowed deep within the bowels of stone.

Vilkas had remained strong, determined to fight like a man, to make Kodlak proud (a Nord never backs down, forward, only forward, damn it where is she) -

- Until he caught it. The scent of her honeyed womanly parts, emanating from the last elf male quaking in his robes before him. Had he -

Steel tore, buckled and ripped as Vilkas had exploded in an agony of fur and fury. Ripping, jaws clenched deep, immovable in the thin golden skin like a hound shaking a rat, he shredded the man into unrecognizable bits. Tooth and claw, rending...until no scent remained but that of sickly sweet ichor.

Unsated, his claws moved of their own accord as he blindly tore the other bodies to wet shreds.

Once he had calmed somewhat, a still-shaking Vilkas fought the wolf down, fought for dominance of his own damn body. The wolf amber eyes bulged, refracting into bloodshot grey irises with pupils blown wide. He allowed black fur to recede into skin, jaws aching as blood tipped fangs sank back into gums like needles, leaving a layer of wet filth on dry lips.

He had opened the last door, to at last find his prey.

But that sunshine-flecked skin was cold, gods, so cold and she was out of her mind, with the ranting mad glee of a woman who welcomed the grave.

Releasing her bonds, he had closed the eyes, in respect, of the dead Imperial woman who had passed on what smelled like days ago.

Later. He would send someone back to give her a proper burial later. They would not linger here a moment more.

Grabbing the remains of Sigrids travel pack, he scanned the room. Nothing for it. The priestesses of the Temple of Kynareth back at Whiterun would know what to do for the seeping wounds, the broken bones. They could heal her mind. They must.

Growling in frustration, he gently rolled his burden into his arms, wincing as she shrieked. He knew, knew it was always more painful to be moved than to move oneself, when badly injured.

Nothing more to do. The Companion knew no restoration spells, no magic, barely any healing at all. The potion he had tilted to her lips leaked down the divot of her lip and chin, trickling to the straw covered floor. She didn't swallow.

Vilkas took a deep breath. Keep her clean, dry and warm. He could worry later about whatever
damage was done that was not visible to his eyes. Fast, and silent he would be, to take his pack sister home.

Wrapping her in whatever had survived the mindless destruction of his rage, Vilkas trudged slowly with his burden, revealing a world of white-swirling blizzard that howled, howled the twin song of the grey sorrow pounding in his chest.

She would come back.

She must.

*****************************************************************

This accursed storm would be her death, if he did not hurry.

Wearily blinking fast to clear the snowflakes clinging to his lashes, Vilkas hefted the weight of the woman in his arms to a more comfortable angle. She was slowly turning paler, her lips tinged blue with the killing cold that blanketed the path. Making it all but impossible to find the way.

Limbs shaking in exhaustion, he lurched to the nearest blur of white edged darkness. A large pine, needles coated in ice. Perfect.

Slowly lowering the woman, who had been rolled in a forest of fur, down underneath the tree he stretched and pulled the soreness from his aching arms and back.

Gasping for breath, Vilkas shut his eyes and felt, seeking with the brother wolf that abided in him for the full moon, hidden by storm and snow. For the second time in ages, he willed his body to change. Bones cracked, snapped and popped, glutinous muscle and innards twisting and reforming into fur and claw.

Vilkas shook his muzzle. Better.

He'd worry about telling Kodlak later. Surely the old man, after that last gods-awful conversation, would understand.

Carefully judging the distance, as his eyes were still refocusing to lupine lenses, Vilkas slid his paws beneath Sigrid and cradled her against the blackness of his furred chest. She moaned in pain as her hands bumped his jaw.

He growled, straining to focus on his goal. It was always a battle for dominance, with the wolf. His wolf wanted to play, to roll in the snow, to feed.

And Sigrid, wounded and bleeding and cold, was fresh meat.

Snarling at himself, Vilkas held his burden tighter to his chest and ran, ran in great loping strides in the direction his wolf senses revealed to be true north.

Focus.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, I love that verse by Jack London. I think of it as Sigrid's fight song for her new life
in Tamriel. She's such a badass now.
Sarah snuggled deeper into Bryce's warm arms and sighed, pleasantly numb. She loved it when Bryce came back from chopping wood for the cast iron wood stove. He smelled so, so good. She would tangle her fingers in his thick, dark hair and hold him close, just smelling him. Trees and snow and something that smelt faintly dark and masculine. Like sandalwood.

"God, I have had the most crazy dream," she murmured, stroking his hair. Chuckled. "I'll have to tell you all about it once I wake up, Bryce. I just need a few more minutes..." Shivering, she hunched closer to the heat emanating from him. Her very own built in water heater, she had once joked. "I'm going to need to cut your hair again, huh?" She wound her fingers lazily in the soft, pettable hair.

She had stayed out longer than she had thought. Winter in South Dakota started with cold flurries sometimes as early as September, with strong winds that came down to the plains from the north bringing the cold from icy Canada. She loved it, would stay outside wrapped in her afghan with a cup of coffee and just inhale the fresh air, feeling the wind bite into her ears and whip her hair into a horrible snarl.

But she had overdone it today. Her fingers felt off, somehow, thick and unresponsive. Bryce must be wearing one of his thickest flannels, because everything smelled like musk and sweat and God, what was that stench? Was it her?

She couldn't open her eyes.

A dog whined, seemingly far away. Sarah frowned. They hadn't had a dog since Tucker died last spring.

Her legs weren't responding either.

"Bryce?"

***********************

They were back, the two of them.

Wow. These were really good drugs.

If, Sarah reasoned, she was hallucinating, then her brain had really good taste.

She was laying on something soft and raised, high enough that she could see the light sparkle on the water in the circular pools, all lined in an aqua tile. Very Greek. Long trailing plants hung from the ceilings, dangling from pots and planters lining the walls. The air was damp and smelled vaguely herbal. Mint and rosemary and bitterness, like maybe oregano.

The kind faced woman wearing the weird bathrobe-thing led the two men closer to what had to be her hospital bed, if she wasn't hopped up on Vicodin or Oxycodone or whatever they had given her. Her mind felt pleasantly pillowed, like she wasn't really here. Wasn't that called lucid dreaming or something? When you could interact with the people in your dream, like in that movie Inception? Awesome.
She didn't feel an I.V. in her wrist, but flexing her hands she could tell her fingers had been splinted and wrapped in...in yellowed bandages?

Damn, they must have made some budget cuts or something here. Sarah wiggled her fingers. It felt like wearing Mickey gloves, that time they had made the amazing mistake of taking the kids to Disneyland. In the summer. God what a mess.

But little Adam had giggled so hard when she tickled him with the Mickey gloves. Mickey gloves got them through the two hour lines standing in ninety nine degree heat. Seeing the snapshot of the kids and Bryce, mouths open in a scream of delight down Splash Mountain, that had been worth the tears and complaining. Well, almost.

These guys didn't look like they worked at Disneyland.

And really, were they some of those Golds Gym dudes who took steroids on top of a daily five miler? Because she could see the cut and flex of muscle through their rough tunics and pants as they slowly walked closer. The bigger man knelt down, squatting near her bed. The other hesitated, remaining at a distance.

"Hey there." Big guy scratched his head, pulling long strands of hair out of his face. She could feel the deep bass of his voice rumbling through her as he spoke. "How you feeling?"

Sarah wrinkled her nose. Sensation, rising from someplace buried deep, was slowly returning to her lips, fingers and toes. Itching, prickling...she didn't like it. "You must be one of the orderlies here, right Goliath? Can I get a Coke zero, now that the I.V. has been taken out?" Expending more effort that she thought it would take, she lifted her heavily gauzed hand and tapped him, once, on the chest. "That would be greeaaat..." She grimaced, head thumping back on the hard pillow as she closed her eyes. Whew. Everything was spinning.

Goliath looked at his buddy. "That...didn't make much sense, brother."

The other man sighed in frustration. "None of this does." Footsteps drew closer, then paused.

"Hey. Woman. What do you remember?"

Woman? What kind of training did they do here at this hospital? How hard was it to call her Ms. Ferguson? Bryce should be here, he must be going to the bathroom. Checking on the kids. God, she couldn't remember just yet why...why she was here.

Car accident? It had to be. Some pile up from that snowstorm. Sarah was always nagging Bryce to leave a little more distance between their Suburban and...and-

Her medical chart should be right there. Sarah looked around, eyes darting around the fantastic spa her belabored mind had created. No chart.

Just these guys. Wearing those odd tan jogging clothes and moccasins. The one who had moved closer made a pained noise, reaching his hand towards her. She stiffened, something warning her not to make a move.

Whoa. His eyes were a strange shade of light silvery grey, lightening to polar ice at the outer edges of the iris until the white ended with an unusually dark limbal ring.

Pretty.

"Sigrid." His jaw tightened, and he bent closer to her. She could see the roughness of his face where
his shadow of a beard was growing in. Deep furrows in his forehead made him look older, tired.
"You have to remember. Danica says your mind is...hiding, to protect itself. You must wake. Wake
and remember." His breath sighed over her face. Callused fingertips touched her cheek. "Remember
us."

Sarah blinked. Sigrid?

Something about all of this was familiar. Like...like that godawful dream she had been having. It had
been so nice (and sexy, ooh Bryce was getting lucky tonight) up until the part where she couldn't
wake up.

"My name is Sarah. Sarah Ferguson." She shivered. "Can I have some more blankets, please? And
bring my husband, Bryce, back in here. He should be here somewhere, with a bunch of kids. Please,
will you let him know I'm awake?"

The men looked solemn. And sad. Needling fear stole through Sarah as she began to breathe rapidly,
quelling the fast-growing panic. Bryce was okay, right? She didn't remember who had been driving,
but the kids all had their seatbelts fastened, and...

Shit. They had the look, that look she recognized from her search and rescue calls. The ones that
were usually body recovery. The look that said 'Lord, I don't want to be the one to tell them this.'

Someone was dead. Sarah winced as feeling suddenly coursed through her legs and arms, spiking in
soaring agony as she seized, almost falling off the bed as her eyes rolled back and her body spasmed,
no longer hers to control.

The guys tried to hold her jerking limbs down, Big Guy calling over and over for someone named
Danica. Pretty Eyes was grim, holding her head down carefully and searching her eyes for -
something? Bathrobe lady ran over, straight through the decorative tiled pools and god, was that light
streaking from her wrinkly hands?

Warm, welling golden light, soothing the burns, the aches. It hurt so bad, tears leaked from her eyes
as she shut them tight, shut away the pain, god the pain, not even giving birth had been like this god
god oh god-

"Perhaps you wish to confess now what your purpose is here with these Dwarven machinations?"
Sanyon idly sipped from a bottle of wine.

Her cracked lips salivated, eyes tracking every bob of the mers throat. Recorking the wine, the
Thalmor agent walked in measured paces towards her. She shifted, struggling, couldn't get away.

Hell, he wouldn't believe her, even if she did tell him.

Perhaps he could sense her reticence, even now. Lips thinning, Sanyon lifted a long fingered hand
and -

Her back arched, shaking in agony as lightning crackled through the sole of her foot all the way to
her spine.

"If I do that again," The Altmer warned "-then it is likely you may never walk again. Or the lightning
will find its way to your heart, stopping it permanently. I would be displeased, as you have told us
nothing. Less than nothing."
She tried to wet her lips with the old leather strap that used to be her tongue. Unable to take her eyes off the bottle of wine, the half filled mug of water the other mage had drank from earlier. The barrel in the corner, sloshing with liquid.

Cupping her face in his hands, she found herself drinking greedily all of a sudden as Sanyon lifted a shallow bowl to her lips. Gasping, head bending forward as he took it away, Sigrid would have cried, if she hadn't already run out of tears. It tasted so good.

She hated the gratitude she felt, biting back her thanks.

"Tell me something. Anything, about these objects, and I will give you more. All the water and wine you can drink." Amber eyes, slanted like almonds glittered in the light of the lantern.

And so she did.

Told him all of it. The camping trip to Yellowstone, the strange transference from her world to Tamriel, death and rebirth and blood and shit. She told him of Valga and her caring hands (damn him), of the unexpected friendship found in the Companions, hours spent making wreaths, something beautiful, the stark wild beauty of Skyrim untainted by industrial pollution or strip mining or nuclear threats.

He didn't believe her. Scoffed at her explanations of the cell phone, how she used it to speak with people thousands of miles away. How chemical reactions powered the batteries he rolled in long thin fingers, lighting the Coleman lamp he held on his lap. How machines now sewed all her peoples clothing, cheaply made by slaves far away.

Stupid. Desperate for water, she knew, knew he wouldn't believe. How could he, a Thalmor, confronted by evidence of a culture superior in magic he had never seen? When the other elven mage came in to trade places, green eyes raking over her nakedness with lustful dominance, she pulled hard at her bindings, hard enough to feel the broken bones grind together, panting in hard fast gasps as no, no stop, go away, don't do that don't do that no leave me alone go -

"No!" She wailed, horribly aware. Aware of where she was, what she was, who held her now when she never thought he would again.

And everything aches. Her eyes are so heavy they might as well be glued shut, and yet the rest of her feels strangely weightless, as if she is floating a few inches above the bed.

"That is...all I can do, for now. Let her rest, if she will." Danica (Danica Pure-Spring) removes her hands, the light fading from the edges as she stumbles back in exhaustion. Her hands and feet feel peculiar. For a moment she can't place the feeling, and then she realizes, they move.

Somehow, in the period where she had blacked out, someone had removed the bandages. Though her fingers and toes still throb, the healing not quite complete, they are loose, free; their bendiness is intoxicating, and she rolls her hands on her wrist for the sheer blissful ache of it, doing the same with her unbound feet.

Sigrid is so enthralled by the possibility of movement, of the lack of overwhelming pain that she doesn't register the pitched argument going on right beside her.

"She needs rest!"

"...asleep for days..."

"...won't take unless she has somewhere quiet, you'll shock her, no..."
"She needs her people. You have given us much help, but we will look after her now." The world tilted, her view shifting as the giant (Farkas, how could I forget) picked her up from the stone bed. Lifting her like she weighed nothing, with him walking right beside her, oh god.

Vilkas.

**************************
Fredens åtgärd (Measure of Peace)

Chapter Summary

I've been listening to a lot of Scandinavian music while writing these last few chapters. I really dig this one. Pensive and complex, just like their (twisted) relationship.

Always, comment with questions or remarks.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPR56PXiLqY&list=RDMPR56PXiLqY&index=1

Dipping in and out of consciousness, Sigrid awakens in a strange bed. In a strange place once again.

No, she amends to herself, she knows where she is. Somewhere in Jorrvaskr. The golden, slightly aged tapestries and furs, the juniper tang of the cleanser Tilma prefers...all signs point to the hall of warriors. Home.

Abruptly, she realizes she is not alone. Vilkas is here as well. Looking around, she realizes that this must be his personal room. Funny. She'd never been in here before. Various weapons were arrayed carefully upon the racks framing the door, with an entire wall taken up with a massive bookcase, filled with more books than she'd ever seen here in Skyrim. She itched to get her hands on them.

"Tilma provided some hot water and soap, if you feel well enough to bathe." His voice is carefully disinterested, as cautious as his movements as he settles on the edge of the bed.

He touches the shedding edge of her grimy furs. His breastplate and gauntlets are gone, she notices; his arms look naked without them. He wore a simple tunic over soft pants. "Or, if you prefer, you could rest instead."

Vilkas holds her gaze steadily, neither pushing nor pulling, unusually patient as he waits for her to decide.

It isn't even a difficult choice - Sigrid can smell herself, smell the stink, she so desperately wants to be clean - but her mind flutters like a bird without a perch.

"Are you going to help me?" Her voice cracks, ending with a rough cough as she curls in the furs, suddenly despising herself. Weak, foolish enough to be captured, to be rescued. Again with the rescuing. God, and she had just begun to imagine herself to be capable, self sufficient.

Why he hadn't let her die, she would never know.

Vilkas is silent, so long that she is about to speak when he interrupts her. "I can find Tilma, or Lucia, if you'd prefer." His voice is soft, careful.

He's treating her like an victim, and she immediately despises it.

"I'd like to get clean. If you'll help me. I want to be clean more than anything else right now."

"I'd recommend it," he says, his voice dry, but he still looks shaken as he fetches the washsbain of...
steaming water Tilma must have left by the door.

Sigrid sits up cautiously; her ribs creak in warning and the burns pulling the skin tight on her back spike with pain and everything hurts, but hey, for the first time in days she moves all on her own.

Freedom. The muscles of her legs aren't strong enough to swing her feet on their own, so she digs her hands (hands she can move anytime she wants, fingers she can bend and flex and feel) under her thighs and pushes them over the side of the bed, one at a time.

That motion in itself is exhausting, though, and she can do little more than wait for Vilkas to set the basin and a pile of thick towels at her feet.

Though she has every intention of standing under her own power, Sigrid's legs haven't borne weight in a while, and her knees buckle almost immediately. Vilkas catches her around the waist before she can fall and lowers her back to his bed. Sigrid snorts. "That went well."

Vilkas straightens up, his eyebrows furrowing. She's missed those eyebrows. "Raise your arms."

She does so at once, a little shiver of fear overriding the burns pulling her tender skin. Something like sadness races over Vilkas's face, but it is gone so quickly.

She wonders if she has imagined it. He says nothing, anyway, and gently removes the rank fur pelt, peeling it free where it sticks to dried blood and pus. Her gaze drops as it pulls free from her completely and she freezes, stunned by her own appearance.

"I am disgusting," Sigrid murmurs, staring at her thighs. She should be nervous, this is Vilkas seeing her in all her nasty glory, but really, all she can think of is the mage's hands kneading, pulsing with electric light; and the sick horror with which she had screamed in ecstasy, hating it, wanting it to end and yet never cease.

Vilkas's eyes narrow, his gaze suddenly snapping with icy fire. "You are not."

She looks up, startled, then sighs. "I meant—no, Vilkas. I meant physically." So tired, so fucking tired of hiding and pretending she isn't completely lost at sea. So much lingering shame and humiliation, but she doesn't have the strength to think about it now, and more than anything she doesn't want Vilkas to see the grime left deeper than any bath can reach.

She turns her mottled arms over to show him the dirt encrusted in every crevice in her skin, the dried blood that sticks to the half-healed cuts scattered over her stomach and back, grim souvenirs. She fingers the matted hair over her forehead and winces as Vilkas picks something out of it.

Please don't let me have lice. "I think I'm going to need more than a bucket, here."

"It can be refilled," Vilkas points out mildly, dipping soap and cloth into the basin of water. He kneels behind her on the bed and she senses him stop suddenly, arrested by the sight of the lightning marked weals that she knows spread from shoulder to hip. "Ah," he breathes, barely loud enough for her to hear; she feels him bend, brushing his fingertips like ghosts over the mark that runs longest over her shoulders.

She can't help but wonder if he thinks the less of her for bearing them, for being caught in the first place, but he doesn't linger, and with a tenderness that surprises her, he begins to wash her clean.

The water feels incredible. It has been doled to her so severely for so long that it feels almost a waste to have it spent on something as luxurious as a bath.

Sigrid lets her eyes drop closed as Vilkas sweeps the cloth over her bare back in long, smooth
strokes, lightly patting over the places where the skin is split with the sure fingers of experience. His
hands knead through her hair and over the back of her neck with what smells like lavender water and
snowberry soap, working out the tangles as he helps her lean over the basin, wringing her hair out
with slow, sure fingers.

It soothes her until her head tips forward. Sigrid feels more than sees Vilkas move off the bed.

He dips the cloth in the basin and wrings it clean, then kneels in front of her. One hand cups her chin
lightly, raising her face to his.

Her eyes are drooping in relaxation and Vilkas actually cracks a smile in something suspiciously like
gentleness. He wipes her face clean with his other hand, lingering over her eyes and her mouth until
not a speck of filth is left.

"How did you find me?" Sigrid asks eventually, when he seems focused on the bruises collaring her
neck. Bruises that match the echoing pain of long, strong fingers holding her down. And then a
thought occurs to her, and she adds, "Where was I?"

"Didn't realize you were missing, at first," Vilkas mutters, his voice pensive. "Thought you were at
the forge, or afield hunting bandits. Aela is..." He winced. "Not herself, as of now. Skjor is
dead...taken down by the Silver Hand."

Sigrid gasped. "She is in wolf form, and refuses to turn back."

The cloth dips with a noisy splash into the water, and when Vilkas speaks next, his voice is more
businesslike. "Honestly, woman, it wasn't until Lucia asked where you were to teach her lessons,
that we saw you had been gone for days." His grey gaze flicks up to hers, just for a moment, and the
darkness in his eyes makes Sigrid realize that it was worry, not judgement that she found there.

He...he had found her. Somehow.

"You were being held by the Thalmor in some abandoned fort outside of Falkreath." The cloth
brushes over her bare breasts and stomach and then stills; water drips from her hair onto his wrist.
"You have lost weight," Vilkas frowns. His thumb bumps over her ribs.

And even though she can't quite forget what the Thalmor had done, or how cold he had been, she
shivered in unexpected pleasure.

"I thought," he says, so soft she can barely hear him, "...that not knowing whether you were alive or
dead was..." The muscles of his neck are whipcord tight and his jaw works to get out his next words.
"Seeing you in there, at the elves mercy, was - unbearable, Sigrid."

Sigrid shakes her head mutely, unable to speak past the sudden lump in her throat. She swallows
once, then twice, and then manages, "I'm just glad you came, Vilkas. Seems once again I owe you a
debt."

Vilkas moves, wraps his arms around her and pulls her into his chest in one swift movement.

Her heart leaps to her throat, then, and the prickling tears begin to spill over her cheeks in earnest.
One of his hands slides into her (clean, finally clean) hair and the other curls around her waist,
pulling her so close against him she can barely breathe, his arms tightening until it hurts. She tells him
so, and the pressure lessens.

He says nothing else, and peace steals into her as she realizes that awful tension that had stretched
between them for weeks is gone, gone with the certainty that whatever this was, she was safe
now. Sigrid presses her face against his chest, naked and shivering with pain and exhaustion and terrible relief.

He lets her weep softly, as his fingers trace small circles on the unblemished skin of her back.
Chapter Summary

Thanks to groovymarlin, who has kindly consented to beta this work. If there are any faults, they are mine alone.

Aela showed up two days later.

Vilkas had taken to reading to her as she dozed fitfully, sleeping off the remnants of a fever that struck after the last wound had scarred over. Sigrid wasn't always aware of what the low, rumbling words meant; she drifted on eddies of wakefulness and dreams, brought on by the steady dosage of potions Farkas brought in daily.

It was enough, to not be alone.

The tales she did manage to stay awake for resulted in a flood of questions. It was like some Wagnerian opera; gods and daedra and men, battling an alien pantheon with exotic names she absorbed with fascination.

She had nothing to do but heal and sleep and sit; to stare at him as he read, memorizing the fine lines in his hands, the breadth of his shoulders, the way his lips curved and formed words. Deep emotion colored his voice as he told stories of Fjori and Holgeir, Ysgramor and the Five Hundred, Sheogorath and Shor.

She loved the sound of his voice.

It was during one such afternoon, when Farkas sat his bulk on a tiny stool and told her the latest gossip from the market while Vilkas flipped pages, impatient to find the story he sought, that the huntress crept into the room.

Tail between her legs, Sigrid thought idly. But that was unkind. Aela looked haggard, her normally flawless complexion blotchy with tears, armor stained in splotches of dirt and gore. Seems she had been taking the fight to the Silver Hand herself.

Clicking her tongue irritably, Aela motioned sharply for the twins to leave. Raising a single brow, Farkas stood up from his stool and patted Sigrid on the shoulder. "I'll be down the hall if you scream." He winked, then walked out pulling a stiffly silent Vilkas behind him.

The door heaved shut. The two women stared each other down.

Aela broke first, turning away to glance at the plates of food scattered around the room, half drunk bottles of mead balanced on teetering piles of books. "Glad to see you are stronger than you look," the huntress sniffed. "If I hadn't known any better, I would have thought a mammoth had dragged you through a camp of Forsworn, sister. You've looked better."

Reluctantly, Sigrid smiled, feeling the new scars on her face and neck stretch, new skin pink and healing. It was about as much of an olive branch as she had expected from the taciturn woman. "Aela." She reached out her hand to the huntress, who took it reluctantly, pausing as her dirt encrusted fingers encountered the missing fingernails of her left hand.
"...So." Sigrid cleared her throat, aware of the unsure, awkward pause that swelled between them as Aela's eyes took in the thick, fleshy patches of skin marring her arms, peppered with small white slices that were finally fading. "Aela, I'm so sorry for your loss."

She patted the woman's still hand. Sigrid knew, not without sympathy, that it was probably the last thing the huntress desired to hear, but she would still say it. Part of the grieving process, she dimly remembered her search and rescue mentor telling her, when she had fallen apart upon finding the body of a child who had been separated from his parents, lost in the badlands.

Horrible. It was fine to cry, to rage. It was unfair. It was life.

Change was the only constant, even here.

Aela did not respond, but they sat there like that for a few minutes; both thinking private thoughts of the men they had lost.

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Sigrid didn't mind the scars as much as she thought she might, after Athis had dropped by and removed his shirt. The Dunmer had proudly related the tale of each scar marring his dusky skin, with Njada in the corner pretending not to listen, stolid face sneering with mock disgust at each tale. It didn't escape Sigrid that Njada slowly drew nearer as the stories became more drawn out, the locations the scars were obtained even more exotic. Athis was old, at least two hundred years old (what would that be like), and even related with glee his memories of surviving the madness of the Oblivion Crisis as a child.

It had been...fun. The camaraderie she had been greeted with upon her groggy wakefulness was not expected, but welcome. Each had made a point to visit her, under the watchful glare of the Master at Arms. Except for Torvar, who left Sigrid chortling to herself as Vilkas asked, with mock sweetness, to have a talk aside with the man.

Their raised shouting had brought Kodlak hobbling down the hall, just to inquire about the racket.

Sigrid shifted in her pile of furs. The Harbinger had been one of the first to visit, bringing yet another vintage for the invalid to sample. She had been so dehydrated, so thirsty those first few days that Farkas had barked in laughter watching her demolish pitcher after pitcher of spring water.

Vilkas hadn't laughed, merely folded his arms tightly, mouth grim in concern. He hadn't even laughed when, hopping in panic, she begged him to leave so that she could use the chamberpot. Even when she blushed in embarrassment, he had just shaken his head and left.

Strangely, it wasn't as humiliating as she thought it might have been. Having him wait on the other side of the door as she relieved herself wasn't much worse than having him give her what amounted to a sponge bath with a bucket. Or throwing up all over Farkas's boots (the giant claimed she owed him a new pair). Or having him rescue her from a killer necromancer. Or from the sadistic experiments of some seriously unhinged mages.

Even though the scale balanced far in his favor, she told herself it was no matter, as long as she paid him back. Somehow.

How do you thank a man for saving your life, if he keeps doing it, she pondered late one night. The lantern had burned low, and the room was dark in shadow. Vilkas dozed in his armchair, brow smoothed in sleep.

Stone walls. With a flash of fear, she tore off the blankets, suddenly desperate to be free and
unencumbered. Vilkas became Valga, limp and dead instead of asleep, the room cold, not warm...

But, it was not that room. Not Valga who picked up the blanket, cradling her in his arms as she shuddered in nameless fear over the room that wasn't cold, not cold at all.

"Peace, woman." His mouth brushed the top of her head, so lightly she hardly felt it. "Sleep."

Darkness, and warmth, safe. Safety in his arms.

She slept.

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She was fine. If she kept telling herself that, it was bound to be true. Getting better by the day, and she told Kodlak so, as he poured what smelled like mulled wine into polished horn glasses.

"Evette Sans spiced mead," Kodlak Whitemane toasted her with his cup, nodding. "Like a fire in the belly - I find it helps as winter pains my joints, these days." He harrumphed, sharp eyes taking in the well lived atmosphere of what had become a hub of activity in Jorrvaskr's living area. "I have a task for you."

Sigrid basked in the flavor of spices, something akin to clove and anise dancing on her tongue. She was going to have to send an order for this by the wagonload. "Yes, Harbinger?"

"You have heard by now the story of how the Companions came to be werewolves?"

She had heard that particular tale, one night when she had timidly asked her watchful roommate if he knew why she had dreamt of fur and pine when she was ill. One of the few times she had ever seen him struggle for words.

"Vilkas said it was a curse." She sipped more slowly, savoring.

Kodlak chuckled. "The boy has a nugget of truth, but the reality is more complicated than that. It always is." Taking a labored breath, the elderly Harbinger paused to collect his thoughts.

Knowing what was coming wasn't the same as hearing it from the horse's mouth, Sigrid thought ruefully as she mentally mapped how far away the Glenmoril Coven cave must be from Whiterun.

Damn. She had been enjoying this vacation.

Yep. Think of it as a vacation. Nothing more.

"The Companions are nearly five thousand years old. This matter of beastblood has only troubled us for a few hundred. One of my predecessors was a good, but short-sighted man."

Kodlak sniffed. Sigrid found herself leaning forward, despite herself. The old man would have made a fine bard.

"He made a bargain with the witches of Glenmoril Coven. If the Companions would hunt in the name of their lord, Hircine, we would be granted great power. They... did not believe the change would be permanent. They were deceived."

He sighed, seemingly searching for words. Flame guttered in the lantern set near on the table, as Sigrid sat silently, waiting for him to continue.

"The witches didn't lie, of course. But it's more than our bodies."
The sudden sound of footsteps neared, then paused. Kodlak raised his head; then seeing Vilkas at the doorway smiled fondly.

He continued, "The disease, you see, affects not just our bodies. It seeps into the spirit. Upon death, werewolves are claimed by Hircine for his Hunting Grounds."

"For some, this is a paradise." Kodlak thumbed an etching of a wolf on the tusk handled dagger he carried at his waist. "They want nothing more than to chase prey with their master for eternity. And that is their choice. But, I am still a true Nord."

He smiled sadly. "And I wish for Sovngarde as my spirit home."

Seconds ticked by as no one moved, Vilkas leaning against the doorway, seeming to contemplate what the Harbinger had related.

"Is there a cure?" She prodded.

"That's what I've spent my twilight years trying to find out." Kodlak responded, taking the opening she had given.

"And now I've found the answer." Vilkas shifted from foot to foot. She looked up at him. He seemed even taller, in the darkened hall. "The witches' magic ensnared us, and only their magic can release us. They won't give it willingly, but we can extract their foul powers by force."

Kodlak fixed Sigrid with a look, his gaze heavy with expectation. "I want you to seek them out. Go to their coven in the wilderness. Strike them down."

"...And bring me their heads." He finished, before Vilkas could object. Sigrid finished the rest of her wine, offering the man hovering over her the rest of the bottle. He shook his head, focused on the Harbinger. His loss.

"The head. The seat of their abilities. From there, we may begin to undo centuries of impurity." Kodlak finished, with a faraway twist to his lips.

"Should I do this alone?"

Her quiet statement finally brought Vilkas out of his silent observations. "No, woman. No! You've barely recovered as it is!"

Kodlak steepled his fingers and looked at Vilkas from beneath bushy brows. "You shall have no shield brother this time, girl. But the spirit of Ysgramor goes with you, to restore the honor of his legacy."

Standing creakily, he passed by a seething Vilkas with a rasped chuckle. "Talos guide you, lass." She sighed and nodded wearily.

As the door eased shut, Vilkas fixed her with a stare. "You should have said no."

"But Kodlak, he..."

"No!" Raking his fingers through his hair, Vilkas swore and turning on his heel, walked from the room.

Sigrid sank back in the bed, a ripple of unease spreading through her. Stretching her hand out, she grabbed the tome that had suddenly become the top priority on her reading list and dragged th
lantern onto her lap, for better light.

Vilkas stalked into his room hours later to find the woman fast asleep...his copy of Herbane’s Bestiary of Hagravens flopped open upon her chest. The tattered book rose and fell with each breath, her face in peaceful repose.

Pulling the woven blankets higher over her exposed hip, he frowned. Not that it was necessary; it was perfectly warm.

He let her be.
Chapter Summary

Time for some wilderness survival!

So, Sigrid has trained her ass off for months at Jorrvaskr, studying the sword. But outdoor survival (climbing, hunting, fishing, shelter building, fire, etc) is an entirely different animal. There's a bit of a learning curve.

And yes. You can eat the inner bark of pine trees, if you haven't read the Hunger Games yet, now you know.

I've tried it. Chew thoroughly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She spent the following week in preparation.

After Danica Pure-Spring declared her fit to fight, Sigrid spent the last of her savings on a new set of leather armor. Though the game she remembered only allowed for the basic brown set of light armored leathers (unless one was a Nightingale or Assassin, fat chance) she found a great deal of variety was possible depending on the craftsman.

Adrianne had outdone herself this time, she thought as she looked critically at her reflection in the blacksmith's small mirror. Tight red leather closely fit each joint and curve, the seams double stitched and waterproofed with a waxed oil that came, she was told, from tundra cotton. Steel plates were concealed in the areas of her shoulders, wrists, thighs, belly, shins...like the hard plate kevlar body armor Bryce had stored somewhere in their attic.

Blood red; the better to hide the stains if not herself, she laughed inwardly.

Stealth did not become the Companions. Sigrid would meet her assailants head on.

She had added a stylized wolfshead to each shoulderblade, drawn painstakingly in ink. Sigrid smiled; the memory of the Companion's reaction had been memorable. Farkas had whistled appreciatively, with Torvar and Athis giving her a slow clap as she turned slowly around, posturing. Like Vanna White, her mind helpfully supplied, the armor was certainly tight enough. Ria and Njada simply stared.

Vilkas had said nothing. But later (she almost missed it) she had bent over at the waist to pick up one of her boots and saw him stumble, almost walking into a wall.

Totally worth it. She should have picked up the other boot too.

Tightening the straps of her wrist guards, she frowned at the tiny braids tightly woven at the side of her skull, holding back the bulk of her hair. They were uneven; Aela would need to fix that. If Sigrid
could dig her out of her latest hiding place. Aela had helped her shear off about a foot of matted, snarled hair during her convalescence. Now it hit her collarbones in a sheet of burnished brown. She missed the weight, the silkiness of her old braid.

It would grow back.

Begging some blood from Anoriath's stall, she carefully painted on her trails of tears. Warpaint applied, she turned this way and that, ensuring each side was even in the mirrors reflection.

Beware, Glenmoril witches, beware.

She hummed cheerfully, sharpening her shiny new steel blade (courtesy of Eorlund, who told her that the previous weapons burial with the bodies of Thalmor was fitting. She was deemed fit for another sword, free of charge). Which was a godsend, frankly, since she had found out how much her custom armor cost just then.

During her flurry of activity, her hours spent checking, filling and rechecking her travel pack, two thoughts repeatedly circled in her mind, like a snake swallowing its own tail.

Would the Silver Hand still attack Jorrvaskr in her absence?

And, as she dodged Mikael's lecherous groping as she absentmindedly slapped him in passing, what would she do about Vilkas.

The man she now considered somewhat beyond a friend, yet still a foe was insufferable. He had made his point quite clearly, she thought with sourness. Thought he was her father now. He didn't think she was capable of taking down the coven by herself, and even went so far as to challenge her to a fistfight.

If he won, she would stay. If she won, she could go.

Like he had any say in the matter.

Farkas nearly fell over laughing when a perfectly executed mule kick to the gut had sent Vilkas spinning roughly to the dirt. She winced; judging by his evil glare, he would not forgive her for that anytime soon.

She had to go. It was the will of Kodlak. It spurred the progression of the story she knew (and prayed had not altered, despite her sneaking suspicion that Aela had killed far more of the Silver Hand than she let on).

It was not the only thing she had to do alone, either.

Why, she reasoned with herself as Carlotta paid her the stipend of earnings from the wreath making business (the clinking coins music to her ears) would she even bother with Delphine at this point?

Ustengrav was nowhere near any of the landmarks she planned on visiting.

And, if she was being honest, even in the game she had never bothered with the Blades questline. Could care less about Sky Haven temple. The katana-like Blades swords were nifty, and she had briefly indulged a teensy fantasy of herself striding around like Michonne, that badass from Walking Dead.

Only instead of zombies, she had harvested the greasy heads of hagravens with the curved blade. Returning to Kodlak alive and well, the warrior hall filled with toasts and cheering of her name,
Vilkas stripped and waiting for her in the hot springs...

But no. No need to go to Ustengrav. The Horn of Jurgen Windcaller waited, safe in the Sleeping Giant Inn somewhere near Delphine's person. It might require more stealth than she possessed, but hey. There were potions for that.

And things had been so different, already, than she had expected.

No. She could not warn them. They would want to know the source of her knowledge, and sweat beaded at her hairline as she thought of trying to explain that this world; this reality was a complex, open ended video game where she had come from.

In which game she had typically played a dastardly, murdering thief.

Oh, how the tables had turned.

Sigrid took a deep breath, and squared her shoulders as she took to the road. She would place her faith in Paarthurnax, for the answers she already knew he would hold.

The road waited.

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She spent the better part of Sun's Dusk travelling to Glenmoril Cave.

It took three weeks, four days and approximately six hours to slog through the heavy winter snows to her goal. After two miserable days spent postholing in the deep snow, she broke down and purchased a pair of highly smelly, webbed leather snowshoes from a passing hunter.

She sniffed, her breath fogging the air. Yep. She was pretty sure that was a classy combination of skeever fat and urine keeping her snowshoes greased and functional on top of the snow. But the hunter had actually laughed at her when she asked if the weather was much worse further west.

"Anywhere near the Reach you can guarantee you'll run into rain, if not snow," the hunter snorted, stropping his blade on a nearby smooth boulder. "Getting closer to Evening Star, and its only bound to get worse. You're really not from around here, are you?"

No. No she wasn't, she thought in exasperation.

Her travel rations ran out halfway through her journey. She had chewed slowly, making each bite count. Had tried to catch some of the silver-flecked salmon swimming in the river, tried and failed.

At least her firemaking skills had improved since her first jaunt into the wilderness of Skyrim.

Sigrid had even pried off some of the inner pine bark, to chew on sparingly as she walked down the remnants of the old Imperial roads. It did not, she discovered gasping in agony as she squatted under a tree in the dead of night, go down smooth.

Even her snares (one of the few things Torvar had ever imparted of worth in their group lessons) caught next to nothing. She hated killing the fluffy, plump rabbits, who squealed and strained against the wires, cutting themselves deeply in a wild attempt to escape. She bashed their heads in with a heavy rock, as quickly and mercifully as possible.

Oh, but rabbit tasted almost as good as a Thanksgiving feast, after nothing but hard bread, cheese and dried apples for so long. She kept the bones to gnaw on, and soon the smell drew the attention of
wolves.

Sigrid killed and ate them too.

She had gotten soft from Tilmas daily spreads. As she drew nearer to the Reach (thunderous black stormclouds dumping even more snow and sleet upon her, god she hated it when weathermen were proved right) she began to carry rolled up chunks of punky wood stuffed with sap and moss. Her own little bic lighter. It reduced her time spent shivering pathetically while building a fire almost in half.

And, as she whittled fish hooks from the bones of beasties, she slowly started to catch the trout, river betty and salmon.

Salmon was even more delicious here, in Skyrim. Something about the freshness, or lack of pollutants. Could have used some lemons or butter sauce, Sigrid lamented as she licked her fingers, sucking each one carefully to get all the juices.

But one couldn't have everything.

Still hungry, she laughed in relief as the witch keeping survey over the what had to be Glenmoril cave spotted her and, lighting up like a firework with spells, sprinted towards Sigrid.

She must have looked a sight; all gaunt and ragged in her makeshift cape of wolf and rabbit furs, wind fluttering her Forsworn finery.

"Oh thank god. I’m so glad to see you," Sigrid smiled.

The black clad Breton paused in her charge, teeth bared uncertainly.

Steel hissed as the Dragonborn pulled her sword free.

Continuing to smile tightly, she eased her back foot into a fighting stance.

"Just so you know," Sigrid continued conversationally, "...you should really move to a better location. Whiterun has some good real estate. I bet it is just lovely this time of year."

They waited, barely breathing in a standstill.

The witch's hand briefly flickered, then -

"YOL!"

Chapter End Notes

More possibly great alternative vocals for Skyrim. Not knocking the bards...much. Okay, I hate them.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BPILaMT50k
Calm pervades the plains of Whiterun as the world slept, blanketed beneath pure, unmarked snow. The wind barely stirred, the sun in the east tinting the Throat of the World pink edged and pearly grey. Morning dawned.

The month of Morning Star was well on its way, idyllic in its perfection.

It did nothing to ease her foul mood.

Sigrid stomped up the steps towards Whiterun. She ignored the guards' tentative welcome, slamming the main gates until icicles rained down upon their hapless helmets.

She swore at the Imperial guard captain who passed, frozen mid-wave.

Pushing roughly past the villagers setting up their wares, she steamrolled through the animals milling about placidly in the market square.

Not even seeing (finally, it had been months and she missed them all) the great ships hull of Jorrvaskr could make her smile today.

Delphine (that bitch) had caught her red handed. So much for the pickpocket potion that traveling peddler had sworn up and down would work. And now, she had been coerced into a twisting, bottomless pit of fetch quests, with no end in sight.

Just what she had striven to avoid, all along, forced down her throat.

It would have been too easy to simply wander down to Blackreach (after a brief chat with Septimus Signus, naturally) nab that goddamn Elder Scroll from the Falmer and swoop back to Paarthurnax, sitting pretty on the Time-Wound.

(In a moment of weakness, she wonders if the Elder Scroll might not be the only thing powerful enough to somehow send her home, back to her own reality, no, don't think about it-)

And what a busy couple of months she had endured already. After decapitating every last Hagraven in Glenmoril Cave, she bagged the heads and walked along the river until she reached some local Nord fishermen.

Sigrid suspected (and after a few fireside tales, she knew) that these hunters and fishers were the redneck hillbilly folk of Skyrim. They didn't care if she tagged along on their boats floating along Lake Ilinata towards Riverwood...as long as she sang for her meals.

She performed the entirety of the Pirates of Penzance. For the fish, of course.

Delphine had caught her sneaking around her room so easily. Sigrid couldn't tell if the old Breton was thrilled or dismayed to discover that she, of the patchwork furs and crazy eyes, was indeed the Dragonborn. She hadn't bought any of the bullshit excuses Sigrid had stammered. Of course Delphine had asked the question she knew was coming.

How had she known that the retired Blade had already waltzed into Ustengrav for the Greybeard's horn? Especially when she had yet to make the long trip up Skryim's version of Everest... lucky guess?
Thank the gods that after a demonstration of her Thu’um, Delphine had required no further proof. No traipsing off to Kynesgrove, no Sky Haven Temple. Yet.

At least she had the horn, for the old guys who actually cared. After the Delphine fiasco, Sigrid had broken down and hired a wagon to take her to Ivarstead. The wagon driver had been thrilled to have a Companion along for protection, and had given her a hefty discount.

She spent a day, one glorious day, completely off her feet lying in the box of the wagon atop the bundles of straw feed, drowsing in the sun.

Such bliss, after the brutal month and a half surviving in the winter wilds.

But bliss could not be eternal. The hike to High Hrothgar had been...bracing.

No, she told herself as she kicked snow from her boots and warmed her hands by the banked fires of Jorrvaskr. Be honest.

It sucked Shor's balls.

The path up the seven thousand steps to the peak of the Throat of the World had been one of Sigrid's favorite scenic hikes in the game. In her previous life, though, she hadn't had to move her ass off the couch. Or stab the ice wraiths, whose needlepoint teeth stung. Or kill a Frost Troll, when Sigrid was completely, utterly exhausted from climbing said seven thousand steps.

Or be chewed out by the spokesperson of the most depressingly solipsistic, patronizing group of men Sigrid had laid eyes on in her life.

And she had attended college. Wise and peaceful teachers of the Voice, pah.

It hadn't been a complete waste of time. Obtaining more Words of Power had been...useful. Terrifyingly useful. With every Word came knowledge. Sigrid wasn't sure if the knowledge the Greybeards imparted came from souls, or experience of their own, but she feared it.

Feared the dreams.

She dreamed now, not of the simple pleasures of sex, but of flight. Soaring high, on leathery wings unfettered by gravity or fear. She had cried, the first time she awakened from the dragon dream. So vibrant, alive, real...it had felt like she was the dragon, had lived as Mirmulnir.

Would she relive each dream as a dragon whose soul she devoured? Was that her lot, as Dragonborn? In the week she spent studying under the tutelage of the Greybeards, the changes had slithered, unseen until they could not be undone, into Sigrid's soul.

Her temper grew, patience thinning until she found herself snarling and shouting at the smallest provocations. And she was afraid to fall asleep, for fear she'd never want to wake up. She found herself craving meat, red meat, as raw as it could be served without being alive, wolfing it down (was this how Vilkas and Farkas felt hunger? Damn, she owed them an apology, and a nice rack of roast ribs). She spent several hours fascinated by the shining gold in her purse, counting and recounting her pathetic stash of septims. Dragon sickness, like poor Thorin Oakenshield. God help her.

It explained alot about Miraak, come to think about it. Ornery cuss. Couldn't wait to get shanked by his cronies for simply existing.

To hell with dragon souls. Miraak could devour them all, for all she cared.
Each new Word made it better, and simultaneously worse. Now, she not only knew Yol Toor Shul, the Fire Breath shout, but she had quickly mastered an odd assortment that Arngeir and his cronies insisted on testing her with.


They weren’t even happy to see that stupid horn.

Mess with the timeline, reap the consequences. Sigrid had been paying couriers regularly since Riverwood for news from Whiterun. Coming back down the mountain to Ivarstead was a particular agony, especially as she snatched the sheaf of paperwork from the courier's waiting hands and scanned it.

Nothing. No news from Whiterun, nothing of note. Oh, thank god. A warm glow of relief burned in her heart. Kodlak lived. Aela (bless her) had killed enough of the Silver Hand that they didn't have enough to regroup and mount an attack on Jorrvaskr.

The old bastard, who had the stones to send her on a lengthy quest like this after she nearly died, was going to make it.

Something had turned out right, after all.

Sigrid was going to have to haul ass to find some way to Riften to rescue old Esbern, head in the total opposite direction for Winterhold, break into the Thalmor Embassy, talk the Greybeards into teaching her that Clear Skies Thu’um to see Paarthurnax...

Shit. She wanted to hit something.

Dumping her gear in the chest by the stairs, her footfalls echo in the empty hall.

Luckily she knew someone who would never back down from a fight.

**********************

Frost swirled lacy patterns on the glass of his smoked out lantern. Cold, so cold. He is working up his resolve to rise out of his warm bed when without warning, his doors slam open with a bang and Sigrid stalks in.

Sitting up quickly, Vilkas' heart just about stops as he sees the expression on her face.

"Come on... ready for a rematch? Miss me Vilkas? You've lost so many chances to train me. Surprise! I survived, dumb ass!"

She viciously boots the side of his bed. "Get up! Get up and fight me, you son of a bitch! Think I'm weak, a weak woman child, that you have to tell me what to do?!"

He swallows as he takes in the snowflakes clinging to her wild hair, the furling cloak of raggedy pelts crudely stitched together with leather laces. Months. Months have passed. Scars have healed on her full lips and pointed chin, faded white on her neck and visible on her hands. And that goddamn skin tight armor...

She's beautiful.

He hates it. Despises her for leaving, Shors' thumbs, didn't she know it would tear him apart to find her remains, scattered by animals and the spring melt, lost in the Reach? That he missed her, missed
her presence in his bed as he stared sleepless at his ceiling, counting the books he read to her and the ones he wanted to read. She had left him.

That bitch wanted a fight, she was going to get it.

******************************

Sigrid knows she is ranting, but just can't stop. It feels so good, after all this time to get this deep, gnawing ache out of her chest.

"You didn't think I could do it, did you? Didn't think I'd survive. Well," She is shaking as she stabs him in the chest with a finger. "Fuck you, Vilkas. I did it. I killed the hagravens, I-"

The deep growl in his chest is all the warning she gets.

She doesn't see him move until he tackles her, arms around her waist, unbuckling her sheathed sword off and somehow kicking it away under the bed, pinning her down with his weight all the while.

He's testing her, she knows, testing her strength and stamina because she will be tested by someone less careful soon enough, but ohhh, his hand hurts so good as he grabs her neck and holds her down — she hooks her fingers into the soft edge of his sleeping tunic and yanks him, rolling to the wall and landing on top.

Pulling back her arm, she punches him in the nose. Once. twice. Blood seeps from his nostrils, washing the last of the sleepiness from his eyes, but his hand is still around her throat and suddenly she is gasping, clawing for air -

- and gasps in relief, as he tears off her ratty cloak, ripping the topmost clasp of her breastplate. She should be pissed, this set of armor cost her a fortune, but ohhh, his hand hurts so good as he grabs her neck and holds her down — she hooks her fingers into the soft edge of his sleeping tunic and yanks him, rolling to the wall and landing on top.

She kisses him back, fighting for control, the rumbling in his throat soaring right through her. For all that she'd accused him of treating her gently this definitely is not, and yet she revels in it, loves that he is not tip-toeing around her like a victim, to be carefully kept from breaking.

Broken, and remade. She has rebuilt herself.

Rolling them over again so that she is under him, his weight is hot and satisfying as he grinds into her. Sigrid opens her mouth under his, lets his tongue slip between her lips and winds her arms around his shoulders and pulls him closer... because it has been months, months she has been out of his bed and he still isn't close enough.

His leg nudges her knees apart and slips between them until he is pressed flush against her armor...she is pressed against him. Her hands touch his back, his arms, his chest, following the heady burn of his kisses. She is lost, and like a map to guide her his own hands move more slowly over her armored body. Almost as if he is trying to memorize the feel of it under his fingers.

Pulling closer to her, she arches her back to match him, ignoring the twinges of complaining muscles, aware only of the heat slowly coiling in her belly. Sigrid sweeps her tongue over his and his hand slides over her neck and her jaw, the calluses on his palm slipping wonderfully rough over her skin. His fingers dig into her hair to adjust her head better to fit his as his other hand slides over her breast through her leathers, glides down her stomach to pull at the buckled straps.

"Vilkas," she groans against his mouth — not enough, she has been starving, dying for touch and she
needs more. Answering her unasked plea, Vilkas squeezes her hip, then slides his hand under her thigh and pulls her knee up to his waist.

Too slow. He is slow and she is burning with want, need and rage, goddamn him how dare he ignore her for so long — her palms graze down his stomach and she feels the muscles jump under her touch. His mouth drops to her chin, nipping at the tendons in her neck; she lets her head lean back against the fur throw, baring her throat to him as she weaves her fingers into his hair -

"Uh, hey. Guess you're back."

Sigrid's eyes snap open. Farkas.

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Fuck it all, Farkas had the worst goddamn timing today.

She freezes beneath him as Farkas rumbles in ill-concealed amusement, outlined by the door frame.

"...I can come back, Shield Sister, if you'd prefer?"

He would prefer. But she writhes, flushing red all the way up to her hairline. Vilkas hangs his head as he tries to capture just how damn good it feels to have rub up against him like that, as she wriggles out from under him.

He stays there on the ground, for a minute more. Just to catch his breath.

"Nice to see you here. It's been a while." Valiantly ignoring the incredible wreck Sigrid's face must be, Farkas claps hand to shoulder in welcome.

"Um, its good to see you too." Sigrid manages to squeak.

"Looks like you dropped your cloak. Kodlak wants to see you, when you're done eating breakfast." Turning back, Farkas peers down at her with an almost wicked glint in his eyes.

"...Unless, of course you're already full."

Vilkas slumps, his head hitting the stone floor with a sigh.
Heill De Ärorika Döda (Hail the Glorious Dead)

Chapter Summary

I listened to this song while writing the chapter. Appropriately named Valrulven, The Werewolf. Sung by the band Garmarna.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX0b3_8ZWzE

For the rest of the day, Vilkas only thought of ways to get Sigrid alone, to finish what they had begun.

She had spent a few hours after breakfast closeted with the Harbinger. He had restlessly paced outside Kodlak's private chambers, until Farkas pulled him upstairs and with a shove, sent him to warm up and attend to the daily weapons practice of the Companions.

Not that he needed anything physical to heat his blood, at the moment. Heat poured off of him, steaming through the joints of his armor as he practically galloped through the fresh snowy path around Jorrvaskr. He hardly dared examine the feelings thumping with every pound of his heart...

Desperately trying to forget how she had moaned, soft tongue in his mouth as her hands slid under the band of his trousers -

- Vilkas quickened his pace, breath puffing in clouds, and passing Torvar, Athis and Njada who were panting a few laps behind him. He would put her from his mind, now, and continue the lesson planned for the day, focusing particularly on Ria, who had been struggling to balance sword and shield in tandem.

Ever since Kodlak had imparted his well meaning advice, the master at arms had abstained from visiting the Bannered Mare. Taking a page from the old man, he spent his evenings reading, a mug of mead always kept refilled by Lucia; Lucia who no longer crept around the warrior hall like a mouse, but ran, eyes bright and chattering excitedly to any who would listen of how she would be a warrior one day. Just like Aela, or Sigrid.

He had avoided the appearance of studiousness as a boy, not wanting to give the impression of a scholarly mind when he had craved more than anything to be seen as a man. Arnbjorn, in particular, had been ruthless in his mocking taunts, until Jergen and Skjor had driven the wild teenager from the halls. Vilkas never found out why, and didn’t much care...the skeever-shit had been brutal to Farkas, and that was unforgivable. Once his growth caught up to gangly limbs and oversized hands (though he would never quite reach the hulking stature of his twin), he read voraciously.

His brother did not care much for the pursuit of reading. Vilkas wasn’t exactly sure that his brother could read, as he never saw him do so. But the larger twin had developed a taste for listening to tales, those few weeks when Sigrid had been bedridden (smiling, his alone to keep, keep safe). To keep his hands busy while sitting at her bedside, Farkas had started to knit (of all the fool things) and the day he had presented the woman with his handiwork (a very knotty, chewed up afghan) Vilkas could see the tears she had swallowed back as she squeezed it in her roughly scarred hands, thanking him.

From then on, it had been his mission to find something similar, something to make her happier than
a simple shawl. He thought he had landed upon it when one evening when they were alone. Normally when Vilkas began to read to Sigrid, she listened attentively until her sleeping draught took effect. Nodding gently, she would drift off and on. He read anyway. But, she came fully awake and aware when he began to read The Tale of the Dragonborn.

He hadn’t thought that that particular story would have any impact, honestly. It had been a favorite of his as a boy. But her amber-green eyes (like sunlight shining through a glass of ale) had been intent, interested.

He read her the entire volume that night, and they had been so absorbed in the ensuing conversation that he had forgotten his entire purpose; to impress the woman.

And perhaps, maybe, to touch her again, without it being the touch of a careful man. A cautious man, soothing a shield siblings hurts and fears.

He wanted what they had had that night so long ago, in the bathing room. Sudden, all instinct and no fear, flowing into each other like wind and rain.

Ysolda avoided him at market, refusing to meet his eye after he remained purposefully absent from her bed. And Saadia had apparently moved on to greener pastures; he had seen Redguard men in desert garb opening the doors to the Bannered Mare, escorting her out to the stables.

He hardly gave them a thought, anymore.

Perhaps one of the caverns that led from the Underforge? Twisting passages where sound refracted down and away. Where they would not have to be silent, he could make her scream his name as many times as he wanted, and be claimed by her in turn.

He was sure that one of those hidden tunnels had a sister cavern to the bathing pool.

Not now, he told himself sternly.

He didn’t even care if Farkas gave him shit about it. Vilkas would corner the woman, alone. Privately.

Later.

****************

Kodlak’s hearty laughter filled his rooms as Sigrid told the Harbinger her tales of travel and daring. The effects of dining upon pine bark in particular had him almost howling, and after obtaining her promise to make more space for dried meat and way-bread rations, Kodlak rather teasingly insinuated that perhaps some rolls of linen would not be amiss, either.

She had hidden her face in her hands, as he chortled merrily at her expense.

Her grisly prizes from Glenmoril Cave had not held up well in their storage sack. Already half decomposed, the skin had begun to slip from the bone as Sigrid held a head up by greasy hair for Kodlak’s perusal, a rotting miasma filling the room as she hurriedly tied it back in with its fellows after he nodded in approval.
She was glad to have accomplished something right, for once.

Her chest still felt fluttery, like a bird beating its wings in her ribcage as she cautiously looked around Jorrvaskr’s living area, searching for him. Seeing it was empty, her heart thumped in disappointment.

Get it together, Sigrid, she chastened herself as she walked down to the bathing room -

-only to stop in a silence that seemed to stretch as Torvar stumbled, gurgling, from the bathing area, a silver swordpoint gleaming from the front of his chest.

Their eyes met, and a bubble of blood popped as Torvar’s mouth opened, and closed. In unbelieving horror, she watched his body collapse to reveal a grinning Silver Hand, flanked by two grim, robed men wearing amulets featuring a rams horn, holding swords and hands of flame….

Stendarr. Stendarr’s amulet.

The Vigilants of Stendarr, and the Silver Hand. Dumbly Sigrid stood there as if in caught in a mire of quicksand as the three men strode forward, confidently.

They had teamed up to destroy the werewolves of the Circle once and for all.

She had been so, so wrong.

As their swords caught the torchlight in their slow advance, dimly she could hear cries upstairs. Shrieks of ‘attack!’ and ‘...to the light, brethren!’ seemed so distant as Sigrid hazily remembered their preachy catchphrases in the game.

Slowly reaching for her sword, she backed down the hall, eyes fixed upon those who would kill all she had come to love.

They would regret this day.

************

It was the smell that first alerted Vilkas that something was suddenly, spectacularly wrong.

Farkas smelled it as well, the scent of blood mingling with ash, more smoke than was usual from the chimney flue. As one, they turned from the training yard towards Jorrvaskr, deceptively peaceful, frosted in a veil of white unbroken snow.

He could hear screams, and his breathing became a rapid pant.

Athis and Njada Stonearm, sweating from their recent match, cautiously approached the twins. Ria chimed in, swinging her sword arm. “What’s the problem?”

“The tunnels.” The look of lazy impassiveness that Farkas wore like a shield had disappeared.
Turning in all directions, teeth bared, Farkas unsheathed his greatsword, with Vilkas following suit. “Inside! Come on!”

They followed the brothers into a scene of clashing mayhem, darkness and fire.

Robed men lay dead upon the floor, mingled with what could only be the fur-leather clad soldiers of the Silver Hand. Wild with fury (they dared to enter his home) Vilkas could smell the song of silver, like metal grating against his teeth. As he lunged forward, intercepting a blow that would have taken the head from Tilma, who had huddled for protection beneath a bench next to a hysterical Lucia, he could see flying gouts of fire lick up the tapestries, the wooden beams glowing as they caught flame.

“To Vignar’s room! Quickly!” Picking the old woman and the child up in his arms, Farkas heaved them up in his arms and deposited them into the care of the shaking old man and his servant. Trusting that Vilkas had his back, as Ria shouted a war cry to distract the Vigilant who had crept, teeth stretched in a parody of a grin, ready to slash and stab.

His head suddenly parted from his neck as the fine-edged shield of Njada spun in a wide arc. Not pausing to appreciate the kill, the Stonearm roared back to back with Athis, his dual blades spinning in blinding patterns meant to confuse and slice.

Vilkas lost himself to the dance of the battle, harshly focused on ending them, destroying these intruders who defiled with hands and swords, how bold they were, to seek the wolves in their den…

It may have been moments or mere heartbeats later that Vilkas realized that Sigrid was fighting beside him, behind him, her Skyforge steel dripping wet in crimson glory. Slashing, screaming, she defended the door where the innocent cowered, chopping the arm off of a Silver Hand who had raised his axe for Vilkas’ throat.

In all the madness, only he heard the rough shout, the warcry of Kodlak Whitemane as he stormed the stairs of his home, war hammer raised high in knotted hands.

No. He couldn’t look away, couldn’t move his leaden arms any faster to cut, slice away the bodily barriers that blocked his view of the man he looked up to more than anyone.

“No, Kodlak, no don’t!” Sigrid screamed somewhere to his left, cornered by Vigilants as she parried, gasping for breath, as she too struggled to cross the impossible distance.

In a moment that would forever be etched in his memory, he saw the Harbinger cut down. It was Aela on the floor dangerously close to the firepit, almost hidden in the smoke...holding hands to her slashed midriff soaked in blood.

His aged body jerked, contorting as he took it, took the blade meant for her as her dilated eyes opened impossibly wide.

The Harbinger’s last swing of the hammer hit the Silver Hand with a wet pulping thud, the man’s face unrecognizable as he released his grip and dropped to the floor; silver sword remaining buried in Kodlak’s gut.

Roaring in denial, Vilkas drew upon his remaining strength and charged forward.

It was a blur of death and ruin, all faded and grey.
The funeral was held two days later.

Clouds held their silence, swollen dark and silvery with grief. The wind from the plains played with the hair of the assembled Companions, friends and citizens who had come here to this ancient seat of power.


Torvar lay on lower bier, arms crossed around his axe and shield, covering his gaping wounds. Ria lay on Kodlak’s other side, lips blackened still from the smoke that had ended the Imperial’s life.

And Kodlak, raised above on the tallest bier of all. Covered in a golden tapestry of wolves, bears and eagles on a stylized ships hull.

They were waiting for something. Someone.

Carefully walking up the steps, Aela the Huntress stepped forward bearing a torch. Her other arm was wrapped around her heavily bandaged waist, tightly.

She spoke loud and clear. “Before the ancient flame….”

“We grieve.” Sigrid looked around as the assembled men and women spoke in unison.

“At this loss…” Eorlund stepped forward, hand clasped to his shoulder.

“…We weep.”

“For the fallen.” Vilkas spoke quietly.

“…We shout.”

“And for ourselves…” Farkas lifted his head.

“We take our leave.” Echoing against the stone walls of the Sky Forge, the mourners approached one by one to leave effects upon the pyre. Many left bottles of wine, or dried flowers. Sigrid approached bearing the wreath she had given him, so many months ago.

Measured in her steps, Aela touched the burning torch to the tinder heaped upon the Skyforge. Dry logs lit up in flames, shadowing the bodies of the dead. Slowly, a bard began to sing, drumming to the story of Kodlak Whitemane’s life. His adventures as a youth, the battles won in the Great War, how he had led the Companions to fortune and glory. His last sacrifice, valorous even in death.

Sigrid felt as grey as the ash floating away, free on the currents of wind. Glancing at the still, inward grief of the men and women beside her, she swallowed and looked away.

Could she have prevented this? Even she could never have guessed that those fanatics of Stendarr would have gone so far.

Hadn’t their Hall of the Vigilant been torched already by the vampires of Harkon? Her head spun. What was the timeline now? Had that happened yet, or was it yet to be? Did it matter?

Gods, she was so tired.
It was all death and fire and smoke. She couldn’t remember the smell of sun ripened grass, anymore. Her tears were blackened, hands repeatedly wiping away the grime, the grey that she kept repeatedly spitting out as she helped to clear the broken burned timbers of her home away. They all wore warpaint now, for there was no room in Jorrvaskr untouched by ash or blood. No heart unburdened. Could it ever be rebuilt?

There was no talk of avenging Kodlak. Not that night. She would have been amused at the holes in the knowledge, if she hadn’t been sick with worry over the stunned silence of her family, her siblings.

She couldn’t bear to sleep in Jorrvaskr tonight.

Packing up her belongings, noting absently that her cell phone, lantern and knife had been stuffed in the chest that had belonged to her in the new bloods quarters (Torvar, drunkenly laughing as he showed her how to spring a snare, to gut a rabbit, Ria, so desperate to prove herself, to prove anything) she packed them as well and took a deep breath as she opened the door to his room.

Vilkas sat on the bed, motionless, sword still sheathed on his back. With a lump in her throat, Sigrid realized he was still wearing flecks of blood from the battle, warpaint darker than usual with ash ground into the creases of skin, his armor stained and scratched. He hadn’t bothered to bathe in the days after that horrible afternoon.

He hadn’t said a word.

She took his hand. Limp and unresponsive, his fingers lay open and unmoving. She leans over, tips his chin up to catch his bloodshot eyes with her own.

“Vilkas.”

A ripple goes through his shoulders.

“Vilkas. Let’s go. We’ve cleaned up the worst.” She squeezes his fingers. “Come. I know where we can track down the ones who did this.”

His lips slowly twisted into a snarl.

“Come.” Standing up, she pulled gently at his arm. She knew her face was filthy, her armor encrusted in things she would not name. Her eyes still wept ash. Pulling at him, urging him up, she rested the other palm of her hand on his cheek.

“Vilkas. Come.”

Slowly, unsteadily, he stood up and followed her out. Out of the only home he had ever known.

Farkas watched them go, face shielded once more as his arm cradled the pale, unblinking form of Aela. Eorlund leaned over the remains of the main table, placing together pieces of what looked to be Wuuthrad, assisted by Njada Stonearm and Lucia. Tilma held Kodlak’s journal.

Dimly, Sigrid wondered if she were Harbinger, now. Wondered if he had dreamed of her, before the
end. Hoped not. She was the last person she would have picked.

She had, before leaving Kodlak’s desk (it felt longer than two days ago) organized the careful notes the old man had made, detailing the proper procedure for curing the beast blood. The witch heads were still in the basement of Jorrvaskr, wrapped tightly and stored in the meat freezer dug into the permafrost ground.

She hoped no one got a nasty surprise, rooting around in there.

Guilt swallowed her as she realized she hadn’t even asked them...asked if they, the brothers, wished to be healed with Kodlak.

No one had mentioned Ysgramor’s Tomb. She was lost.

Athis rose from his seat on the stair, and cried out hoarsely as they took the path, “Make them bleed!”

Sigrid responded by raising her sword, high above them both. Her other hand gripped Vilkas’ fist.

The Companions watched until the two figures were no longer visible.

At last, the snow began to fall.

***************************

It took them to First Seed to reach Riften.

Vilkas did not speak, did not move on his own except to eat and drink what Sigrid proffered him. He lay still on the travel furs as Sigrid wound her arms around him and slept when she bid him.

Otherwise, it was like travelling with a ghost.

They alternately walked and rode in carts. The weather changed (she hardly noticed) the snows of deep winter thawing into a lesser cold. Sun awakened the first tint of green on the edges of tree branches and bush. The water they waded through became less glacial and more temperate, the nearer they drew to the Rift.

Soon, she smelt sulphur and the green of living things. She had forgotten, Sigrid thought, forgotten what life smelled like, as she held the hand of the man whose eyes were fogged in a daze of death and grief.

He began speaking again, once they reached the burbling heated pools and terraces of Eastmarch. “I haven’t seen these pools in years. There used to be more, to the west. They dried up winters ago.”

Shocked, but grateful to hear words of any sort from his lips, Sigrid squeezed his hand in response.

He squeezed back.

They bathed together, uncaring of their nakedness as they luxuriated in the mineral rich pools, savoring the feeling of being clean. Washing the dirt, the accumulated grime and blood that revealed skin she was almost afraid to touch, after urging him along for so long in silence.

That night, before she could wrap her arms around him, he held her instead. No fires were lit, as they preferred to gaze up at the ever-changing kaleidoscope of the night sky, peppered with stars and
constellations that Vilkas quietly pointed out, telling the ancient songs and stories.

Curled up in his arms, feeling his breath move through her hair and heartbeat strong and slow, she slept more deeply that night than she had in ages.

******************

She decided to tell him the truth about her world after Honorhall.

They had elected to stay in the Bee and Barb, agreeing quietly to follow up on Sigrid's hunch and ask more about the new vampire hunters that went by the name of Dawnguard. They kept their peace, kept watching for signs of the Vigilants.

It wasn’t for another three days that Sigrid saw the horns of Stendarr, worn openly and she clasped his hand, Vilkas' grin matching her own in wolfish glee.

They would hunt, soon.

She leaves him to drink fancy cocktails with the kind Argonian couple (nothing surprises her anymore, she fears, not even living sentient dinosaurs) and hefting her newly sharpened blade, Sigrid pays a visit to Honorhall Orphanage.

Windhelm is too far away to effect a change yet for Aventus Aretino, who was probably still praying desperately over the corpse of what must be his mother. Incense of nightshade, human heart and blade. Sweet Mother, sweet mother...but Her child would not come.

Sigrid would never serve the Night Mother. Not a dark goddess who murdered her own babies.

Idly, as she pushes open the door to smell rot and dank, Sigrid wonders if the Dark Brotherhood would have ever gotten around to killing the headmistress if they knew the reward was a simple plate.

Probably not. But then, these assassins were religiously motivated. Death was their cult, the end was the means.

All the worst atrocities in the world, her world, were caused by fanatics. Idealists, unchangeable, unmoving. Not unlike much of the conflict currently dividing Skyrim. Was she any better than they? Would changing something effect anything, anymore?

Faith seemed too delicate to grasp, right now.

She reminded herself it was a kindness. With Grelod gone, Constance might grow a backbone and actually tend to the children in her care. She frowned. It had been the work of only a moment to corner the Bosmer steward Anuriel at the Jarls keep.

Easy...too easy to use the leverage, the knowledge of Anuriel’s wealth of embezzled funds and sly machinations to ensure that the orphanage would flourish. Thanks to Sarah Fergusons’s knowledge, achieved by an exhaustive playthrough of an addictive game, Sigrid could ensure that Honorhall had the funding it had been allotted, instead of the septims lining the Bosmer’s pockets as they had been.

She only wished she had pursued more individual quests. Petty things...lost folk, missing rings.
Sigrid interacted far more with the common and coarse than Jarls and Kings.

She waits until the old bat has fallen asleep, silently crouching in the pantry, waiting for the children to snuffle and cry themselves to sleep, her fists tightening in their leather gloves as one little girl sobs in hunger. Constance cleans the dishes, then wearily takes herself to bed in a room the size of a closet.

Grelod died poorly.

Returning to the Bee and Barb in a sunny mood, Vilkas looked at her warily as she slams a mugful of Cliff Chaser down in one pull.

She dreams of her dead children that night and awakens, screaming, in Vilkas’ arms.
Skär som ett Svärd (Cuts Like a Sword)

Chapter Summary

Author’s Notes: This is a continuation of Chapter Two. Finally, I have stapled and sewed that moment back in its place!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The old balding Nord jabbered on and on, his words tripping over themselves in his eagerness to expound. “…which of course, is ludicrous. Haven’t you figured it out yet, Dragonborn? What more needs to happen before you all wake up and see what’s going on? You idiots!”

Dragonborn. Right.

Sigrid sat, topless, on his bed in the Riften inn of the Bee and Barb. Not the way he would have liked, perhaps, getting her naked (cuddling platonically for months had been...pleasant, but he was slowly waking up from the grey numbness that followed him from Jorrvaskr. All of him). They weren’t exactly alone, and he reigned in his baser urges as he continued attending to her wounds. He was trying to breathe as shallowly as possible; the stink of old man’s sweat mingled with spilled mead from the bar downstairs, the earthy smell of the ground blisterwort in the poultice he was currently tying to her arm, the acrid sweetness of elf blood.

Well. Dragonborn. It explained why the agents of the Aldmeri Dominion seemed so focused upon his Shield Sister.

It also perhaps enlightened Vilkas about her secretive errands of late. She’d smile brightly, encouraging him to sit awhile and drink Talen-Jei’s (admittedly high quality) breus, and then she’d wander off Shor knows where. This time, she had returned with this Esbern fellow, along with a new collection of lightning burns and still-bleeding wounds.

Vilkas had difficulty reconciling the Dragonborn, eater of souls and wielder of the Thu’um, with Sigrid. Sigrid who just that morning had lectured the beggar Snilf on the value of imbibing fruits and vegetables for the preservation of teeth, instead of spending his coin on drink alone, children running circles around her as she passed out honey nut treats and pulled taffy...

Terrifying.

Hardly stopping to draw breath, the old man droned on and on, consulting one of the texts he carried in his spindly arms. Vilkas pulled a bandage tighter with a vicious yank. Sigrid made a noise of complaint, her eyes hooded in exhaustion as she continued digging through her pack. If she would just ask, he thought with a mental sigh. Just bring him along, so that he could watch her doing whatever she was doing. Tell him what the fuck was going on.

It was as though a song was playing that everyone knew, could sing along to. Except that he didn’t know the words. He despised that feeling.

“…alright, Esbern.” The woman cut off his ramblings as Vilkas tucked in the last roll of linen
bandage and sealed the healing salve for later use. Turning her head experimentally from side to side, her neck cracked and popped. Sigrid huffed in relief. “Esbern, I know you must have a thousand questions. I would encourage you to talk to Delphine about them. She’s at the Sleeping Giant Inn, in the town of Riverwood.”

Eyes darting back and forth, Esbern leapt forward and covered her mouth with a wrinkled hand. “Shhh, woman! Don’t you know the Thalmor have spies everywhere?” Esbern glared at Vilkas, who was washing his hands. He frowned right back. “For all you know, this man could be serving them, secretly.”

That prompted a guffaw from Sigrid, who eased herself to a standing position. Pulling a wrapped little burlap bag from her (bottomless, he swore that knapsack probably carried the secrets of Mundus in its depths) travel bag, she held it aloft triumphantly.

“Aha. No, I don’t think I have to worry about him. So sweet of you to worry, but that’s that! Now, seriously, go get a wagon and get thee hence to Delphine. She’s probably peeing in empty wine bottles and killing rats right now in some hole, hiding until she sees you are safe. Go go go.”

Slack jawed in shock, Esbern watched his Dragonborn sidle over to Vilkas. Standing on her tippy toes, she gave his cheek a smacking kiss, which made him blink. “I’ll be back in a minute, if you want to talk.” Giving him a winning grin, Sigrid pulled on a spare robe and tramped downstairs.

“I don’t understand,” Esbern muttered, shaking hands flipping pages furiously. “There must be some mistake.”

“No.” Vilkas sighed, then gently placed his hands on Esbern’s shoulders, ushering him out the door. “Stables are down the street to the left. Farewell, old man. And good luck.”

Following behind him (what the hell, he wouldn’t be left behind on any adventures from now on, he vowed) down the stair, Vilkas startled as abruptly the main floor of the Bee and Barb erupted in shouts, cheers and cries of glee.

Talen-Jei lifted Sigrid and twirled her in the air, laughing as Keerava began dabbing her scaly eyes with a handkerchief. Smiling (and wincing) Sigrid pushed away from the Argonian and stood in front of the couple, shaking their hands as they kept uttering their thanks.

“Drinkssss for everyone, on the houssse!” Keerava called out, resulting in an echoing cheer as the patrons clapped and roared, banging their mugs on tables. Well, the ones who were still sober.

“Mara’s blessing on the happy couple,” a priest intoned near Vilkas. Hooded in robes of butter yellow and harvest gold, his arms hung heavy with amulets as he proffered one to Vilkas. “Hello there, my Nord friend. Have you heard of the mercies of our Mother Mara? Perhaps you’d like to get married as well?”

Vilkas licked his lips, his grey gaze focused upon the woman who was now sipping from the foaming mug Talen-Jei had brought; her face puckering as the Argonians hissed in good humored laughter.

“How much for one of those amulets?”

**************************

Rain’s Hand lived up to its name as Vilkas and Sigrid walked steadily into the steaming fissured
plains of the Rift. They had left not long after Esbern’s departure, Sigrid urging them to make haste. He had lifted an eyebrow at that; hadn’t they been stalking the Vigilants of Stendarr? He had been under the impression that they would be slowly making their way to the fortress of Dawnguard. The orc had pointed it out on his map, with a hearty slap to the back as Vilkas wavered in confusion. Did they kill just vampires, or were werewolves a target of the Dawnguard? Sigrid had only mentioned the Vigilants of Stendarr, how their Hall had been destroyed by vampires (oh he would love to fight a vampire, and here he stood thinking he had killed one of everything in Skyrim). He didn’t know how she obtained her knowledge, but judging by the constant running of couriers taking her coin, he guessed.

She had been smiling, face flushed pleasantly from drink when a courier had rushed by, begging her attention. Scanning the parchment quickly she had paled, freezing in place as singing and dancing continued around her; horror stamping her features. When he inquired, she motioned him to gather their things in haste.

Concerned, but not overly curious (Sigrid often took detours during their travels, picking plants, talking to people. It was a miracle they had even reached Riften) Vilkas did as she asked.

Muttering under her breath as they packed their bags, Vilkas could hear snatches of what sounded like ‘they know... they know , fuck ‘em, so what they know, gods we need to move…”

Hours had passed since they had passed the mining village of Shor’s Stone, and there was nothing but wilderness as far as they could see. Fat raindrops pelted them from above, gradually increasing until it was a veritable downpour of rain, soaking through furs and steel.

“We have to stop!” Sigrid called out, her pale lips slightly blued. Nodding, Vilkas looked all around for shelter. A cave, or rocky outcrop where the fallen wood might still be dry. Sigrid did not have his tolerance for the cold; the refreshing spring breeze that made him sigh with pleasure was a torment to her.

Peering through the rain, Vilkas spied a watchtower not far from where they stood. “Up ahead. Come on,” he called. They began to walk more rapidly, huddled together beneath an oiled tarp that Keerava had insisted they take for inclement weather.

As they drew closer, he could see that the watchtower (Shor’s Watchtower , the faded sign read) had been neglected for some time. “Stay here,” he whispered to Sigrid who nodded, wrapping the oilcloth more tightly around her trembling form.

Drawing the steel dagger from his boot, Vilkas crept closer and prodded the still form he had spied from a distance, propped against the entrance. Dead, for some time by the smell of it. Guards of the Rift, with rents in their chainmail that told the tale of death by sword.

He carried three more out of the tower, laying them in the woods before he motioned to Sigrid to enter.

By now, a full body shaking had taken ahold of the woman. He blocked the entrance with available logs and broken planks of wood. Luckily for them, he noted, there was plenty of firewood here, piled almost chest high up against the wall near the firepit. Sniffing, he investigated the barrels lined up against the other wall. More sleeping furs, some threadbare but dry clothing. Two bottles of Honningbrew mead, unopened. Some apples, wrinkly but edible.

The dry wood eagerly set to flame, and he pulled off his soaked armor with a sigh. Sigrid set to hers as well, her trembling fingers struggling to unlatch the buckles and laces that held her leathers in place. Finished, and standing in damp underclothes, Vilkas did not pause as he walked over to assist
her, gently removing the sword, travel gear and pieces of armor.

Her nipples pebbled in the cold as the thin tunic she wore under her armor stuck to her, sopping wet and transparent. Noting his blush, she laughed ruefully. “Y-y-you know, having you un-dress me went m-m-much differently in my h-head.”

His soft rumbling laughter filled the small space, as he gathered the driest furs and a set of spare clothing. “Go ahead and change. I won’t be far.”

Stripping off his own wet shirt, Vilkas wiped off his warpaint with the soiled fabric. He felt a timid hand brush his back, hesitant. “Where did you get this?” came her soft query.

Feeling a prickling knot tighten in his gut, Vilkas did not turn around but continued cleaning his face. “Farkas and I chose to get tattoos when we joined the ranks of the Circle as young men.”

He shivered as one of her fingers circled the branching tree, looping and interlocking strands symbolic of death and rebirth. “J-just like the Gildergreen.” She laughed quietly, reaching around his back to grip his stomach with her hands. He placed his hand on hers, holding still as she sighed, leaning against the warmth of his back.

_Gods_ she was cold, her skin bare against his. She had not replaced her wet shirt. “Go sit by the fire, woman.” he managed to say, as her fingers played with the line of dark hair that disappeared into his pants.

He felt, more than heard her chuckle. “Nope. Shan’t.”

Gripping her hands with his own, he turned to fix her with a serious look. “No.” At her mulish expression, he shook his head. Not yet. Not until she told him everything, everything she had been holding back. His nose could smell her hesitance before, when she had vanished with half truths and excuses off to return with old men, or nightmares. Or flawless amethysts, never mind _how_ she had found such treasure in a place like the Ratway.

Gentle, but firm, Vilkas pushed Sigrid onto the furs by the fire. “Not until you tell me what has been going on.”

Sitting across from her, barely within touching distance, he crossed his arms and stolidly refused to look lower than her face. She sighed, and then pulled her travel bags closer. Riffling through with a sad smile on her face, Sigrid pulled out a separate bag and gestured for him to open it.

He did, eyes narrowing at the strangeness of the things she showed him. An antler bone knife. Some clothes, smelling unlike anything he’d ever smelt before, finely tailored with neat even stitches. Something vaguely dwarven, with cracks all along its length. And a cylinder that lit up with a cold, yellow light as she flipped a switch on its side.

Vilkas simply looked at her. “I have no idea what these are,” he reminded her. “But it must mean something to you.” His lips turned down. “Everyone, even the Thalmor, seem to know what I do not.” Pulling away from her, he used a stick to prod the fire, coals glowing a deep blazing orange. “So tell me.”
The fire sputtered as they sat silently, With a deep exhale, Sigrid wiped her face, then straightened with what looked like resolve.

Staring at him with a mixture of tenderness and something...dark, Sigrid whispered.

*Feim Zii Gron.*

The air seemed to waver as suddenly Vilkas could see right through her, the outlines of her body suddenly as transparent as her wet clothing. He could see the stone masonry of the wall, the furs beneath her as the shaking of what must have been the Thu’um reverberated in the watchtower.

Moments ticked by as he took it all in, trying not to focus overmuch on the fullness of her breasts or the shape of her hips flaring from her waist as the color poured back into her skin, form regaining substance. “So you *are* Dragonborn.” He cleared his throat.

“Yes.” Her eyes were serious. “I...I am also not from here. Not from Skyrim.”

“*That* I gathered, long ago.” He would not look down. “Where are you from, then?”

She laughed raggedly in what sounded like terror. Or relief. “I don’t think you’ll believe me. The Thalmor certainly didn’t, though it didn’t stop them from asking.” Her fingers traced the patterns of scars, rubbing the missing nails on her left hand.

He waited. She spoke, “I was travelling with Bryce and the children, back home. In my world…” Sigrid challenges him with her hard stare, “…we did this often, for fun. Getting away from the city, such as it was, from the pollution and daily routine. My world is not like Skyrim. God. Not at all.”

“We had camped at this place. Fairy Falls.” She twisted the rings on the amulet of Arkay she wore, her shivering slowing as heat filled the room. “Then, and I don’t know how, don’t ask...we ended up here.”

Her face was wretched as she lifted her hands imploringly. “I have asked *everyone* I can think of, aside from the mages at their college how, why, my family ended up in that necromancer’s lair. No one can tell me how it happened. A rift in the fabric of Mundus? Daedric lords meddling in plots we mortals can’t understand, maybe? I don’t know. And I’m fucking tired of not knowing either, Vilkas.”

The fire pops and sputters. Pulling a fur over her shoulders, Sigrid adds a log then resumes her position across from him. “And that’s just it. I already know too much.” Her jaw jutted stubbornly as he realized she was trying hard not to cry. “I knew what would happen when I joined the Companions. I knew you were werewolves. I know that right now, there are vampires and Vigilants of Stendarr searching for a vampire who has the power to blacken the sun. I know that Alduin eats the souls of the dead in Sovngarde, and is bringing back the dragons... *dragons*, Vilkas, I barely managed to kill just one. Dragons, taking back Skyrim. Unless I stop it.”

“And…” her fingers continue turning the rings, twisting, fidgeting. “I know how to cure the beast blood. Before Kodlak told me, I knew...knew I had to go and face the hagravens of Glenmoril.
Vilkas, you can be cured, if you want.”

“Please say something.”

Chapter End Notes

i imagine the celtic tree of life Vilkas has (in my head canon) as looking a bit like this.

https://www.askideas.com/media/85/Black-Ink-Celtic-Tree-Of-Life-Tattoo-On-Right-Shoulder.jpg
Vilkas hardly dares to breath. Blinking, he looks over at the woman who is sitting placidly before him.

His woman is crazy.

Perhaps it was the Thalmor and their questioning that did this. He had fantasized many times of killing them over again, slowly...or perhaps it had been the grief of the attack on Jorrvaskr. His heart still ached, letters yet unread from Aela (with scribbled tidings from Farkas) still waiting in his travel pack. He had just gotten Sigrid to the point where she did not jump at the sight of slanted eyes and pointed ears. As long as she slept in his arms, her rest was untroubled.

But this was impossible. Part of him wanted to ask how she could cure his lycanthropy, if she was even a Nord by birth...what pollution was, and why her world (her fucking world?!?) was so different. If he didn’t think about it too hard, it almost made sense. All the books he had read pointed to alternate realities, dimensions that Daedra ruled. Other worlds, wrapped in the ambient omniscience of an Elder Scroll.

Everywhere and nowhere. Gateways to other worlds in the strangest of places.

He could feel her scrutiny as he thought about what to say. Since that fateful day in Morning Star, when she had taken him by the hand and led him out of Jorrvaskr and into the wilderness...

This journey...it may have started in pursuit of vengeance. But, he thought wryly, if this was a hunt, then they had veered far off course. Vilkas had never spent so much time holding bundles of plants, fishing, picking out landmarks, chatting with the odd villager...

Never been so relaxed in his entire life.

If he was being honest with himself his first instinct after the burning of Jorrvaskr would have been to hunt. Hunt with Farkas, with Aela and strike at the remaining known fortresses of the Silver Hand. He would have slaughtered them - all of them, down to the last woman and child.

It wouldn’t have brought back Kodlak. Or Ria, or Torvar.

She had guided him, channeled the stunned rage, a hatred so cold he didn’t know it existed within him. Sigrid had thawed his heart, and so, he would listen to what she had said.

Even if it sounded completely mad.

And she knew it, knew how to gauge his expressions by now. Her eyes popped wide and her expression, so unguarded, became fierce. “Oh hell. You don’t believe me! I wasn’t surprised that the Thalmor didn’t but,” her voice cracked “- but you...you know I wouldn’t lie, right? Not about this. Not to you.”

Tears seeped onto her cheeks as she huddled in on herself. “Please believe me.”

He did. Shor and Kyne damn him, but he believed her. More ridiculous things had happened.
Somewhere. Holding the rectangular dwarven artifact out to her he hmphed dryly. “So what is this then, woman?”

Taking it with shaking hands, she pressed an indent on the side. Light suddenly flooded the cracked glass, with a metallic jingling sound as Vilkas stared, fascinated, the colors and swirls on the device so vibrant and alien.

“This is called a cell phone.” Tapping the screen with her rough fingers, Sigrid carefully stroked the peeling plate-glass. “We used them to speak over long distances. It’s a...a bit complicated.” Her mouth quirked, noticing Vilkas staring at the images that suddenly appeared.

“And this one is broken and just about out of battery life. Yeah, I’ll explain later,” she added as his mouth opened to ask. “But basically it depended on a type of magic we had at home. I stored everything in here….music, books, pictures...”

Leaning closer, he breathed in her scent as scarred fingers lovingly traced the faces, bright and healthy, of her bairns. Picture upon picture, as she showed him her life. Her home - a ranch style home ‘straight out of the seventies’ she said with a self conscious laugh, he had no idea what that even meant- the drawings and finger paintings of little boys. Messy rooms, foreign mountains. Strange gleaming wagons on wheels that were everywhere. Pictures of food that made his mouth water.

One of the boys looked just like her, wide hazel eyes amazed as a plump, smiling Sigrid (Sarah, his mind whispered) lifted the toddler to touch the paw of a puppy resting on a man’s lap. Bryce.

Bryce was a man not much taller than Sarah. Dark in hair and skin, with twinkling black eyes and a very white smile. She showed him pictures of them, years younger, her wearing a long lace embroidered white gown, fingers entwining with her new husband who held himself tall and proud, dressed in some kind of uniform and beret.

The fire burned through seven more logs before the phone blinked out, fading into blackness as the batteries died. Placing the dead cell phone reverently back in her pack, Vilkas turned back to Sigrid, only to be surprised as she held out the knife.

“It’s a Falkniven. A really good type of knife, from my world. Still sharp.” Fingers tightened on the smooth antler bone and wood. “I want you to have it. Please, Vilkas.”

Hadn’t he taken enough away? As they talked quietly, Sigrid alternately laughing and sobbing over some of the pictures forever frozen in her past, the doubt and guilt twisted around his chest, biting, clawing...

...He could have come sooner, he was sure. Could have saved them all. Didn’t know. There were so many children. He could see, see in her face that she had loved them. She must have been a wonderful mother. Fierce. Kind.

And for the briefest flash, he pictured her... belly swollen and ripe with his child, as she laughed, clean and free.

“Woman, I can’t take that.” She waited, knife outstretched in her palm. “It was your husband’s, now yours. Keep it. In their memory.” Pulling back, he couldn’t read her expression as she placed the knife next to her cell phone and clothing.
She was still naked, he realized suddenly, and he was ashamed as his body reacted, slowly stirring to life as the firelight cast its shadow over the hills and valleys of her form. He swallowed, turning away to lie upon his furs.

Only to be surprised, again, as she stands up and carefully steps into the space between his arms. Lying flat, she arranges the sleeping furs around them and drags his heavy arm over her waist.

“Rest...” she murmurs in his ear, burying her head in his neck.

Slowly, the tightness of his muscles relax as he holds himself away so as not to push, push against her as his cock throbbed with want.

She had saved him from his black hole of grief and pain. He would try, try to believe. To absorb what she had revealed, realizing that she sagged against him in something like relief. Exhausted from baring her soul.

She had been right about so many things.

He feels her breathing become slow, measured, and his eyes slowly shut as he chases her into the realm of dreamless sleep.

He would trust. And follow...wherever this path led them.

Together.
Tystnad, Mitt Barn (Silence, My Child)

Chapter Summary

A badass viking fighting song. Because it gets old listening to the same old danger music from Skyrim.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0O3LsJOvE

There was a roaring sound, like wind blowing through the eaves of her hall. Rushing waters, pounding drumbeats. All in her head, as Sigrid blinked in the darkness.

“Sleep well?”

A shrouded figure sits, leg dangling carelessly. Her eyes focus on that leg, clad in black, swinging back and forth hypnotically.

She can’t see what awaits in the dark.

Lifting herself to a low crouch on the bed, Sigrid realizes she is naked. Scanning her surroundings, she find her armor piled upon the floor at the foot of the bed. She slowly reaches for her sword, so close, still there in its sheath.

“Where am I?”

A chuckle, dry and silken. “Does it matter? You’re warm, dry...and still very much alive.”

Fingers flip a mirror bright dagger, back and forth. “That’s more than can be said for old Grelod. Hmm?”

Sigrid licks her lips and blinks, rapidly straining to focus, damn it. Focus.

Abandoned shack. Astrid. Three figures, hobbled and hooded against the wall.

And the darkness seems to coalesce,lingering in an umbra around the woman, assassin, killer who caught her in a trap. Sigrid would play along.

“So, you know about that?”
If she thumbed the pommel out slowly enough, the blade would make no sound. Astrid chuckled. “Half of Skyrim knows. Old hag gets butchered in her own orphanage? Things like that tend to get around.”

A sound, muffled, comes from one of the prisoners. Sigrid doesn’t dare look away.

“Oh, but don’t misunderstand.” The dagger ceases its spinning. “I’m not criticizing. It was a good kill. Old crone had it coming. And you saved a group of urchins, to boot. Ah, but there is a slight...problem.”

“You see,” oh, she is tensing, readying herself for the leaping strike that will kill, slash the spider that entrapped Sigrid in this web. *Slice before the words can come.*

“...that kill had already been claimed by another. A little boy, all alone in Windhelm. Who prayed, for me and my associates. Grelod the Kind was, by all rights, a Dark Brotherhood contract.”

“A kill....that you must repay.”

“So, you want me to murder someone else?” Her fingers have almost completely gripped the hilt of her sword.

“Well now, funny you should ask.” Silk rasping on leather. *No one* should have a voice like that, and waste it on serving Sithis. Sigrid remained crouched, bare feet digging into the straw of the bed - tightly wound as a spring as Astrid jumped light as thistledown to the dusty boards before her.

“If you turn around, you’ll notice my guests. I’ve collected them from...well, that’s not really important. The here and now. That’s what matters.”

*Oh no.*

Two women and a man. They are chained, cuffed to the wall in unforgiving metal, the blackness of their hoods preventing her from seeing their faces in the guttering torchlight. But she knows.

Astrid taps a booted foot against the floor. “You see, there’s a contract out on one of them, and that person can’t leave this room alive. But...which one?” Her voice turns playful. “Is it the thief, the wolf, or the bat? Go on, see if you can figure it out. Make your choice.”

The assassin whispered closer. “Make your kill. I just want to observe…”

Astrid breathed into Sigrid’s ear. “...and admire.” Straining not to pull away, Sigrid stands still as Astrid traces a gloved hand over her back and steps away.

The hut creaks in the wind as Sigrid considers.

An old lesson, an eternity ago.

“When you are surrounded, trying to rescue a hostage on a job-” Vilkas spoke sternly, pacing around the training field as the whelps sat in exhaustion on the benches. Sigrid could barely focus;
military strategy was not her preferred reading material at the best of times. The words jumbled around like alphabet soup in her head.

“...never freeze. The longer they have you, or the prisoner, the less likely you will make it out alive.” The Nord Master at Arms warned. “Violence, and speed of action. Surprise them with the unexpected. Throw a torch, fire an arrow. Lead the fighters away from the innocent, who are at the most risk in this situation. Strike to kill.”

Strike to kill.

She struck.

The Dark Brotherhood leader’s lovely eyes (blue as morning glory) widened in shock as Sigrid drew her sword in one swift pull, angling it upwards and cleaving off the assassin’s left arm.

Violence. Speed of action.

Blood pumped wetly from the raw stump as Astrid screamed, high and furious. Stabbing with her dagger (poisoned, keep away!) with her remaining arm, the women circled around each other, their heavy panting the only sound.

No words were needed. Sigrid could see that the assassin was beyond words, her pupils dilating to see, to kill, to take her life. Blood continued to spurt, hot and sticky, on the floor, smeared by their footwork.

Sigrid waited, a slow smile stretching her lips over her teeth as she watched the other woman gasp shallowly and strike again. The woman had skill. Graceful, with an economy of movement that belied the swift sharp snap of a blade, the shift of a heel. Sigrid parried her strikes, fighting the cloud that hung over her still, from the drugged sleep that Astrid had forced upon her.

Never. She would never join them.

They could all rot in hell.

Once, twice, Astrid lunged. Sigrid felt a slice cut into the soft skin of her waist. It immediately burned ice hot, warming with prickling pressure as Sigrid danced out of the way.

The fly, pulling its dented wing out of the spider’s grasp.

Heaving the suddenly-heavy blade in a wild horizontal swing, Astrid’s mouth moved soundlessly as her head tumbled off her shoulders, rolling onto the cracked boards.
Gasping with the sudden rush of adrenaline and spiked fear, Sigrid leaned over and put hands on knees. Breathe. In and out.

*You did it, you goddamn amazing idiot, you killed fucking Astrid.*

*No more Dark Brotherhood. Soon.*

Breathe.

Slowly, the light no longer flashed in bursts against her retinas. Sigrid straightened and walked slowly over to the wall where the prisoners were kept.

The first hood revealed a gangly teenage girl, dirt streaked face runneled with tears. Sigrid carefully removed the gag and chains, silently gesturing for her to leave. No words - the ‘thief’ stumbled over to Astrid’s corpse and looted the pockets, turning only to kick the dead woman furiously in the stump of her neck before unlocking the shack and sprinting away.

The second hood revealed what she already knew. Focusing blearily on her smiling face, Vilkas relaxed. “Sigg-hreed,” he mumbled through the gag, limply hanging by the wrists.

Never had she moved so fast, unchaining the cruel wrist cuffs, rubbing the chafed marks as she hurriedly removed the cloth gag and supported his weight as he took a weak step forward.

His silvery eyes were almost warm. “You killed her.”

“Of course. That bitch didn’t know what hit her.” Sigrid sat him down on the creaky bed, hands patting all over his bare chest, making sure he had no further wounds. “Like I would join the Dark Brotherhood. Protecting you keeps me busy enough.”

He coughs at that, the dust they kicked up during their fight still hangs in the air. “Yes, yes, you’re a mighty warrior.” He grasps her arm, frowning at the droplets of sweat beading on her pale face, the bleeding slice in her side. “Not yet.” she cautions him, reaching for the last hood of the remaining prisoner.

Glowing orange eyes gleam from a bloodless face, perfect as a doll. Serana, daughter of Harkon, Lord of Volkihar and veritable princess of vampires stares back at Sigrid.

“Well, this is unexpected. You’re...well, you’re naked. But also not like me at all.”

Sigrid closes her open hanging mouth with an audible click.

*Shit.*
A werewolf, a vampire and an outworlder went on a quest, Sigrid thinks dryly.

Mired in the swamps of Hjaalmarch, they continued by foot for days, seeking the distant rock arch where lay the city of Solitude. Sigrid could see it, when the mists (and the biting dragonflies, and zombie draugr) cleared away long enough to view the western horizon.

She had slowly become more sick the longer they traveled; the poisoned wound in her side seeping greenish pus. It made Vilkas’ nose wrinkle in worry, and she bit her complaints back as he shouldered both their travel packs, walking closely in case she fell.

Serana, vampire, did not speak as she walked. Her black cape flowed over the rocks and streams, with no audible footfalls. Her burning eyes could be seen looking back time to time, as Vilkas and Sigrid struggled along the tangling roots and mud.

“Here.” As they halted for the night, the great bridge looming above them, Sigrid could hear the clanging bells of ships in an unseen harbor. Serana ghosted to her side as Vilkas lay her down carefully upon their bedding.

Weakness was slowly stealing her limbs, as every step had become a torment. Her side burned, swelled with the poison she could almost see spreading, blackening her blood vessels with dark ichor. “You won’t last much longer with that in your system. Let me try something.”

“Yes, please,” Sigrid waved Vilkas away, who stepped back from intervening with a grim tilt of his lips. He had been polite, if not exactly cordial to the Daughter of Coldharbour. Distrust colored his awareness, and Sigrid could see him watching the vampire discreetly as she held out hands wreathed in light.

Healing hands. She sighed in shuddering relief as the pain ebbed away, replaced by a numbness that was definitely preferable. “Oh. Oh thank you. That’s much better.”

“Thought so.” Removing her hands, Serana drew back and away as Vilkas spooned out the stew into bowls and handed one to Sigrid. He didn’t offer any to the vampire. “But you should come, too. My father will be, well…” glowing eyes darted to Vilkas, then back to her. “…not thrilled, to be honest. But he will reward you for my return.”

“There is a boat, further north, that can take you to your father’s castle.”

Serana tilted her head, listening.

“It’s not far - maybe two, three days by foot? From what I remember, there are no people that way, but plenty of wolves and bear.”

“That sounds...reassuring.” Serana drawled, watching as Vilkas spooned out the stew into bowls and handed one to Sigrid. He didn’t offer any to the vampire. “But you should come, too. My father will be, well…” glowing eyes darted to Vilkas, then back to her. “…not thrilled, to be honest. But he will reward you for my return.”
“I think you’ve got things well in hand.” No way was she going to end up in that dungeon as human cattle, food for the flock at Volkihar. “I wish you well, though.”

Serana nodded, resignation clear as she stood up and brushed her (gloriously goth, Selene from Underworld had nothing on her) armor off. “Then, I guess this is goodbye. I appreciate your discretion.”

The vampire had already begun to walk away when Sigrid called out, “Wait!”

Serana turned.

“You don’t have to go, Serana.” Vilkas made an inaudible complaint over a mouthful of stew, and she shushed him. “I mean it.” Her lips compressed to a tight line.

“You don’t have to give your father that Scroll.”

Pale lips narrowed as Serana assumed a fighting stance, hands clawed in ice. “How do you know?” The vampire demanded. “I don’t sleep, and I know you haven’t been through my things. What would you, a human, know about it?”

“Enough.” Sigrid took another bite of stew, calmly chewing. “I know you don’t want your father to have it. And your instincts - and your mother - are right. It’s a terrible idea, plunging the world into darkness.”

Removing a curled up map from her knapsack, Sigrid rolled it along the rocky ground towards Serana, gesturing for her to pick it up. “Not four days southeast from here, there is a town called Morthal that has a vampire problem. A wizard named Falion took up residence there, to help. By now, he should have learned how to cure vampirism. Serana,” her eyes were solemn and kind as she held the shocked bright gaze in her own.

“It has always been your choice.”

They stood there, locked in unspoken communication. The vampire’s lips trembled, then she stooped, picking up the map with shaking hands. “I don’t know how you know these things,” the undead woman warned. “But don’t follow me.”

Turning on her heel, she vanished into the night.

Sigrid sighed and flopped back on her furs.

“What in the name of Kyne was that all about?”

She turned to her side, rejoicing in the lack of pain as strength flowed back into her limbs. “One of those choices we talked about, Vilkas. A major clusterfuck, potentially averted.”

**********

He was glad to see the vampire go.

She smelled wrong, like the dust of bones and old, rotting blood. Beautiful and pale her face may have been, the eerie glide of her walk and too-smooth skin painted her what she was.
They should have killed her.

He almost had, back in that abandoned shack. Their supplies had come with them on their sudden, drugged journey out of Shor’s Watchtower (Thank Shor and Kyne and all the other gods listening) and he had hefted his broadsword, preparing to cut down the dead thing that talked and walked like a woman.

Sigrid had stayed his hand. “She isn’t a threat to us, Vilkas. Not unless she chooses to be.”

And so, they had traveled in a group for safety, encountering more things dead and alive in the reeking swamps that curled his fists and blighted his nose. “Do not touch the water,” he finally scolded Sigrid in exasperation, as the bodies of mud crabs and frost spiders littered the clearing. At least the undead one had helped; her ice spikes searing through draugr and crab.

Gods, he was tired.

Solitude was...stifling. He missed Whiterun, for all that he had visited the major hub of his homeland many times. High walls and close minded people, weak and worldly. At least the market was silent this time of eve, with the fluttering of luna moths and torchbugs alone in their dancing flight. That last day was a dim blur in his mind, as they walked through the last of the wilderness, towards the small farms and mills crowding the outskirts of Solitude’s port.

Filled with lives. All the lives of men, trickling from the city gates into the rivers and woods.

And all this was a game to her. No, he rephrased that mentally.

No longer a game. He could hardly wrap his head around it. Like an Elder Scroll, she had explained...a world within a world. Like the World Tree, the choices, quests and conclusions, all turning with root and branch into different stories, forever and ever growing.

But the foretelling, the creepy awareness of everyone and everything that may or may not happen...

...the woman was a fucking seer.

He had to protect her. No one could know about her terrifying knowledge. They would chain her to the jagged throne, (a table, cuffs rusted and crumbling with blood) hurt her, as she had been hurt before, to get to the answers they didn’t know were possible.

He wouldn’t stand for it. Luckily the woman (his woman, he thought, smug) had some sense. He dared not ask her, though the questions remained at the tip of his tongue, what lay in store for his country. She had briefly, sadly explained that the current civil war balanced on a knife’s edge either way.

Had asked him what he thought, the Dragonborn requesting strategy from a Companion.

Sometimes his life felt like a elf tale, spun by a fanciful bard.

And other times, it was all too real. He walked closely at Sigrid’s back as they stumbled towards an unfortunately named wayhouse (really, the Winking Skeever, it was a miracle it hadn’t gone out of business) and then exchanged gold for a single room. With two baths.

“Oh, thank god.” The woman sighed as the servants hurriedly filled the dwarven hammered tubs with buckets of steaming water. “That looks divine.” She rubbed her hands eagerly.

Vilkas could only stare as, finally alone, she removed her armor with swift practiced motions. Pulling
her breastplate over her head, he swallows as the muscles in her back bunched and stretched beneath her tunic, the curve of her ass narrowing into the still-soft belly.

“Hey.”

He startled, then turned abruptly to shed his own armor.

A touch on his neck, soft and inquiring. “Vilkas, that look on your face.” He turned. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her full lips curve invitingly into a smile.

Her breath sighed over his shoulder. “We should talk about that.”

Snaking her hand around his chest, she held him close. “Maybe more than talk.”

He shivered as she slowly dragged her hands down, lower still.

They didn’t make it to the baths.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Hey, everyone who has made it this far with me. The next chapter will be spicy. Read or don't read, accordingly.

Took them long enough, right?

Also, I feel like I should explain that bit with Serana a little more thoroughly...

So Serana was turned into a vampire by Molag Bal, along with the rest of her family, in exchange for what she termed a 'degrading' ritual. Considering that particular daedric lord is also called the Lord of Rape, you can take a few guesses as to how that all happened. Yeah. Her dad, Harkon? Pretty much the worst father ever.

So I imagine Serana doesn't feel as though she has much choice in her life. She loves her (screwed up, crazy) parents still, and doesn't exactly mind being a vampire. If you ask her in the game about curing herself (before befriending her and going through the whole questline) if you are preachy, she rejects the idea immediately.

But if the Dragonborn asks Serana kindly, considering her feelings...yeah. Serana actually cures herself. It's a possibility that that whole snafu with the Elder Scrolls and Harkon trying to block out the sun may never happen.

...Or will it? *evil cackling laughter*
Du får mig att känna mig levande (You Make Me Feel Alive)

Chapter Summary

Sugar and spice and everything nice;
That's not what they are made of
Leather and chains, wind and rain
This chapter is racy with love.

He turns, facing her. She lifts herself up on tiptoe to kiss the roughness of his cheek.

She feels his breath hitch. His hands grasp her bare shoulders to stop her or steady her...she doesn't know. Sigrid doesn't stop, though, and doesn't hesitate; her mouth passes to the other cheek. Placing another light kiss there, she curls her hand around his neck and pulls his face down to hers, so that she can reach his mouth.

Here she lingers. She traces his jaw with her thumb and follows it with her lips, brushing his hair out of the way where it falls against his jaw...that revealing jaw which tightens in rage, loosens in lust. She darts out her tongue, dragging it against the bristles of his newly grown beard -

Vilkas bites out a garbled oath, his voice low and strained, and one of his hands slides to the nearby wall to brace himself as she rubs herself against him.

Sounds of laughter, drinking and lute playing float upstairs, distracting in their volume but Sigrid hums against his jaw and feels him shudder. Allowing her fingers to wander to his ear, her mouth follows as she placed a hot open mouthed kiss to the shell of it.

Her other fingers clench around his neck. They curl so hard into his throat she can feel his heartbeat, thudding just as rapidly as hers. Tilting her head up, she sees...

-He stares at her without blinking, his dark eyebrows drawn tight, all the muscles in his neck and arms and chest so tense they ridge under his skin.

She opens her mouth to say more words, and he kisses her instead.

The kiss is fierce and hot and brutal, her fingers still digging into his throat, anchoring herself to him. She is no thief but she will take this, her tongue diving into his mouth and claiming it even as he falters in surprise.

He snarls into her lips and his hand moves suddenly to fist in the hair at the base of her neck, forcing her head back...and then it is his tongue that takes her mouth, the wildness of his strength pulling her forward, with the corded muscles of his chest pressed fully against hers.
"We have to talk about this," she begins again, and his fist tightens in her hair as she tries to form words, but he kisses her again and again, hard drugging kisses that wither her thoughts into nothing, until they are only words.

But she must say them still, before he takes away her ability to think entirely.

"I am not," Sigrid says against his mouth, her fingers digging into his scalp, "one of your women, for you to fuck and leave. I am in love with a bastard of a Nord -" he shudders at love and his grey eyes go wide and she doesn't care, not at all, because it's true.

"...and I choose this. And if you can't handle it, this shit I've told you, all of it - you can stop right now and take your ass back to Whiterun, you stubborn skeever-shit!"

Vilkas growls, a low rumbling deep in his chest that coils through her belly, and then he wraps his arms around her and crushes her against him. His mouth seals over hers in a searing heat, and she can't help the noise she makes as she pulls him closer.

His grip in her hair loosens - his hands scour down her back and waist and ass, and then he lifts her bodily against him. Sigrid wraps her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck as they still fight, battling for control of the kiss.

Absorbed in the moment, a small part of her realizes that Vilkas is moving, making his way with her towards the bed in the room, the baths completely forgotten; the rest of her is fully enthralled by the feel of his hands gripping her hips, the smell of him all smoke and sweat and pine-musk, the light in his eyes as feral as her own.

...And then they are both toppling over onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and gasps and entirely too many clothes. Her hands are pulling at the homespun tunic, desperate to feel his hands on her skin… but then Vilkas is pushing her hands out of the way as his mouth drops to her throat.

"Vilkas—ah—" Sigrid tries to speak, to tell him she can undress her own damn self, but his teeth are grazing down her shoulder to sink onto her neck, and she loses her train of thought. "Vilkas," she says again, fainter; he bites down on her, and her fingers helplessly rake his back, straining for something to hold to.

She feels him smirk against her throat and that, more than anything else, clears her head...a moment later, she has rolled them over on the bed until she can straddle him, his eyes narrowing as he grips her waist. Sigrid leans over him, rolling her hips as she does so, enjoying the shudder of his neck as he swallows.

"I bet you think you're my teacher in this as well," she breathes, and her hand drags over the muscles of his chest and down his stomach to tug at the top of his pants. She drops her head and mouths his collar-bone, feels him jerk; one of his hands slides to cup her breast through her tunic, ungentle and tantalizing as she moves to the hollow of his throat. She sweeps her tongue over the straining tendon there and rolls her hips again - he growls again and god, that sound does things to her. With the sudden sound of tearing cloth, her tunic is falling free from her shoulders to fall on the bed.
She should care. She should care a lot, actually, since that was her last shirt, but his mouth is hot on hers and his hands are finally, finally on her bare skin, and she doesn't know if the goosebumps are from the air or his touch. His thumb flicks over her nipple and she shivers; the calluses of his palm scrape coarse over her breast and she stifles a moan.

-They seem to both realize at the same time that he is, in fact, still wearing pants. Sigrid pulls back and scrapes her nails down his chest, over the dark trail of hair, and tugs at his pants. She has only a moment's notice when his muscles bunch in his arms and his neck strains forward before he has flipped them both.

"We will teach each other," he says with a half-smile still hard around the edges, his cock heavy and pressing into her stomach, and his voice is rough and dark and it thrills right through her.

"Not sure you're ready for this job...you're still wearing pants." Sigrid hooks a leg around his waist and shifts her hips, showing yes, that it is a problem, and Vilkas's eyes hood over.

He kisses her, hard, and then moves to her neck, and lower. "You are a pain in the ass, woman," he mutters against her breasts.

"I'm not trying to be," Sigrid says breathlessly, threading one hand into the wild mess of his hair as his mouth skims over the swell of her breast. "I'm trying to - don't you dare stop, ah..."

His tongue rasps rough over her nipple again and her fingers clench in his hair. "Not fair," she gasps, and arches into his touch. His chest rumbles over her stomach and she feels his hand thrust between them; he shifts over her in a sudden movement and then at last his pants follow her tunic to the ground, forgotten. Again his head bends over her breast, tongue tracing the freckles she has there, like constellations of stars.

Sigrid grasps his neck and tugs. As much as she likes this, it has been forever and he is going too damn slow. He kisses his way back up her chest until his mouth brands hers, until he is pressed flush between her legs and she can feel how tense he is, how much he is holding himself back but Sigrid is tired of gentleness

- she wants him to trust in her strength and let go.

"Sigrid," he groans into her mouth, husky and hoarse, and the sound of it sweeps through the hot tight coiling in her stomach to curl her toes. She slides her leg higher on his waist, inviting him in; he stares down at her with pupils blown wide. Bracing himself over her with straining arms, he kisses her with a savagery rimmed in tenderness as he enters her.

It has been too long. She has gone through too much and and she can't help the moan she makes as he drops his head to her shoulder and presses his open mouth to her skin.

He moves, then, slowly at first and then faster, and her hips roll to meet his as he quickens. She doesn't want gentle, doesn't want soft, doesn't want careful - she wants rough and hard.

She wants to feel alive!
His hands slip under her shoulders, raking his fingers over the scars there with something like desperation. Sigrid retaliates, scrapes her fingernails of her good hand down the sweat slicked muscles of his back where his tattooed tree curls, his teeth dig into her lip in response.

This is what she wants, the stormy wild abandon, honest and furious and perfect. She leans back, breathless and grinning as her tongue traces the marks of his teeth on her lip and he pulls her mouth back to his; his kiss is ravaging, rough and territorial and Sigrid feels the twining heat in her belly twist in on itself.

"Vilkas," she breathes, because she is close, so close, and his pace increases as if her words are electric. "Vilkas," she says again, letting everything she's feeling out in her voice, all the heat and light and shuddering love, and then the heat snaps tight in her cunt and she arches like a bow on the bed, her arms seizing him as close as she can get as she clenches around him, as the waves crash down behind her eyes.

The growl rumbles again in his chest, and then Vilkas's voice soars to a triumphant shout and his hips rock hard into hers. He pumps once, twice, three times, and then he grabs her face roughly and kisses her, bracing his weight on his elbows as best he can as they ride out the tide of sensation that swallows them both.

...Eventually, when her pulse slows to something slightly less than a deafening roar...when his breath is not quite so harsh in her ear - he's panting now, she thinks with satisfaction - he rolls off her with a groan.

Sigrid follows him over, her sweaty skin sliding wetly against his, resting her head on his chest and pressing her ear down to where his heart beats. One of his arms wraps around her. She lets out a long sigh over his skin. "Vilkas...hey."

"Hmm?"

"I don't really think you're a bastard. Mostly. Sometimes you are."

He snorts and Sigrid slowly smiles. He turns his head and presses a painfully tender kiss to her forehead.

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They bathe later, in cooling lukewarm water.

“So,” she murmurs hours later, completely and deliciously worn out. Vilkas is half asleep, drowsing against her stomach, fingers idly tracing the stretch marks there. “Dragon's Bridge is half a day south.”

Feeling free and unburdened for the first time in forever - she stretches, lazily rubbing her foot against Vilkas’s calf.

“Hmm...How do you feel about killing some more assassins?”
Against her belly, his lips curl upwards in a grin of his own.
Livets största illusion (Life’s Greatest Illusion)

Commander Maro was...thrilled. Hesitantly, dubiously thrilled.

Not that he didn’t believe the Nords. They had gone out of their way to visit the small outpost of Penitus Oculatus, last line of defense of the Emperor of Cyrodiil. He had led his squadron as best he could in this backwards little village, preparing for the Emperor’s arrival in Solitude. Soon, a few months now, and the bulk of his labors would be over.

But unfinished. The Imperial had made it his personal mission to track down and eliminate that cult of death dealers, the Dark Brotherhood. He had lost his wife to those bastards back in Cyrodiil, years ago before the angry mob had torched the Lucky Lady, hiding its sepulchral secret deep in Bravil. Reconnaissance and backbreaking legwork had led him, finally, to the last remaining hideout of assassins in the continent.

They were due for some death of their own.

Which is why his heart leapt into his throat when they told him that they had taken down Astrid, the elusive vixen. Their leader, dead and rotting in a shack, an ignominious end to a notorious murderer.

Gaius made a face behind the woman’s back; his son had not yet become accustomed to the dress and habits of these Nords; the streaked warpaint of blood and ash that decorated their stern faces was fresh enough that he could smell the metallic tang.

Commander Maro thought it the sweetest perfume.

“And you’re sure?” He looked over to the giant of a man, who looked almost bored. “Aye,” he stated, shifting his bulk of steel armor. Maro had never seen the detailed wolfshead motif that emblazoned the armor before - the work of a master - but he put it from his mind.

“I took her head myself.” The woman, who looked positively wild, all scars and leather, blinked up at him. Behind the warpaint, Maro thought, she could have been rather pretty. Her amber green eyes had steel behind them. “I am willing to aide the Penitus Oculatus in ridding Skyrim of these murderers.”

It was too good to be true. “That is...excellent news.” Clicking his fingers at his son, Gaius began shifting paperwork, searching for Maro’s latest reports. “Unfortunately, while I know of the sanctuary’s location in Falkreath, I do not have the passwo-”

“...Silence, my brother.”

“Beg your pardon?” This snowback thought they were equals? His olive hand twitched to teach the woman a lesson.

“The answer to the door’s question.” Continuing patiently, her hands waved as she emphasized her point. He noted that her left hand was missing three fingernails.

“What is the music of life?” She rasped, making her voice a hagraven croak. Then shifting a step aside, she responded in a normal voice. “Silence, my brother....” she resumed her position, hands
behind her back. “Now you have the password. You’re welcome.”

Commander Maro thought he saw the ghost of a smile on the man’s face. Impudence. With the civil war stretching across all of the provinces of Cyrodiil, Skyrim had been pushed to the back of the news that reached citizens of the empire. Obviously these backwards mammoth hunters needed a lesson.

But he would not be the one to give it to them. He frowned as the woman smiled sharply at his discomfort. “I...don’t know how you came by this information, but...” Damn his doubts. Success, at last. “...no matter! When you are ready, meet us by the roadside ruins, on the southeast.”

He reached out his arm to clasp the woman’s right shoulder. She mirrored him in the Nord way, grasping his shoulder in return. “Then, we will end them once and for all.”

She sighed. “It won’t be easy.” Her brow creased in thought. “You should prepare your men. They have a vampire in the guise of a young girl, an Alik’r warrior, a necromancer....hmm. ah yes. A Shadowscale and a man eating werewolf.”

Damn, but that did seem a bit more daunting than he had hoped. Behind them, Gaius stepped back, face pale in shock.

“If we work together, we can take them down. Prepare many healing potions and antidotes to poison, you’ll need them. We will meet you at the ruins in a month.”

Allowing the male warrior to exit before her, the woman stopped as if just remembering something. “Ah, something I almost forgot.” Removing a scroll from her pack, she presented it to him with a flourish. He opened it to reveal a crude map of Whiterun Hold, with an ‘x’ north of the small farms dotting the northern steppes.

“There I have marked the map, your soldiers will find an Imperial man...a Jester...who will not leave his broken wagon and is waiting for a wheel replacement. Arrest him. Kill him if he attempts to escape.”

Maro frowned. Strange. He knew the locals were not fond, exactly, of Imperial customs, but to imprison a jester for existing seemed a bit harsh. “What for?”

A shiver of what could have been fear passed through her. “The man Cicero is a deadly assassin, quite mad, a risk to the people of Whiterun Hold. Oh...” her gaze turned to ice. “And this is very important. The wagon he guards must be seized. And burned, burned so thoroughly no trace remains.”

“Or else all this planning, all our efforts will be for nothing at all.”

Lifting his eyebrows, he nodded. Satisfied, she walked out to join the man, who waited near the horses. Swinging the door shut behind them, soon the only proof they had even stepped inside was the stunned looks of his officers, blinking in the sudden silence.

“Well, gentlemen, we’ve been given quite the gift! Prepare for an assault!” His men cried out in a victorious shout, scattering to ready themselves as Maro dragged a flagon of wine towards himself. Uncapping it, he drank it to the dregs.

Death was coming for the death dealers.

At last, his wife would be avenged.
Jumping off the wagon near Whiterun’s stables, Sigrid and Vilkas ran to the waiting group of warriors who had gathered near the gates to welcome them home.

“Brother! Sister! At last you’ve returned.” Farkas boomed, clasping them both in mighty hugs. Athis shook their hands, with Njada calling out greetings as Lucia ran circles, leaping like a rabbit.

“Yourve come back! Tilma said you would, and it took the whole winter - its spring and you missed the first blooms, Sigrid - but you’re here and its okay!”

Aela, looking more hale and whole than she had in the months before their departure, gave each of them a tight embrace. Sigrid couldn’t stop smiling as she watched the men and women she adored, family, moving amongst each other, exchanging news and hailing the townspeople as they made their way up the steps to the Wind District.

Jorrvaskr stood, eternally strong. Skillfully repaired, it was as though the fire and death of Morning Star had never taken place. Sigrid sighed in pleasure. A soak, in the mineral rich waters of the springs, would be more wonderful than a whole case of brandy at this point. Her muscles screamed from being seated in a bouncing cart for an entire week. She could see Vilkas wincing and stretching as well.

Her lips curled evilly; perhaps they could lock the door to the bathing cave somehow? And once again make it their own. There had been little opportunity for intimacy after Solitude when they were travelling by wagon, with only stolen caresses and heated glances to keep her warm.

She did not forget his challenge that she was somehow less skilled than he at the art of pleasure. Pulling at her leather fastenings, she wiggled as suddenly the undergarments beneath the armor felt too tight, heat coursing through her as she imagined...

She had plans. Very detailed plans for teaching Vilkas just exactly how informed she was -

Breaking through her daydream, Aela gestured for Sigrid, Farkas and Vilkas to follow her to the Underforge. Tripping in her soreness, Sigrid entered the vine covered entrance (skillfully blended to merge with the bulk of the rock) and looked around curiously.

It wasn’t that far off from the game’s version. A massive stone bowl took up the center of the room, with smaller rocky alcoves lining the cavern. She could make out small totems, carved wolves howling, hunting, beasts of prey being pursued. Totems of Hircine.

She tried to remain stoic, allowing none of the joy she felt to steal across her face. Ysgramor’s Tomb. The cure... a head for Kodlak. A head for Farkas, for Vilkas. Battle with the spirits of their wolves, brief and hopefully bloodless. And then...

Then they’d be free.
Vilkas had spoken with her at length on the subject, on the journey back to Whiterun. Since she had foreseen the beneficial effects of curing the beast blood, it was now only a matter of personal choice. Her heart went out to him as they talked quietly (too quietly for the wagon driver to hear, the old man was practically deaf as it was) of expectations and traditions. The joys of running on four paws (she had teased him about riding werewolf back, which prompted Vilkas to roll his eyes as she giggled) contrasted with the battle for dominance. The wolf always sought to dominate, Vilkas murmured. It took a strong will to resist the anger of the beast, and the bloodlust.

She thought of his face when he spoke of what he called his brother wolf; a longing stained with self disgust, as he stepped forward in the Underforge to address the others. "The old man had one wish before he died. And he didn't get it. It's as simple as that."

Aela shuffled on bare feet, her eyes going to the totems. "Being moon-born is not so much of a curse as you might think, Vilkas."

"That's fine for you." Vilkas gestured firmly. Stepping closer to him, Sigrid caught a tilted look from Farkas who lifted an eyebrow in inquiry. She smiled back, broadly.

“But he wanted to be clean. He wanted to meet Ysgramor and know the glories of Sovngarde. But all that was taken from him."

The Huntress sighed. "And you avenged him."

Vilkas stilled, his nostrils flaring as he struggled to regain calm. Sigrid mentally huffed. Of course, Aela would bring that up. But, she reminded herself, the woman had been mourning her own mate...had not seen the Hall of Vigilants the way she and Vilkas had. It had added an entire day to their travels, but Sigrid was firm in her insistence that he saw with his own eyes the consequences of retaliation.

He had been silent, as their footprints left tracks in the snow. Bodies, burned beyond recognition, interspersed with piles of gleaming ash and spell scars upon the timbers of the once-mighty hall. Vampire dust, she had whispered. The result of an eye for an eye, the finality of continuing a warfare that destroyed yet did not rebuild. They had seen the last of their order in Riften, she explained quietly as he struggled with what he saw as betrayal, a breaking of the trust he had in her. For he had expected a fight - no, a slaughter, to repay in kind the grief and fury of the attack on his home.

But they were already over and done, never to return. Not even with the potential rise of the Dawnguard would the Vigilants of Stendarr or the Silver Hand be a power on Skyrim again.

With the silence of the grave surrounding them, a weight seemed to leave Vilkas as he sighed in resignation. And nodded, once, as Sigrid wound her arms around and held him, relieved that at last his inner turmoil had ceased. She fought her own battle in her heart, she told him quietly. And he listened as she brought forth all the doubts and fears she had never been able to express before that night spent bearing truths in the shelter of the watchtower.

Would the Silver Hand have joined forces with the Vigilants if Aela had not hunted them down?

Would Kodlak have lived, dying peacefully in his bed surrounded by beloved Companions and friends? Was it her fault, for meddling? Doing too little, or too much?

Another branch of the tree, cut off too soon to tell.

"Kodlak did not care for vengeance." Farkas sat heavily, still eyeing the way Sigrid hovered near his twin.
"No, Farkas, he didn't. And that's not what this is about." Vilkas's voice echoed deeply in the cavern. "We should be honoring Kodlak, no matter our own thoughts on the blood."

Aela’s face drooped. "You're right. It's what he wanted...and he deserved to have it."

Drip-drops of water somewhere in the cave reverberated as the Circle sat silent in contemplation.

Sigrid cleared her throat, with Vilkas shooting her a glance. "Kodlak used to speak of a way to cleanse his soul, even in death. You know the legends of the Tomb of Ysgramor."

“Yes,” Aela sat on the rock floor, her bare feet exposed and dirty. There was a faraway look in her gaze. "There the souls of the Harbingers will heed the call of northern steel.” She huffed. “But, we can’t even enter the tomb without Wuuthrad, and it's in pieces, like it has been for a thousand years.”

Footfalls sounded as Eorlund Graymane entered, face solemn. He held a massive double bladed axe, stylized, Sigrid noted with some amusement, with the face of a screaming elf at its heart.

The old blacksmith sniffed. "And dragons were just stories. And the elves once ruled Skyrim. Just because something is, doesn't mean it must be. The blade is a weapon. A tool. Tools are meant to be broken. And repaired."

"Is that..." Vilkas's hands twitched. “Did you repair the blade?”

Eorlund smiled, hefting the massive axe in a battle stance. "The flames of Kodlak, Hero and Harbinger, have reforged what was shattered. Behold Wuuthrad, reborn." Lifting the axe, he handed it to Vilkas, who stood as if stunned. “And now it will take you to meet him once more.”

Sidling closer, Farkas traced the engravings upon the haft and the blade. “Shor almighty,” he muttered.

Aela stood, eyes bright once more. “For Kodlak.”

Farkas took in a deep breath and pulled his own blade forth. “For Kodlak!”

Lifting Wuuthrad high above his head, Vilkas's chest swelled with unnamed emotion as his cries joined that of the other Companions. Lifting her own Skyforge steel sword, Sigrid’s eyes were suspiciously glassy as she roared along.

“For Kodlaaak!”
Of course, they couldn’t just scamper off to the northern Pale without some preparation.

Having the Companions immediately run off to the Tomb of Ysgramor in game had been dramatic, Sigrid mused, but not practical. There was an incredible amount of packing that had to be done to allow Sigrid, Farkas, Vilkas and Aela to leave Jorrvaskr for any amount of time.

Ledgers had to be balanced, the bills paid. Lesson plans were written out, with strict orders for Njada Stonearm, Athis and the few new, fresh faced whelps who sought to join their ranks. Meals cooked, dried and stowed away...enough for three ravenous werewolves and one woman. Travel furs, of heavy weight and durability to combat the freezing snows and ice storms that choked the North Sea.

Sigrid actually bounced with excitement; she was going to see the ocean, going to the resting place of the Five Hundred Companions as well as Ysgramor himself. Along with a side trip, she thought darkly, to a certain assassin sanctuary north of Dawnstar.

She had sent a runner to investigate the situation at Loreius’s farm, north of Whiterun. The courier had returned later that evening, gibbering in fear as he relayed the news. There was no sign of a wagon, or an Imperial Jester. Four Imperial soldiers, Loreius and his Altmer wife Curwe...all had been found lying dead on the farmstead. Every cow, goat...even the chickens had been killed as well. Throats cut, with wide slashed smiles carved into the creases of their lips.

Joker style, Sigrid brooded silently. She would not underestimate Cicero again.

Enough. There was enough to prepare for, to plan. Delphine had made a surprise visit to Whiterun, hooded and skulking until Sigrid joined her in the shadows.

The Breton Blade had been relieved to open her door to the sight of Esbern, who had arrived safely on her inn doorstep. But, of course the woman was not satisfied. Delphine had spoken in tight, whispered sentences about the need to infiltrate the Thalmor Embassy, to steal the papers filed about the surviving Blades.

And, hopefully, to find out what the Thalmor knew about the return of the dragons.

Sigrid had attempted to tell Delphine, to tell her the truth. That Alduin, miraculously spit forward in time from ages long past, was resurrecting his forces for a hostile takeover. But the moment she mentioned her trip to the Greybeards, the Breton woman’s face pinched in a sour scoff. And Sigrid knew she had lost her chance.

So, along with visiting the Tomb of Ysgramor, the Dawnstar Sanctuary of the Dark Brotherhood, and in a few weeks the destruction of the current sanctuary of the Dark Brotherhood south of Falkreath…

Her schedule was booked. Rather like having too many quest markers, she thought amusedly to herself.

Packing the hagraven heads herself (thank the gods they were frozen solid and no longer gave off a stench) Sigrid gathered the notes from the Harbingers desk.

His rooms had remained undisturbed those months Sigrid and Vilkas had traveled across the land. Dust softened the piles of books, coating the blankets and shelves. Fondly patting the chair he often slept in (still draped in his favorite bear furs) Sigrid closed the door quietly.
...Only to slam face first into steel plate.

“We have to stop meeting like this.” Throwing her hand dramatically over her brow, Sigrid looked up at him, bat an her eyes.

Suddenly, all her breath left her in a huff as Vilkas threw her over his shoulder. “Stop! Cease! Desist!” She yelled melodramatically, pounding his back with her fists. He continued to walk with his burden down the hallway as she started to giggle. This was something out of a cheesy romance novel; the burly barbarian dragging his woman to bed.

Grunting in pain as his armor dug into her side, she pinched what she could reach of his ass. Mmm...lucky her. She felt him spank her in return, heard Farkas guffaw somewhere out of sight (her hair had fallen over her face in a wild tangle) as Vilkas muttered something that made his brother laugh even harder.

Shutting the door so hard that one of the boards cracked, Vilkas dumped his burden onto the bed. Sigrid had a moment to realize that everything was spotlessly clean, the tapestries beaten clean from soot, with a vase of spring wildflowers on the side table.

-And then she began laughing in earnest as Vilkas, his hands everywhere, began tickling her. “Ack! Damn it, stop that.” She curled up in a ball away from him, batting away the hands that wormed their way into the gaps of her armor, the backs of her knees, her armpits. “See if I ever tell you my weaknesses again!”

Bored to tears, they had begun swapping tales from their pasts as they watched the tundra slowly roll by. Vilkas told her of the time Aela had arrived to join the Companions, a scrawny girl dressed in ragged furs like a Forsworn; who pinched Farkas and taunted him until Vilkas found his twin hiding in tears. That had prompted Vilkas and Aela’s first ever fistfight. It had been declared a tie, as Aela ended up losing her front teeth and Vilkas cradled a broken nose.

They were both called to task by Kodlak for their childish spar. But, it had made them close friends at an age where boys and girls often avoided the other. Sigrid wondered if cooties existed in Tamriel in some form, too.

In return, Sigrid told him about the day her boys had been particularly rowdy, with a summer rainstorm keeping them inside and driving her up the wall. Tempted to spank them (they had broken three plates and a glass) she had taken one look at the sniffling, rebellious kids and had tickled them instead. She smiled as she remembered chasing them, shrieking around the house as she administered her punishment. Many couch forts and stories later, they had all fallen asleep in a big puppy pile.

“You should know better by now than to open yourself to an opponent, woman.”

Oh, that smug shit would not do. Thrusting a leg between his, she heaved until his greater weight toppled over, catching him completely off guard as he nearly crushed her in his fall. Laughing hysterically beneath him, she wheezed “Oh god, you should have seen your face!”

His head banged against the wall. “What am I going to do with you, woman? You run into me without apologizing, attack me, trip me into bed…” unfastening her armor, his questing fingers finally found their prize as she began laughing helplessly.

“No! Ahah hah hah, oh stop! I’ll do anything, I swear!” Slapping him away, he grinned as he gripped her arm and held it high above her head, the better to attack her armpit.
“I think not,” he said idly as she writhed beneath him. “Such underhanded dealings will cost you.”

One hazel eye peered out of her birds nest of hair. “Oh really?”

Then suddenly, the tables turned as her hands delved beneath the laces and furs of his armor, and he was suddenly interested, very interested in whatever Sigrid had planned.

She smiled in sly victory. “So, Vilkas, ever heard of the term ‘blowjob’?”

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Later that night, after a new cask of mead had been broached and emptied in honor of their return (leaving most of the warriors dozing where they lay at table) they crept into the bathing cave.

“Alone at last,” Sigrid whispered playfully as she sank into the slightly sulphurous and steaming waters. Vilkas followed her in, moaning as the tension of the previous months slipped away with the heat.

They lay there in wordless bliss, eventually sitting up out of the water as they became overly hot. Steam poured from their skin, Sigrid sighing in contentment as Vilkas rubbed some salve into her shoulders. “So, in this ‘game’ of yours, did Jorrvaskr look the same way?”

“Not entirely.” Pulling the mass of hair forward over one shoulder, she leaned back to give him better access. “They had a training yard, of course. And Jorrvaskr was close to the Skyforge. But there weren’t as many rooms, or practical things. Such as the privy.” And thank god for whoever had designed them with the seats directly over a running stream. Other privies were not as fragrant. Some had been so rank she swore her hair curled when she drew near. Although Sigrid winced when she saw folks casually step in or drink from the water running down the streets of Whiterun. Eww.

“...And there was an Underforge, with tunnels that led out of Whiterun. No bathing rooms or springs though. Mmm, that feels so good, right there.” His thumb continued digging into her shoulder blade as she considered what she had been thinking about. “Anything else?”

“Well,” she began sheepishly. “This is going to sound so surreal, but I actually married Farkas once. In the game, with my fake Dragonborn avatar.”

His hands stopped. “You’re joking.”

“Nope.” She popped the ‘p’. “Farkas was...much more sweet. And slightly dense, in the game. Like a cute puppy. Not that he isn’t nice now!” she added hurriedly as Vilkas began laughing.

His hands rubbed idly over her hips. “And what about me, hmm? Did I not tempt you?” She could hear the smile in his voice.

“Umm....yes?” Oh boy. Awkward. Thinking of how to phrase this, she turned to face him. “So, you er, you and your brother...actually all the Companions...had quite a fan base back home.”

“How?” He was distracted, she could tell, his hand that had rubbed her hip slowly meandering further south. God. But if this was how she was going to die of embarrassment, she would die in bravery. “I may or may not have read quite a few stories about you. In...intimate situations.”
Blinking, he looked puzzled. “Your people had the time to play these involved games, and then write
about it?” He seemed to be masterfully ignoring the jist of what she had said.

She swallowed as his finger crept closer, shamefully hoping he’d rub her and yet hoping he
wouldn’t, so that she could think straight. Damn, but he was distracting. “Yes, certain inventions
made it...possible to...waste time, oh hell, do it or don’t, just…” he pressed his thumb straight against
her clit and she stiffened in ecstasy.

“What kind of things did you read about?” His voice was a deep purr.

Whining, she struggled to move, get away from his questing hands. They kept her trapped in place,
as he seemed utterly focused on circling her center of pleasure.

“Er, well...most stories seemed to involve Ulfric Stormcloak - I know, why, right? - or Aela, or
Brynjolf - that thief from Riften, yes the annoying one. But I loved to play as...umm...a wicked
character. So, the things I liked to read were often about getting caught stealing from the
Companions, and ah...” one of his fingers slowly pumped inside of her - “...god I loved the ones
where you or Farkas would catch the Dragonborn and punish her, and…”

Sudden splashing filled the room as he kneed her roughly apart and put his mouth on her. Clenching
her thighs around his head, she furiously bit down on her hand, breathing quickly in and out as his
tongue replaced his fingers.

Later, they lay on towels in the room. Sigrid shifted in his arms, pleasantly sore and and scrubbed
clean. He had made her come twice more (the last as she rode his lap, gasping as he slammed her
onto his cock, damn that was fun) but now he had finally run out of stamina, it seemed, and was
beginning that deep, slow breathing that usually meant he was almost asleep.

“You’ve always been my favorite,” she whispered, hoping he was too tired to hear.

His chest rumbled as he chuckled. “Hope so.”

Sighing happily, she cuddled closer.

“But you realize I now have to tell Farkas everything.”

She yawned. “Do that, and I will tell all the Companions the truth; that I saved your ass from a
woman who had nothing but a knife. Naked.”

“Damn.”
The dark pool lay still, unfathomable, ringed by nightshade. The wind, stirring the nearby pines and tossing the purplish heads of the deadly plants, made no ripple on the waters.

"Don't touch that. I'm not sure it is even water," Sigrid whispered in agitation to her shield siblings as they drew closer to their prey.

It was supposed to be so easy. Should have known Murphy's Law existed even here, in Skyrim. Or would that be M'aiq's Law? It seemed randomly destructive enough.

Commander Maro of the Penitus Oculatus had not been content to wait a month. Sigrid had received a message one week after arriving in Whiterun, scribbled sentences that informed her that the Falkreath Sanctuary was to be attacked that following Sundays, in three days. And if she was to assist, she would have to haul ass to get there in time.

Arrogant Imperial, she thought frantically. Judging by the body count of the soldiers fallen like leaves around the black door, they hadn't even planned to wait for her. The wrinkled form of what looked to be Festus Krex hung limply bound from a tree, pincushioned with dozens of arrows. If they had had the time to torment the mage, then the fools would have given the remaining assassins all the time in the world to flee or prepare to fight, accordingly.

Babette and Cicero. Undead child and mad jester. The two who always survived in every playthrough in the quest Destroy the Dark Brotherhood. She couldn't let them live; not when the body count was so high.

Sigrid had a sinking feeling that it would be up to her, Farkas and Athis to clear the sanctuary and also rescue the commander with the any of his surviving men. Though, feeling the blood squishing into mud underfoot, she would be pleasantly surprised if they did have help in the bowels of the assassin’s lair.

Vilkas had wanted, no, demanded to come and fight by her side. But Jorrvaskr needed him more. There were at least five new whelps, bright faced and eager, who had to be put through basic training. Farkas had attempted to keep the accounts balanced, but (and Sigrid knew this was just proof of how stupidly head over heels she was for the man) Vilkas had gone into an adorably long winded rant as he flipped through the books about just how damn long it would take him to sort all the numbers.

He should be Harbinger. Not her. Hell, even Farkas would be a better fit.

Tilma and Eorlund had approached her the day after the welcome feast with the news, taken from Kodlak's journal. Of course, this piece of foreknowledge had been depressingly accurate. Down to the dream recorded, with the old Harbingers vision of Sigrid herself, driving back Hircine and leading the Companions to a glorious afterlife in Sovngarde.

No pressure, she thought acerbically. Barely a year (a year) in this world and she was the fucking Dragonborn and the Harbinger of the Companions.

She didn't want it. Hell, Sigrid just wanted to eat Tilma's delicious apple pie, try all the wines, and sleep until the aching soreness that pounded her head went away. There were so many gorgeous places she wanted to see with her own eyes, like the Forgotten Vale and glowing Blackreach. She wanted to sunbathe with a shirtless Vilkas on a sunny beach with fruity drinks (where was the
nearest hot sandy beach? Hammerfell? Worth it). Maybe build a house of their own, far away from nosy Companions. Especially, she glared at Farkas who had taken point, Shield Brothers who liked to tease.

Sigrid rolled her shoulders, forcing herself to loosen up her tense muscles as Farkas pushed open the black door all the way. It made no sound, for such a heavy stone door. Thin tendrils of smoke escaped as they silently entered in, with Athis smiling savagely as he readied his dual wielded Skyforge blades, gleaming greenish ochre with poisons.

The Dunmer warrior had not become more verbose with time. But, he had made a request to come along, when he heard what Sigrid was about, the night she had related her upcoming quest and had been declared Harbinger to a stunned roomful of fighters. He had taken the news in stride (much more so than Aela, who had stomped off and began furiously whispering with Vilkas in the corner) and when Farkas, Tilma and Lucia had finished toasting her and declaring their loyalty, he had pulled Sigrid aside to tell her about the Morag Tong.

The worshippers of Mephala had murdered the Dunmers entire family clan when he was just a child. Athis had survived, barely, by hiding in a barrel and creeping out when the screams (and footfalls) went silent. Athis followed Azura, he told her in hushed reverence, had crawled his way across the border of Morrowind to seek Azura's statue...a pilgrimage of the Goddess of Dawn and Dusk. At Her feet, Athis had recovered from his journey, his wounds treated by her priests and priestesses.

Ending a guild of murdering fanatics was too good to pass up, he informed her with a strange gleam in his blood red eyes.

Sigrid was never more grateful for his fervor when in a matter of minutes, the smoke from the burning sanctuary obscured all sight. Handing her and Farkas a small blue bottle, she followed Athis' gesture to drink up and immediately saw the glowing outlines of bodies dancing, dealing and avoiding death. Detect life, she thought, with a sudden spring in her step. Farkas returned her grin with a smile that had fangs, and then they were suddenly upon them.

Sigrid found herself locking blades with what had to be Nazir, his white teeth set in a snarl as sweat soaked his turban. Straight Skyforge steel shed sparks as his curved scimitar thrust, curved and thrust again, seeking to end her.

Not far, she could barely see Farkas battling Arnbjorn out of the corner of her eye. The two werewolves wielded massive two handed blades as they furiously swung at each other, growling and barking gruff threats. Had they known each other other once, or...

With a swift chop, Nazir disarmed Sigrid. Crouching in desperation as his blade came down, she rolled out of the way, tossing a palm full of dirt toward the Alik'r's dark face. It bought her just enough time to snatch her sword and see his jaw grow slack, eyes dimming in death as twin dagger points emerged from his chest.

Nodding her thanks, Sigrid ran past Athis and lunged as Veezara attempted to stab a truly enraged Farkas, who was throttling Arnbjorn by the throat. The scaly skin parted for her, as she slashed him in passing, his taloned hands clutching his throat as he fell.

Three down. Four, as Arnbjorn ceased struggling in Farkas's crushing grip, eyes popping from their sockets as his tongue protruded swollenly. She felt a faint twinge of fear as her shield brother dropped the were like a sack of flour and loomed over her (no, it's Farkas, it's okay), his eyes glittering wildly in the firelight.

"Please tell me there are more to kill, sister."
"This way!" She led the Dunmer and Nord further into the nest of tunnels, stumbling as they tripped now and then on the bodies clad in Imperial armor. Remembering the layout of the sanctuary was simple; she had roamed it so many times when Sarah Ferguson played a Khajiit assassin, or a Dunmer battlemage that she confidently ignored the false corridors and shadowed dead ends to reach her goal. The sanctuary smelled of moldy rot, the bitterness of poisons and somehow, old blood. Sigrid had a brief moment to wonder why it didn’t seem quite as homey as it had when her avatar had been welcomed with murderous open arms into the family. Circumstance was everything, she supposed.

Suddenly the three reached an open chamber where an alchemy table was set near an enchanter’s alcove. Sigrid could see that Gabrielle, the Dunmer mage, had been eliminated as well... blood soaking her robes as she slumped atop the main table. Death that had been bought dearly, by the looks of spellcast scorch marks and the bodies of soldiers sprawled upon the floor.

The smoke was turning more thick and and acrid the further in they went. Sigrid coughed and choked, feeling Athis and Farkas solidly at her back as she hurried to catch the most elusive and dangerous remaining assassin.

Babette had to be here somewhere, she thought wildly as her head whipped around, struggling to see against the flames crackling around her. She could see embers of orange eating into the supporting timbers, and knew time was short. "Farkas!" She cried, grabbing his elbow as the Nord werewolf tried to rush past. "The vampire girl! Do you smell her?"

Wrinkling his nose, Farkas lifted his head, sniffing the stale air. "No scent... just blood and fire." He sneezed, Athis giving them both a strange look. Peering into the last tunnel, she saw that it ended in a collection of rooms lined with beds, all empty and burning in billowing clouds of black. "I don't see Commander Maro," the Dunmer shouted at her against the roaring of the fire. "Time to leave!" She hoarsely yelled back, keeping her blade ready.

Damn, and double damn. There must have been some private escape tunnel, some secret way out for the undead child. No honor among thieves or murderers it seemed, Sigrid thought as they ran past the bodies of Gabrielle and the crushed remains of Lis, Babette's pet spider.

A figure stumbled blindly ahead, calling out into the hellish darkness. "Father! Father, where are you?"

Stubborn fools. If only they had waited, had bloody listened to her about the risks, the need for preparation. Grabbing Gaius Maro by the arm, Sigrid disarmed him, throwing away his sword as he struggled, throwing punches and generally panicking. "I didn't see your father in there, he must have left already!" She shouted into his ear. Shor save her, he continued struggling against her grip as she strong-armed him to the surface.

The green pines and ferns had never been a more welcome sight as the group hurtled past the black door, coughing and pulling in great lungfuls of fresh damp air. Breathe. We're alive. Just breathe.

"Easy! Easy, my boy," Commander Maro forcibly hauled his son off of Sigrid as she bent over, trying to keep hold of her last meal. The stench of death was everywhere; dead men piled up in wagon loads, their grim faced compatriots silently dragging the rest of their casualties out of the sanctuary.

"Well done!" Maro clapped his hand on her shoulder. Feebly waving it away, she gripped Farkas's hand as he pulled her up straight. "I will personally inform the Emperor of this glorious victory. You and your, erm..." He struggled for words at the sight of Athis and Farkas bedecked in blood, weapons dripping, "...brethren, should be richly rewarded. Here," he placed a chest in Farkas's
hands, causing the Nord were to grunt and shift under its weight. Still trying to control her gasps, Sigrid nodded. "We found it in their lair, near what looked to be the leader's quarters. Compensation for your timely assistance."

And just as she was about to snarl at Maro (the ass, he would have fucking died along with all his men for that Imperial arrogance) the leader of the Penitus Oculatus strode away, followed by his son, who did not wave, but looked back wide eyed as the caravan of death disappeared down the cobbled road.

Wiping her tearing eyes, Sigrid sniffed as she felt more soot and blood smear on her face. No wonder Gaius had looked at her like that; she must look like something a dragon spat out.

It was strange, Sigrid thought, realizing that common citizens found her frightening.

"Azura's mercy. That's a lot of coin." Athis murmured admiringly as Sigrid walked over to Farkas and opened the chest. She blinked at the sudden gleam of gold, piles of it, in which nestled jewels of every hue and shape. Strings of pearls, amulets, as well as what looked suspiciously like a carved jade phallus. Well, well. It seemed even assassins had needs. Averting her eyes, she blushed beet red, closing the chest as Farkas raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well," Sigrid clicked her tongue. "I think we can afford a wagon ride back to Whiterun, now."

"And pay back the repairs made to Jorrvaskr, among other things." Farkas did not smile, but heaved a great sigh of relief as he put down the chest and began cleaning his blade on a scrap of linen.

“If you have any further errands like this serjo, please feel free to bring me along." Athis was still staring at the chest with undisguised glee.

“I will...you certainly earned your share, serah.” Winking back at the Dunmer, the new Harbinger sat down with a weary sigh. “A good days work. One less thing to do.”

“Oh, sister, is that all you see?” Athis sat down near her and began inspecting his blades, reapplying poisonous salve. “I think this victory will earn us another feast, back at Jorrvaskr. I for one am anxious to drink all the mead my share allows me.”

“And a bath.” Sigrid stretched her arms, leaning side to side as she worked out the crick in her shoulders. “Yes, we know, a bath for the soft skinned outlander.” Athis teased back.

Sharing more good natured jibes as they packed up for the trip home, none of them noticed that a full moon was slowly rising. An orange moon.

A Hunter’s Moon.

*******************

Blood, so shiny, so fresh-red, drink the blood eat the flesh.
Call, call the pack call the pack on the hunt moon hunt.
Slashing ripping tearing with fang claw eat as they scream pretty screams
Call the brothers call them CALL CALL CALL
She could hold it in no longer. No more. Lonely, longing for her brothers. Lost to the moon, Aela howled.

And as she waited with indrawn breath, moments later she heard a faint howl echo back.

Her blood coated lips stretched into a smile.

*Call the wolves, sister hunter. Call them, call them close. Call them here.*

*Here for blood, for the flesh, so fine to tear, to rip to maul.*

*Eat their screams, lovely screams so fine.*

Lord Hircine had called. Her Horned God bid her call the others. So she called, stretching, twisting as bones popped and muscle writhed over flesh as she changed. Changed into the beast, the wolf, still hunched over the kill.

The white stag still gleamed white in the darkness of the shadowed trees. She stretched her clawed hands, the hand that held the ring. Pretty ring. From Sinding. Hah. Her mind pulsed like a drumbeat as she grinned at her own pun. Red, rich drops of blood spattered the trophy hide. She was liberally covered, dripping in iron red life. But no matter...it had been a wild hunt, a fine hunt.

Her Lord called. She would obey, and hunt again, as was proper. Aela the Huntress, descendent of Hrotti Backblade, would find and seek her prey. Sinding. The one Her Lord wanted dead.

And her brothers would come. Come to hunt, to eat the kill. She would be alone no more. What would their high handed morals, their denial of this basic instinct, their own nature come to when confronted with this...this joy? Surely once they saw, once they could feel...they would come around. They would hunt with her again.

Adrenaline hissed in her veins as she grew tight with wanting, with heavy lust as the Aspect of her Lord, of Hircine caressed her with moon pale claws. Shifting from mighty stag to wolf, to bear, to werewolf, Her Lord’s glorious aspect wavered like shadow. Aela whined as His claws raked furrows down her neck, tongue laving her neck.

*You have been faithful, my Huntress. I know your devotion to Me. You will never be alone again.*

Stretching her neck to the glorious moon that hung, harvest gold and heavy, she crooned a song.

*Come to me, brothers.*

**********

“Do you hear that?” Farkas lifted his head again to the night sky, stone grey eyes puzzled.
“Nothing. I hear nothing, for the tenth time tonight brother. Go to sleep, while you can.” Athis grumped, turning over in his furs. Sigrid shifted in sympathy; this had been the best campsite they could find, and it was still heavily covered in lumpy tree roots, rocks and wet fern. She had drawn first watch, and she wrapped her furs more tightly as her breath came out in a cloud of hot mist. “He’s right, Farkas. Sleep while you can. I’ll wake you at midnight.”

“No. Something’s not right.” Her shield brother stood suddenly, an odd tension rippling through his unclothued back as he sniffed the air. An almost audible whine came from his chest.

Of course the Nord was comfortable in almost nothing at all, Sigrid sighed mentally. Just because she and Athis would freeze even in early summer without their furs...yet Farkas could waltz about in a fur kilt and not even get goosebumps from the chill.

“Wait, wha-” Sigrid hardly finished her thought before Farkas bounded off into the darkness, into the trees. Shielding her eyes from the firelight, she blinked as she focused, trying to see him. “Farkas! Farkas come back!”

“Oh, for Oblivion's sake.” Athis made a disgusted noise, then tore off his sleeping furs with a huff. “The stubborn oaf. Going off about this smell, that noise all day long.”

Sigrid kept her face still, not betraying any emotion as she hurriedly packed up camp, dousing the fire with a kick of wet earth. Athis had not joined the Circle (technically neither had she ) and Sigrid wasn’t exactly sure how private her friends wanted to be about the beastblood. Even if it seemed a bit...obvious. *It’s a secret to everybody.* Right. And half the Companions disappeared every few weeks for long, romantic strolls in the moonlight. Tilma often despaired aloud of ever getting all the blood out of Aela’s carpets...

Aela. Ever since that night she had been made Harbinger (against her will) Aela had been missing from Whiterun. Vilkas had reassured her, stating that it was not unusual for the huntress to work off a fit of pique by taking to the tundra and hunting down several elk or sabre cat. With the temper (and evil glare she had fastened on her new Harbinger) Sigrid would bet anything that Aela had bagged mammoth this time. It seemed like that time of month.

Meeting the Dunmer’s exasperated gaze, she motioned him on as they followed the obvious trail Farkas had left. Worry filled her; it wasn’t like her friend to just take off like that.

Not like him at all.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been years since Farkas had felt this way. Not since he had been young, a young man. Newly tattooed and basking in the glow of pride. Pride in himself, in his brother. At being entrusted with the Circle’s great secret.

Lycanthropy. The beast blood. Moon called. A tradition that dated back hundreds of years. Wild and fearsome strength, Jergen had told them, his normally jovial face serious with the desire to impress upon the restless younglings the weight of this honor.

So many names for a simple thing. Natural. His feet raced over the forest floor, sharp grey eyes taking in every branch, root and rock as he flowed into the night, one with the night, seeking, a feeling he had not felt since…

The first transformation was always the worst, Jergen told them.

But Farkas had not believed, had not been prepared for the gut ripping pain, the feeling that his insides, all those murky bits of odds and ends, had somehow rearranged as he bent over with the agony. He could see Vilkas faring not much better, paces away from him in the clearing Jergen and Kodlak had chosen for their first moon.

Something gave inside with a wet rip, and Farkas choked out a howl, sharp burning heat poking through as fangs emerged from his open maw. His limbs felt loose, the ground further away than was normal as he stood flexing, chest heaving.

And was overwhelmed by the terrible, clear beauty. The beauty of it all.

Farkas heard Vilkas gasp, wolf-rough, as he too took it in. The moon - shades and patches on Secunda’s rough face. The furry edge of a luna moth’s wing. An ant crawling on a yellow-veined leaf. The scents, so rich and complex, good and bad…he could smell Kodlak’s breath, the honeyed mead he must have drunk for dinner. The scent of the oil they used to sharpen their blades. A rabbit twitched, hiding in the brush behind him. All this knowledge, imparted in a single breath.

It was intoxicating, and as the brothers prostrated themselves before Kodlak and Jergen (who must have Changed as they were struck dumb and staring) Farkas felt his jittery pulse thrum with excitement. It was almost as good as when Helgi had let him touch her breasts, giggling nervously, or when Farkas had made his first kill on the tundra and saw the proud faces of his family eating, full and happy and fed.

Oh, how ready he was, ready to hunt, to kill, to do something, anything. His claws ached to rend, tear. To fuck…

He heard the howl, then. Aching, pure and powerful in its lonely call.

Come to me. Come in me. Be with me.

Without meaning to, his legs pounded even faster into the loamy forest floor. He was needed. He was wanted. All of Farkas had been condensed into one single purpose.

Find her. Hunt with her. Be with her.
And, as his cock throbbed, hanging heavily as he leapt and dodged gracefully through the trees, he could slake the lust, kill the pain, the lonely call he felt echo through him. Thoughts were gone, purged in the raw simplicity of this bone-deep need.

Lifting his face to the ripe moon, he howled back.

Not far. He sniffed, picking up the pace.

Not far at all.

**************************

He came.

Aela slumped as she saw only one appear, silver eyed and raw, before her.

No matter. He would do.

Lifting her paw, she growled in need as she carefully painted the blood, rich fresh blood of her kill upon his face. She could see it, the moment Hircine blessed him, see the pupils expand and his breath hitch as he felt it. Oh Horned Lord, God of the Hunt, he did feel it after all.

And Aela would never be alone again. She nuzzled him, resisting the impulse to bite down on that tenderly beating pulse as the man (Farkas, the woman inside her sighed) fell to his knees, still looking at the great white stag laid out before them.

“Feast, brrotherrrr,” Aela spoke around dagger-sharp teeth, pulling claws through his long dark hair. Not yet fur, but soon. “Heed th’ caaall…chaaange.”

“Farkas!”

Hissing, Aela whipped her muzzle left and right, searching for the intruder. A woman and a man, not far off. Intruders. Challenging her. Taking her rightful prey.

Her werewolf, brother-soon-to-be-mate, winced as Aela released an ear-splitting howl of defiance, clawed hands raking the air.

“Farkas, what th-” stumbling loudly into the open air of the grotto, the scarred woman blinked (so familiar sister-in-pain). “What in Shor’s hairy ballsack is going on here? Farkas? Who is this?”

The elf man hung back in the trees, blood red eyes wide and fearful. Good. Aela would allow him to slink away, just this once. This woman had come, she knew, come to take away what was hers. Deep inside, she felt the truth of this in her gut. Something, something she treasured, this one would take.

Not if she was dead! Lunging forward with the speed of a striking snake, Aela’s jaws trailed gobs of saliva as her muzzle champed, snapped at the neck, the arm. So sweet, the flesh, to rend and tear and gobble up, gobbets of flesh. Hircine promised.

Leaping backwards (so slow, the prey was not worthy) the woman who smelt of dragonfire and lavender kept her eyes on Aela, so wise, and slowly walked closer to the werewolf still kneeling on the ground.

“Farkas, come on, Farkas I need you to snap out of this!” Leaning closer, away from Aela, the woman cradled his face in her hands and stiffened as he opened moon-bright eyes to stare at her in
puzzlement as she touched him, touched one who had already been touched by Hircine.

Ah, the fear. The best spice to a hunt, blowing aside all barriers. The bones in the woman’s wrists cracked as Farkas grabbed both wrists of the woman, hoisting her high. Aela watched in amusement as the woman (Sigrid! Aela howled. No, stop this, stop it, it’s SIGRID-) choked in surprise as Farkas’ mouth claimed hers, taking both wrists in one hand, keeping her suspended as the other clawed away all furs, all clothing, all obstructions to the hunt.

The Hunt had been called. Had been given. Tongue lolling out of her muzzle, Aela capered playfully in the clearing as Farkas gripped the woman with his free hand, already growing claws, and pressed her, full body against his. Writhing to get away, the woman was only making it worse. Prey ran. Prey struggled. All the better for the taking. Oh, it was sweet.

The elf man was watching, a musky fear emanating from him. Aela feinted an attack, just to see him yelp and take off, running north. Where the other soft two legs lived, where her human form lived enslaved by those rock-hard fetters, those feelings so impure and confusing.

Wasn’t this better? She licked her paw as she waited, patiently, as her wolf-brother stripped the woman of her leather coverings, her steel tooth-blade. She kicked and yelled, tears streaming as she screamed meaningless words at the moon-bound man, trying to bite him when he held her chin still to take her mouth with his once more.

He would take her. He would change her. And they would hunt, once more. A full pack.

And it would be glorious.

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What in Kynareth was going on?!?

Oh, this was just pointless, yet Sigrid couldn’t help but fight - fight the wild strength of the stranger that had somehow taken over Farkas. This, this couldn’t be her brother. The one who had held her hair as she vomited over his boots. Who sang silly songs, knitted horrible afghans and never raised his voice.

Against her will, she shivered as his tongue swept hungrily through her mouth. They were pressed so closely together that Sigrid was left without any illusions as to how the evening was to conclude. Struggling to raise her knee (wait, was she naked? When the fuck had that happened?!) Sigrid attempted that last ditch effort of desperate females everywhere. She kicked his balls, as hard as she could, and heard a satisfying grunt of pain as his hands released her.

She dropped, stunned, to the forest floor. That must have been a ten foot fall, she thought blankly, rubbing her ass. Probably be a mother of a bruise there, tomorrow.

If she saw tomorrow. She could see the she-wolf coming for her, preparing to attack again. No weapons in sight, no reliable Skyforge steel at hand.

Crouching on her heels, Sigrid prayed that Athis had made it away safely as all of a sudden a weight forced her onto her back. No, hell no, and she fought with every dirty trick in the book as a very naked, very zoned out Farkas rubbed the length of himself roughly against her.

She panted as struggled to get out, get out GET OUT from under him. “Farkas, listen to me, you don’t want this, please stop. For fucks sake, you’re like my brother, just-"

- with a massive thud that shook the ground, another werewolf (obviously male, no genderless
wolfmen here) leapt upon Farkas from nowhere. Pinning the Companion down, he began slashing and tearing with massive paws, jaws snapping as they struggled to bit down on his neck.

“No!” she cried, searching vainly for her sword, anything really that she could use as a weapon. She could Shout, but didn't quite feel like harming Farkas. Yet. Maybe after he had explained what the hell had happened, here.

But the strange were was not the only threat as Sigrid backed away from the she-wolf, who opened her jaws panting in what looked to be a smug smile. Thunk! K-chunk!

An arrow embedded itself in the werewolf’s thigh. Keening in rage, she bounded off for the woods. Sigrid couldn’t see, couldn’t tell in the dark who had shot the were. But soon it all became clear as Athis desperately shouted from far away “-Sigrid! Stay close to the wall!”

Sigrid did as he asked, shivering with cold as well as nerves now, as another arrow took the werewolf atop Farkas in the back. With a cut-off bark and groan, he jerkily fell off of Farkas who was lying too-still there, naked in the raked-up clumps of grass.

“Shit. Shit shit shit. Damn, where are my potions?” Heeding the sudden twitch of her gut, Sigrid leapt completely over Farkas as the female werewolf suddenly lunged for her, almost clawing out her guts. Close...too close, and she was shivering full bodied now, as the slavering creature took one step, then another, and -

- and then fell, fell heavily onto the grass with a sigh and did not get up.

Sigrid froze, not wanting to make a move in case the crazy bat-shit thing made a move. It didn’t move.

“Here sister. I think your leather armor is good and done for.”

Accepting the fur pelt Athis offered her, eyes averted, she swallowed as she tied the makeshift dress around her and then stood wobbling in the moonlight. Blinking, she squelched the bubbling betrayal as she stood over the form of Farkas. “What...what was all that about?”

“I don’t know. Let’s ask him in the morning, when everyone has clothes on again.” Keeping his movements slow and unhurried (for her benefit, she realized, since she was shaking like a leaf) Athis reached for the coil of rope tied to his travel pack.

"Just so you know, I’m tying them all up. I don’t know how long this paralysis potion I shot them with will last.” Athis began to busy himself picking up the odds and ends that had been scattered all over the meadow clearing. Forcing herself to move around the still, breathing forms of the werewolves (except for the strange male, who seemed to not be moving at all, arrow still embedded in his back) Sigrid noticed all of a sudden that the rocky walled cavern they were in was beautiful, with an open ceiling that framed a galaxy-strewn sky.

Over in the corner by a rock wall, a small shrine decorated in antlers, bones and hides had been carefully tended with candles and incense. Coughing, she grimaced at the sour-sweet stench of the smoke. “Athis, I’ve never seen this plant. What is this stuff?” She picked up a dried bundle of the strangely spiky leaves tied with twine to show him.

Wiping his hands off as he finished the knots that bound Farkas and the two werewolves to nearby tree trunks, Athis examined it with a critical eye. “Oh, for the love of - put that down!” He spluttered, with Sigrid frowning as the Dunmer seemed to bite back a laugh.

“None of this is funny Athis.”
“I know, Azura take me, I saw all... that... earlier. But this,” he fingered the incense bundle. “This is epimedium.” Taking in her clueless expression, Athis smiled. “Horny goats weed. It’s an aphrodisiac.”

Dropping it faster than a pile of dried mammoth shit, Sigrid danced away, kicking dirt at the incense burners. “Oh for crying out loud! The fuck do they need that for, anyway!?!?”

Athis and Sigrid stared at one another. Suddenly they both started snickering, as the ridiculous hilarity trumped the near death experience they had both faced.

“Hircine’s Horny Goat’s Weed.” Sigrid was turning purple from helpless laughter, as she began waving wildly at Farkas. “Like, haha - like he even needs it!”

“Oh ho,” Athis chortled weakly, wrapping his middle tightly with his hands. “Oh, that hurts. Well, all I can say is that I was wrong. This will be a much better story to tell in Jorrvaskr over a mug of mead than the slaughter of the sanctuary.”

“Ugh, just...” Sigrid picked at the grass in her hair. Frowning at the blood decorating her lips, she shuddered as she remembered Farkas pulling her lip between razor sharp teeth. A feral kiss. One that was going to raise a hell of a lot of questions, once that big bastard woke up. “Just give me until tomorrow morning to talk to them. Well, whoever the others are.”

Athis nodded, still grinning. “Sure, sister. As long as I get to keep the weed.”

“Ahh! Like you need it either. I’ve heard enough stories at the Bannered Mare.”

“You never know, sister.”

******************

It was with shock, pain and no little amount of foreboding that Aela and Farkas awoke the next morning to find themselves bound quite thoroughly with rope, each tied to a tree. Even worse was the expressions of exasperated humor that Sigrid and Athis stared them down with.

Aela’s face fell, drooping even further as she realized the werewolf form of Sinding was dead, slumped in his binds against a tree with an arrow in his back. But, she realized as Farkas shot her a look that was brimming with humiliated loathing, she probably had bigger problems at the moment.

“So,” Sigrid tapped her foot on the ground. She was wearing nothing but a chewed up wolf pelt, tied with leather thongs. “Someone’s got some ‘splaining to do.”

Athis rolled his eyes. “Today, please. You s’wits have set us back long enough.”

Aela and Farkas looked at each other, then said in unison, “You first.”

Sigrid hissed and stamped her foot. “This...this, augh!” Throwing her hands in the air, Sigrid stomped off muttering something Farkas couldn’t quite hear. Something about stupid werewolves and their stupidly hot brothers and...

Oh. That was not complimentary.

Athis raised his eyebrow at the bound Companions, who were tugging at their ropes with steadily sheepish expressions. “Really? Werewolves?”

Farkas sighed. He didn’t even remember what he was in trouble for.
“I hate Morndas,” Aela seethed next to him.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Horny Goat Weed is a real thing. Apparently some men take it to increase their, ahem, virility.
“...and then, we made it back here. So that’s, er, all of it.”

Vilkas stared nonplussed at the faces of his shield siblings sitting around the table. When he had asked the three returning warriors what, exactly, had happened to put such a variety of expressions (and smells. Vilkas never thought he’d smell embarrassed intrigue wafting from his brother, but there it was) on their faces, he was not prepared for the honest truth.

Which apparently entailed his own brother getting into his woman’s pants. Or getting them off. He was too enraged to draw a distinction, at the moment.

“Get out. Everyone but you, Sigrid.” Rubbing his temple with forefinger and thumb, Vilkas closed his eyes tightly, striving to banish the pounding headache that had existed since the discussion began.

“Vilkas…” His eyes opened. They were alone in Kodlak’s room, the door quietly shut tight. “It was, um, well…”

“If anything you are about to say excuses Farkas for what may or may not have happened then do not bother to speak. He knows better. I have seen more self control regarding a...a leg of goat roast than he has shown in this!”

“Hmm, I wasn’t actually going to mention him.” Her full, scarred lips, with their delicate cupids bow spread in a sad smile, then slowly turn down as Sigrid thinks. “I was more concerned about Aela, actually.”

Vilkas feels the iron ridged tightness of his muscles relax slightly, at that. “Explain.”

“Aela may have briefly mentioned this in passing,” Sigrid stepped behind him and began applying pressure with her hands to his head. Sighing, he dropped his head back, giving her further access. “...But no, she is not exactly enthralled that I have been made Harbinger. Against my inclination or opinion as well, I might add.”

Her thumbs dug into the base of his skull, rubbing at the tightness there. “I...am not sure how to deal with her recent streak of defiance.”

Despite the relaxation stealing through him at her touch, Vilkas snorted. “A Harbinger guides us, leads the overall hall in matters of importance. Each warrior is ultimately responsible for themselves.”

“Yes, I’ve heard all that before.” Dropping her forehead to rest on the top of his head, Sigrid blew out a frustrated breath. “And yet, she is spiteful. I know she is unhappy that...that you, and Farkas are going to cure yourselves as well as Kodlak of lycanthropy. She feels, well, alone. And I can sympathize with that. “

Her fingers tightened, almost painfully on his shoulders through his tunic. “What I cannot and will not tolerate, if I’m to really lead this rabble, are the backhanded attacks on my own free will. Farkas doesn’t even remember last night, just the moon calling him away. I had to practically sit on Aela for hours before the woman even let on that she had been lost to her wolf, trying to bring back the pack. Her pack. You.”

A tremor went through Vilkas, one of his hands lifting to grasp hers. She squeezed back, then continued. “What if Hircine’s gift, his blessing to his devoted follower had been directed at you? Would you have gone to her, the moon in your eyes, and not known yourself until you awakened in
Aela’s arms?”

She sighed again, in sadness. “She has been my friend, and yet...I am so furious at her, for attempting to change me - make me were, to fit her desires.”

Vilkas hummed in thought, considering all that had been said.

If all this was true, then Aela was guilty of using incredibly underhanded means in order to influence the Circle back to the old ways. It still pricked at his fears that Aela had been...lost, to the wolf. He knew better than Sigrid of what that could entail. Vilkas had awakened once in in the middle of the tundra, stark naked and covered in the blood of what appeared to be some dead bandits. Dead bandits with visible tooth marks and gouged pieces missing from the corpses.

Other times, it was lust that hungered to be fed. Brother wolf had his own desires and needs...some of which were distinctly inhuman. He had made himself retch up whatever he had eaten - usually rabbits, or elk, but he didn’t know. Couldn’t, did not want to know. Cleaning his face off in the glacial water of a stream, he made sure to never hunt as a werewolf alone again.

“There is somewhere we could send her. Somewhere she wouldn’t be alone,” Vilkas spoke aloud. “North of Skyrim, there is an island called Solstheim. I’ve heard other werewolves mention a pack that lives there with some consistency on Frostmoon Crag, in the mountains.”

Pulling her fingers through his hair (it was growing long, almost past his jawline, he needed to cut it) Sigrid hmmed thoughtfully. “I don’t want her to be alone. It’s a terrible thing. But, I can’t say I trust her, anymore. Not to have my back, and not try something again. Will…” she cleared her throat. “Will you and Farkas miss her, should she go?”

“She has been our friend and shield sister for many years. Yes, I will.” As Sigrid suddenly stepped away from him, he held her by the wrist to stop her retreat. “But, I would be far more upset if you were harmed, intentionally or not. The beast blood is...not a restful thing, Sigrid. It plays upon your desires, constantly testing, until you are not sure if what you feel is you, or the wolf.” A tiny smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I would not wish that for you.”

Sigrid huffed, also smiling. “Me neither. Well, that’s a fine idea. I think she will be over the moon, if you’ll pardon the expression, to be part of an active pack again.” He shook his head at her pun, smirk pulling into a full, more gentle smile.

They stood there, grinning like idiots at one another, until a knock at the door announced Farkas as he entered.

He carried the chest filled with treasures, hard won against the sanctuary of assassins. “Brought this to you, brother. Since you actually know how to balance the numbers right. Sorry I made it worse for you.”

Seeing the unspoken apology, the nervous tightening of his fists, Vilkas read clearly what his twin was trying to say. “It’s all right, Farkas. It is not your task, to keep the ledgers. I know you did your best.” Holding each other’s gaze, they both spoke without words, used to each other as they were.

*Sorry, brother. I wasn’t myself.*

*I know. Let’s not dwell on it anymore.*
Opening the chest, Vilkas blinked as the gleam of gold fairly lit up the small room. “And this is certainly welcome. We’ll be able to pay back Eorlund and the other workers in full for the repair work done to Jorrvaskr. As well as a great many other things.

Sifting through the gems, jewelry, and septims, Vilkas mentally estimated just how much wealth the destruction of the assassin stronghold had brought to Jorrvaskr. Three, easily four thousand septims. A fortune.

With a raised eyebrow, he pulled out what looked like a carved phallus from the chest. Sigrid laughed nervously as both brothers looked at her in amusement. “Perhaps we can sell it?” She offered, trying not to blush even brighter as Farkas slowly smiled, eyes glinting. “What, you don’t think you could use it? My brother must not be doing things right.” Vilkas turned to his brother affronted, as Farkas began to laugh, big booming shortles that filled the room as Sigrid stuttered. Leaning over to slap his chest, she began scolding him as Farkas pocketed the sex toy.

Vilkas leaned back, forcing himself to relax as he witnessed the rapport between his brother and his woman being rebuilt. At his expense, perhaps. But still. He smiled again, when Sigrid pushed the bigger man away.

She didn’t smell like fear.

*************

Later, after Athis had performed a retelling of their daring victory against the Dark Brotherhood, the rest of the warriors sang and clapped as Njada Stonearm brought out her fiddle. Vignar, his hands still spry at his age, began an infectious drumbeat in accompaniment. Brill, his face red with drink, whirled around the main hall with Sigrid, who was laughing uproariously and still clutched her bottle of ale as she spun.

“You are good together.” Farkas leaned back, pleasantly full after gorging himself on Tilma’s fine baked potatoes, leeks rubbed in butter and grilled, and his favorite, peppered mammoth roast. “I’m happy for you, brother.”

Vilkas swirled the summer ale in its bottle, focusing his eyes as the room blurred pleasantly in the firelight. “Mmm. It seems we both share a taste for widows.”

Farkas choked suddenly on a roll, looking abruptly at his brother who was grinning at having shocked his twin. “Oh, and you thought I didn’t know where you’d been sneaking off to, all those months.”

“So,” Farkas pounded his chest, managing to inhale an entire sweet roll at once. “You. I mean, what...so, er...”

“I don’t disapprove, Farkas.” Taking a long swig from his ale, Farkas could almost see the stiffness bleed from his brother’s posture. “Mm glad for you. Seems like a good woman. Kind. The bairn is a happy thing, so must be a good mother as well.”

“Yes...” Looking over his brother’s profile, Farkas turned back. Sigrid was now dancing by herself, loosely swaying as her hips rotated to a beat only she heard. Farkas could hear her muttering “...hips
don’t lie, starting to feel you boy…” Athis, Brill and even Vignar seemed entirely focused on her
dance moves. Biting back a chuckle, he leaned closer. “So. About that. You wouldn’t happen to
have an amulet of Mara, would you?”

His grey eyes slowly opened to take in Farkas’s grinning face. “What, do you need one?”

Lifting his feet up and crossing them on a stool, Farkas shook his head, amusement coloring his face.

Vilkas tilted all the way back in the chair, until the feet left the floor. “You’re a nosy bastard. Like
always.”

“Heh, heh.” They continued watching Sigrid dance, up until the moves became positively
scandalous, Brill hooting appreciatively as her hips began grinding into the carved post. Vilkas
stumbled over to her and picked her up, arms waving as she shrieked happily. Something about
barbarians in kills? kilts? Farkas tilted his head to hear better, as his brother carried her off to his
quarters.

Must be an inside joke, then.

Heh. Good for them.
Slipa mitt spjut (Sharpen My Spear)

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: The attire depicted here is the tavern clothing. Here is the concept art. http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/File:Barmaid_Apparel.jpg

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Tell me you’re joking.”

“No, Dragonborn. This is the best way for you to enter the embassy, er, unnoticed and be in and out without causing a fuss.”

Sigrid stared in horror at her reflection in Delphine’s polished bronze mirror. A tightly cinched, laced leather bodice held on what was barely a string bikini of nearly sheer linen, held up by skimpy leather straps that were more decorative than anything. The entire affair flared out into a loincloth-like skirt that was heavily embroidered, leaving her hips and thighs almost completely bare. The look was finished with a gaudy set of dwarven earrings and choker, with tall heeled boots completing the tacky look.

Delphine had even curled the ends of her hair and applied rouge to her lips.

“Tell me you’re fucking joking. I can’t wear this!” Her voice rose to an almost shriek, Delphine wincing as she gestured for Sigrid to lower her voice. “How am I going to hide a sword, much less a dagger, in this?” She gestured to the clothing, feeling the air breeze around her privates with no obstructions in place. Oh. Hell no. No way this was happening.

“Malborn, our inside contact, explicitly stated that there was an opening for an...entertainer, only.” The Breton sighed. “No more musicians, barmaids...Sigrid, I did everything I could to obtain an invitation. Forged or not, they cannot be had. This is the way.” She tapped Sigrid’s hips.

“But they can see everything!” Panicking, Sigrid turned almost in a circle. She still had stretch marks visible underneath the scars on her hips, her breasts while still full had sagged a bit after breastfeeding four boys. Not that Vilkas seemed to mind, but hell she minded. Especially in this bit of nothing top. Princess Leia had worn more than this on her tits!

No. No way was she waltzing around like a bimbo in front of a room filled with Altmer. Delphine couldn’t create a worse environment for Sigrid’s nightmares if she tried.

Oh shit. “Delphine, please tell me there is some way we can smuggle in my armors, potions and weaponry in that embassy.” Sigrid pleaded.

“No, Sigrid, what part of undercover and no contact was not clear?” Delphine threw up her hands, walking away from the distraught Dragonborn. “This is Malborn’s life on the line too. Not just yours! And this information is crucial. I just know they have something to do with the return of the dragons. We don’t know what else the Aldmeri Dominion may be plotting. So no. No weapons. They will search you when you enter, and believe me, they are thorough.”

Delphine and Esbern deserved each other, Sigrid thought viciously. She knew all about ‘thorough’
when it came to the Thalmor. Swotty bastards.

She sighed, popping out a hip and trying a seductive smile in the mirror. Bleugh. It looked as though she was grimacing. Which, to be fair, she was.

Hmm. Damn if her ass didn’t look fine, though.

It was too bad Vilkas was out on one last job with Aela, before the huntress left for Solstheim. She would have liked to see his eyes pop wide as he took this whole...monstrosity in. And maybe steal him away for a bit of roleplay? They had never gotten around to discussing any potential kinks or desires, since whenever they actually found the time to be alone they were far too wound up. What was Vilkas capable of, should they actually reach the point of discussing sex, aside from just doing it?

She grinned. Every cloud has a silver lining.

*************

It was better, and worse than she had expected.

Every Altmer, from the bored guard who stood sentinel and checked her work papers, to the steward who ushered her in the back way of the embassy, had a sour puckered look when they saw Sigrid.

Fully bedecked in her barbarian finery, she had only to remember her sister and the nights she insisted Bryce and Sarah go ‘clubbing’. Memories of too-loud dubstep, watered overpriced drinks and some big guy named Merle grabbing her ass had not endeared her to her sister, who insisted they had had a great time and wanted to return the following weekend.

The Thalmor Embassy was rather like that. But, she amended, with much better drinks. And the music, while loudly and enthusiastically played, was not quite so headache-inducing.

“Hey there, handsome,” She purred, sidling up to a wood elf that could only be Malborn tending the bar. “Oh, hello Helga! Glad you could make it on such short notice. The guests are already arriving.” Pulling her close to him, Malborn leered at her breasts as he spoke quickly into her ear. “Create a distraction. Something. Anything...get one of them alone and beg to be shown the ‘back room’. Just do what you’re here to do, and get out while you can.”

Straightening up, the Bosmer smiled widely. “Two Hammerfell Pounders, aye-up at the bar!”

He nodded to the tired barmaid who took the drinks on her tray, and then pushed Sigrid. “Go now.”

Helga. Calling Malborn every filthy name she could think of mentally, she eased her lips into an inviting smile as she swayed into the room crowded with finely dressed, jaded looking men and women.

There were more, so many more people here than in game. Smiling blankly, Sigrid tried to remember how many had actually attended in game. Twelve? Thirteen, including the guards? She could see what must be Razelan, the drunken Hammerfell rake, over by the barmaids. A calculating beauty of advanced years and ebony hair - Maven Blackbriar? So many wearing the fur cloaks and richly embroidered heavy fabrics of wealth. It was hard to tell who was who.

“So, I gather entertainment has been provided of all sorts this evening.”
Turning to the first man who had addressed her (verbally, she could feel the eyes on her) Sigrid was slightly shocked to realize it was an Altmer. Probably Thalmor, she thought with a concealed shudder, taking in the long black robes and geometric embroidery. His hood was pushed back to reveal a shock of greenish-blonde hair that complemented golden skin and...really, rather a handsome face. Slanted grass green eyes wandered over her lush form with something approaching lust.

“Ondolemar, Justicar to the Thalmor. Stationed in Markarth.” He bowed slightly, eyes fixed on hers. Was that...a blush, staining his yellow cheeks?

She could work with this. Forbidden fruit, and all. And to think she had previously believed all elves found men repellant. Turning to a barmaid, she took two frosted mugs of Cyrodilic brandy and smiled up at the Altmer, intentionally thickening her accent to be as Nordic as possible.

“Helga the Hale. Pleased to meet you, Ondolemar.” Looking around at the pressing crowd, she smiled winningly, fluttering soot-enhanced eyelashes. “Any chance you’d know of a quiet spot, to know each other better?”

The red spots burning high on his cheeks grew even brighter. Clearing his throat, Ondolemar proffered his arm. She took it, silently marveling that this part, at least, had been so easy.

She supposed even the Thalmor had needs. Markarth being what it was, he probably only had his prune-faced guards (one of which was currently staring daggers in Sigrid/Helga’s back) for pleasure.

All too easy.

*******

Unlocking the door to what must be his personal chambers, Ondolemar led her by the hand to one of the most richly furnished rooms Sigrid had seen. A chandelier made not of goats horn or antler, but silver gleamed up above her, candles casting the rich tapestries and bedding in a warm glow. Ondolemar favored reds and purples. Even his chairs were upholstered in jeweled shades, and she marvelled after so many months of earth tones at how bright.... how unexpectedly modern and lavish this all was.

It looked like something out of Tudor Style Magazine, with the high four poster bed, the shelves filled with expensive leather bound volumes and, she noticed with relief, entirely stocked with a variety of potions.

Seating her on one of the cushioned chairs, he took away their empty mugs and turned to pour a carafe of what smelled like spiced wine. Handing her a silver goblet, the Altmer sat across from her. Concealing, she noted with a smug smile, his lap from view with arms bent upon elbows as he sipped his drink.

Well, he hadn’t fallen over dead yet. Deeming the drink he gave her to be safe she took a sip as well, looking around as she took in the oil paintings, the vibrant soul gems that were scattered in elegant groupings along the cupboards.

“So, Helga. Have you...been doing this long?”

Drinking deeply, she thought of what to say. Taking in the tight fisted way he was currently balling up his robe with his hands decided her. “I am one of the best, as a matter of fact.”

His golden adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “Then...?”
At this rate, the dragons would be holding sacrifices for new draugr by the time Ondolemar made a move. “Just lie back and let me do all the work,” Sigrid oozed, aware of his indrawn breath as she pulled down the straps to her top, allowing even more cleavage to peek out.

...Which served her purpose well, as the tiny blade coated in paralysis toxin hid there, capped for safety between her breasts. In and out, she thought. Elenwen’s study was just downstairs, conveniently cleared of guests. She had checked as they ascended the stairs.

She turned to him, preparing her best get-it-on smile, when all of a sudden his lips crashed into hers. Shocked, she stood there like a statue for an entire breath as he moaned into her mouth, seemingly lost. Kicking herself, she tried to show an enthusiastic response, reaching her hands around his (too tall, too thin!) frame and sliding her palms down his shoulders and onto his chest.

*This is the second man besides Vilkas that I have kissed lately who has been, well, a surprise.* Sigrid realized she was actually enjoying herself, his long fingers toying with her hair, lowering the straps as he bent impossibly low, burying his face in her decollatage.

Woof. Was he...was that his tongue?

*You slut. Do your job, then get out of here!* Deciding to take matters into her own hands, Sigrid gathered his robes in her fists and pushed, heaving a flushed and sparkling-eyed Ondolemar onto the bed. Assuming the position of a Playboy Centerfold, she began moaning and caressing her breasts through the sheer veil that covered them, disguising her intent as she slid two fingers into her bodice. Seeking the needle that would send Ondolemar to a deep, if not satisfied, sleep.

The Thalmor mage watched her movements, biting his lips and barely breathing in thrall. It seemed he wouldn’t be content to wait, however, and grasping her hips he pulled Sigrid atop him.

Damn. I almost had the needle, that time.

Pulling her back down to him, Ondolemar leisurely explored her mouth with his tongue, which tasted like spices. Forcing herself to relax atop him, she limply sprawled across his lanky figure.

And whoa. Was that what she thought it was?

Sigrid wondered if she could make him come in his pants, just by rubbing herself against him. It couldn’t hurt, for distractions sake. *So glad Vilkas isn’t here to see the Dragonborn doing her duty.* Easing herself down, she fixed what she hoped was a sultry gaze on his fascinated eyes as she dragged her breasts down his chest, simultaneously arching her hips into his.

The moaned oath that he bit out seemed genuine, and for the tiniest millisecond Sigrid felt sorry for the poor horny bastard. Luckily, for him and her, she had finally palmed the needle. Now, all she had to do was pull off the cap, distract him and then -

- A crackling sound filled the room. Sigrid froze suddenly in fear, and then horror as Ondolemar’s graceful hands lit up with sizzling bolts of electricity. Noting her fear, he smiled warmly. “Shhh, my dear. I realize your people are stunningly ignorant about such things, but we Mer...”

She arched suddenly as his fingers found the cleft of her womanhood, spiking unwanted pleasure, and *no no No no No that’s the last FUCKING STRAW* - meeting his slowly failing smile with a furious squeal, she grabbed the nearest object to hand (which happened to be a Thalmor-made boot) and clobbered Ondolemar in the head with it.

Hurriedly uncapping the needle, she stuck it into his neck and watched in victory as he slowly slumped back in bed, eyes fluttering as he strove to form words.
“Sorry, handsome. But you’re not my type. Never will be, in fact.” Leaning over, as she felt a zap of confidence return with the twitching paralysis of his limbs, she planted a smooch on his high forehead. “Too bad. Seemed like you really needed to get off. I’d go with that female elf guard who was giving me a serious stink eye. Ta!”

Ensuring Ondolemar went nighty-night, with his limbs fully relaxed, she took precautions and tied all four limbs to his bedposts with the silk ropes conveniently stowed beneath the bed (*damn* was she glad she had gotten out in time).

It was the work of a moment to riffle through Elenwen’s desk on the lower level for the key, grabbing what potions and elven daggers she could see with her as a security blanket. It was slightly more difficult to sneak to the basement. She braced herself for the inevitable.

The torture chamber was (*no, don’t think about it*) very well equipped. Pristinely clean, with the leather straps oiled and ready, the tables stacked with sharp hooked implements that gleamed in the torchlight. Scanning warily for any Thalmor, she snuck over to the massive chest that hid behind a tidy desk covered in scrolls and neatly lined up quills and inkpots (*prissy elves*) and found the dossiers. Ulfric Stormcloak. Esbern and Delphine of the Blades.

Even, she gaped at the paper in her hand with incredulity, her own history had been contained here.

_Sigrid Farstrider_

*Known by Agent Sanyon Investigative Officer of the Aldmeri Dominion as Sarah Ferguson.*

*Unknown entity, based out of Falkreath. Associated with unknown dwarven artifacts of potential value and import.*

*Known associates: Valga Vinicia; deceased.*

*Solaf, owner of Grey Pine Goods; alive.*

*Kodlak Whitemane, Harbinger of Companions; deceased.*

*Continue searching for individual; seek and detain. The deaths of four agents are upon her head. Preferably alive, but dissection of her deceased will be forwarded to Ithinriel, who has expressed a desire toward the matter.*

_Yours, Head of Investigative Action, Rulindil_
shared a look with the thief. Oh, they were so screwed.

Because if this part was going to plan, the only bloody way there were going to get out through the basement trap door was to kill the head torturer, Rulindil. Who was currently dragging along Malborn, the panicking Bosmer who was chanting ‘no no no…’ as they hauled him down the steps to where Sigrid and Etienne waited.

*Shit.* This was all going south, fast.

Nothing for it.

*Krii Lun Aus!* She shouted up the stairs.

Seeing the Thu’um impact the soldiers as they wavered, weakened and stunned by Marked For Death, Sigrid hollered at Malborn. “Get the key and get your ass down here, now!”

Fumbling in fear, the Bosmer dodged a glancing blow, taking another in his chin as he lifted the keyring from an astonished Rulindil. Booking it downstairs, Malborn hurriedly threw the keys to Sigrid as she made noises of impatience, unlocking the trap door rapidly and gesturing for them to follow.

Relocking the door from below (something the game never bothered with, but Sigrid was NOT about to be chased down the mountain in this getup) the thief dispatched the troll who came grunting and heaving his way out of an alcove in the rock. Grimacing at the snot bubbling out of its nose as she passed the dead thing curled on the path, Sigrid thanked Etienne and then grabbing Malborn escaped free into the cold and clear sky -

*Freedom.*

Barely. By the skin of her teeth. But free, and (she shivered) containing information that would get Delphine off her back. And hopefully, protect her beloved Companions from any consequence she may have had upon them by simply existing.

“Thanks. Hey, look me up in Riften if you are ever in the area.” Giving her scantily clad body a full perusal, Etienne Rarnis smiled rakishly. Joining Malborn (who had barely given her a glance as immediately ran away) he waved goodbye as he ran off the road with the Bosmer towards what was probably Solitude.

Whew. Sigrid took in deep gulps of the still-cool, summery air. *Over and done with.* She began walking down to the stables, eager to hitch a ride home.

“What the...Sigrid?!?”

*Oh hell.*
Vilkas and Aela spent one tense, awkward week guarding the rich merchant’s goods on the road to Solitude. With little to no conversation beyond what was necessary, it was a silent affair. Vilkas was disapproving. Aela was shamefacedly defiant.

The combination did not lead to much friendly banter.

As they finished seeing the merchant (who Vilkas thought was probably more smuggler than merchant, judging by the cagey looks, hyperawareness and the fact that his storehouse was a cave hidden in the rocky coastline) they wended their way back on the road to Solitude’s stables.

Aela, true to form, was the first to break the silence with a blunt attack. “So, you won’t regret this at all? Giving up the beast blood, the safety of the pack, the strength and years of tradition… just like that?” Moodily, she shook her mane of red hair.

Looking at his shield sister with something approaching sympathy, Vilkas readjusted his sword and said nothing.

“I get it, brother. I do. Sigrid is….” Aela huffed, kicking at a rock stuck in the dirt. “She is good with you. And you are better with her.”

Vilkas blinked at the unexpected compliment. “Thank you.”

“Just tell me this.” Planting her feet firmly in front of him, blocking the path, Aela folded her arms and jutted her jaw stubbornly. “Is she making you give up being Moon born? Or is this something you do just for you? Like Kodlak?”

“Hmmph. Honestly, Aela?” Vilkas slowly replied, taking time to formulate his response. She would never believe him if he simply shot off some fast answer, they knew each other too well. He chewed his lower lip. “I want to know if the anger I feel is truly mine. Not Brother Wolf’s. Somedays, it is all I can do to stay in control of myself, my own rage.”

“Sigrid has helped me see this, but in the end I choose, as Kodlak chose, to join the welcoming throng in Sovngarde. With my own merit,” he added acidly as Aela began to fume. “And not the stolen power granted by Hircine.”

“Do as you will,” he finished with a sigh, as Aela stomped off, intentionally lengthening her stride so that he would be left behind.

Which was just as well. Plodding along the road mired in his own thoughts, he almost didn’t recognize the woman wandering down the road. Her...assets had been displayed to their best effect, luscious hips and breasts visible as she moved in that scrap of a gown. It wasn’t until he looked past the smear of rouge on her lips and the despondent expression that he realized…

“What the... Sigrid?!”

“Oh. OH!” The woman jumped, hands fluttering as she tried to contain her heaving bosom from spilling right out of the skimpy attire. “Vilkas, you... ah. I can explain.”


“Umm. Er, so I told you I was doing something Dragonborn related, right? Um. Yes. Well, you see…”

Her faltering mumbles increased in speed and pitch as Vilkas slowly stomped over to where Sigrid stood, blushing and stammering like a fool. Shor’s bones, he could practically feel the heat of her full
body flush increasing the temperature of the air.


“Er, ah. Yeah....well you see, it turns out that Delphine, that Blade I told you about? Yes. Mmm. Well there were no more invitations to be had, forged or otherwise, so, er...she found me a job as...as an entertainer.”

“And an entertainer, eh.”

“Yes!” She lifted a finger, happy to have finally belabored that point without stammering. His face was carefully neutral, although she could sense him simmering with...something behind his cool glare. “Yes. And so I got in, I managed to get past the main party and into the living quarters where I…”

“And how did you manage that?” Gods, his voice could freeze a Frost Troll.

“Er,” she managed to reply, aware that her makeup was liberally smeared all over her face, that her straps were hanging on by a thread, that Vilkas didn’t believe any of this shit and was waiting for more.

“So….one of the elves was, um, taken with me. I managed to get him alone, distract him and then…”

“Wait. Hold up a minute, woman.” Removing his travel pack to toss it heavily to the ground, Vilkas rubbed his neck as he fixed an incredulous glare upon her. “So, this Delphine sent you into a dangerous private home, filled with Thalmor soldiers, mages and politicians,” he practically spat that last word out. “...and expected you to what? Seduce some poor sod in hopes of gaining access to hidden paperwork. And then somehow drag your sorry ass secretly out of there?”

Sigrid thought about it, then nodded. Her last strap fell completely down, revealing the rosy tops of her nipples. The woman didn’t even notice. “Hmm. Yep. That’s about right. Except,” her golden green eyes turned sly. “I did it all, while saving the asses of a Breton and Bosmer also held captive, with no weapons, potions or armor of any kind.”

His hands began to shake. With what, she didn’t know, but she was slowly backing away.

“You didn’t.”

“Damn right I did.” Oh, Azura, he was losing it. “And even better, Vilkas, I totally knocked the shit out of the Altmer official who was feeling me up. He was so -”

Her words were cut off with a squeal as Vilkas grabbed her, turned her over his knee and immediately began spanking her. Squawking, she did her best to get away from his insistent hand and grim face.

“Ow, ow ow! What the flying...Vilkas! Let - me - go!”

“Not until you start acting like a fucking adult and not a naive child!” He spat out, releasing her as she rubbed her sore ass, giving him a look. Popping out her hip, she stood arms folded tightly. Prepared, he realized with sudden amusement, to completely and totally lay into him for his behavior of her.

“No.”
“I didn’t even…” she began, color rushing into her cheeks as her eyes glinted dangerously.

“NO.”

“I made it out just fine, you sadistic bastard, don’t give me that overprotective shit now…”

“Not now. And just so you know, woman…” He stopped her in her tracks with an outstretched hand. His finger flicked a shoulder strap back up. Nope. Nipples, still there, pebbling in the cool air of early summer.

Damn. He couldn’t be angry at her when she was naked.

“...I fully blame your friend Delphine for sending you unarmed into such a shit-storm.” Straightening the other strap, Vilkas pulled up the top cups so that her breasts were completely covered. Looking down, she blushed again, her freckles disappearing as she tried, unsuccessfully, to remain angry after his declaration.

“Well, yeah. It was not ideal at all. But…”

“No. No more words.” Grabbing her hand, Vilkas picked up his travel bags and began walking away. Sighing in irritation, she followed the Companion as she shook her head. Some days, it just wasn’t worth it.

“So, where is Aela?” She asked after what felt like an hour of walking silently through the green forested path. Birds chirped, bees hummed. All was peacefully idyllic, were it not for her spanked ass paining her every single step.

Asshole.

“She went off ahead.”

“...Let me guess. Something you said?” Sigrid retorted, still holding his hand. Which was nice, and she was frankly shocked he was allowing it with the conversation they’d just had.

“Yes.”

“Wow. So, what did you do? Insult her choice of furs? Imply she has no business fighting without a man beside her? Did you bend her over your knee and spank her ass, too?”

“I told her I was choosing to become pure from the beast blood. Partly, because of your influence.”

Oh damn. She winced, feeling a bit like the proverbial foot-in-mouth (where did that expression come from?) idiot.

“Oh. Well. I guess she didn’t take that very well.”

Vilkas shot her an amused look. “Not at all.” Stopping beneath the shade of a spreading pine tree, he tilted his head to look at Sigrid. “But you know,” he finished thoughtfully, slowly pulling her against him. “I don’t really care.”

His kiss blew Ondolemar’s all the way out to sea. Electric fingers notwithstanding. He crushed her to him, his hands riding up the bit-of-nothing skirt to cup and soothe her spanked ass, stroking higher, one hand going north to trace her tightening nipple as she moaned into his hot mouth.

Breaking away from her, he made a face. “Spiced wine. And...is that elf?”
Smiling shakily, she couldn’t help the shiver that went through her. “I really hit him quite hard, you know. Even with the paralysis potion that I stabbed him with. The man seemed desperate.”

Vilkas chuckled darkly. “I guess I’ll have to get rid of the taste, somehow.”

She gasped helplessly as he kneaded the sore muscles of her rear. His huge hands completely dwarfed her ass cheeks, rubbing in smooth, practiced motions. "So, ah, what do you think about the outfit." He could give her shit about how breathy her voice was later. She needed to hear this.

"You know I prefer you with nothing on at all." His breath caught roughly as she rubbed herself against him, the linen cups doing nothing to conceal the form of her breasts. "But I suppose this is something I could get used to." Bitting her shoulder, he ripped a strap completely off. "But only if you enjoy wearing it."

Sigrid felt completely limp, yet warm in his arms. "Mmm. I could get used to it." Grasping his jaw, she pressed a hard kiss against his lips and then looked at him straight in the eyes. "Don't go home with Aela. She's going to be a pain in the ass anyway. Come with me."

"I was planning to." He laughed, with her smiling at the joke as he slowly pushed her against the rough bark of the tree.

Entwined in each others arms, they didn’t make it to the stables where Aela waited impatiently until sunset.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Ondolemar. I would LOVE to see some intrepid soul write a kink-meme where he loves human women, but is totally ashamed of his desires. Since a superiorly bred mer would NEVER touch a dirty human.

Gotta say, I totally dig the Diplomatic Immunity quest. It's really one of the only chances to see the Altmer in any sort of group outside of the Mage's College. Plus, the witty and awesome dialogue of that quest...man. I replayed it so many times figuring out all the wacky ways to cause a distraction.

Hee.
Su’um Ahrk Morah (Breath and Focus)

“Yol.”

“In your tongue, the word simply means “fire.” It is change given form, power at its most primal.”

Sigrid sat cross legged in the snow, warmed by her meditations on the Word of Power.

Fascinated, she watched as Paarthurnax stretched an ancient dew-claw to scratch an offending scale on his back. He perched upon the wrecked remnant of the World Wall, his long scaly tail wrapped around the base, a lovers embrace. The dragon’s deep voice thrummed through her, even at this distance. “That is the true meaning of Yol ... suleyk, power. You have it, as do all Dov. But,” the old beast rumbled, fixing his dull eye upon Sigrid. “…power is inert without action and choice. Think of this as the fire builds in your su’um, in your breath. Su’um ahrk morah. What will you burn? What will you spare?”

Sigrid took a deep breath. And felt fire, power, coalescing at the base of her throat, seeking to spill out, to dominate and destroy.

Su’um ahrk morah. Breath and focus.

“Thank you for the lessons, Master.” Struggling to stand on wobbling knees, she stretched, savoring the icy air, the cold purity of the Throat of the World.

It was well into summer down in the valley tundra. Spring planting was well underway, with early harvests of snap peas, carrots and spring wheat already bartered in the markets. Sheep and goats were sheared, and Tilma had decided to teach Sigrid to card wool, to dye, to weave on a loom. She was eager to learn; anxious to create things of beauty with her hands.

Aside from her weekly, sometimes nightly, moments stolen with Vilkas she felt as though she created nothing of worth. With him, as fire not of her own making burned its way through her body, she felt alive. Felt human, still, very human and fragile and his. She loved creating passion with him, in him.

It seemed that her body had been created for destruction, if Sigrid only focused on her recent battles. Thrilling and terrible, as the dovah who swept in all over the land consumed crops, people and entire towns with their Thu’um, their dagger tipped maws. Sigrid had returned home from Solitude with Vilkas (bidding Aela a half-hearted farewell) when the news came pouring in.

Dragons. Rumours of dragons. Refugees came hobbling into Whiterun, bandaged and burned, faces blank with pain as they held screaming orphans. Often they had nothing but what they had upon them, at the time they fled.

Whiterun opened its arms to them. Poor and rich, old and young. There was some grumbling, particularly among the Battle-Borns who decried the cost of feeding so many for so little, but they were overwhelmed by the other voices of the people.

It was spring. The grass grew green and thick, crops flourished. And Whiterun’s own Dragonborn, Sigrid Farstrider, strode out of the gates every day. Hunting the dovah that flocked to kill, to feed.

Killing her own kind, she thought with a hint of acid. You’d think she was some kind of hero, the way the townsfolk went on about her exploits. Not even the other Companions, who had been running around doing shit far longer, rarely got the accolades Sigrid received when she walked,
exhausted, into a town or village.

*Dragonborn. Yes, I've heard. Kills dovah by the hundreds. And if she were here, she'd consume the dragons with fireballs from her eyes, and bolts of lightning from her arse.*

Heavily edited. But the jist of it was the same.

Thing was, she wasn’t sure the villagers would love her quite so much, were they aware of the fire that burned in her heart. No longer a peaceful hearthborn flame, content to keep home warm and safe, no, her heart throbbed with the ravening of a wildfire consuming a forest.

Consumed. She swallowed. With every soul, the dreams of flying, of falling, devouring, became worse. Sigrid woke up Vilkas almost every night, crying as she pressed herself tightly into his arms. She’d never tell him, but the nights she flew, free and strong….

She killed what she was. She was what she hated.

“Paarthurnax,” she broke out suddenly, aware that her voice was unsure. Trembling. Unbefitting of a dovah. Paarthurnax bent his immense neck closer, the better to hear.

Weak, wavering. She spoke anyway. “I seek to protect the people I love. How do I...avoid becoming the very thing I hate?” Looking down at her boots in the snow, she shifted in shame. “I fear this the most. How do you do it? Live with this...burning, inside? And not hurt those who...who don’t deserve it?”

Paarthurnax tilted his head, his hot breath misting the icy air into steam. "I have overcome my nature only through meditation and long study of the Way of the Voice." His deep throaty rumble held a tint of derision. "Dov wahlaan fah rel. We were made to dominate. The will to power is in our blood. You feel it in yourself, do you not? This is what you speak of?"

Sigrid nodded, a sudden wind whipping her hair into a tangled snarl as she looked into the ancient dragon’s dark eyes.

“How? How do you withstand it...knowing,” she coughed, grimacing as a thunderclap of sound erupted upon the mountain. "Knowing that every day is going to be a struggle, a fight that will never end? I am...so tired.” She hung her head.

"No day goes by where I am not tempted to return to my inborn nature. Zin krif horvut se suleyk." The ground trembled where Paarthurnax landed, his massive jaw opening and closing with his breath, mere feet away from Sigrid’s face. She sighed back, enjoying the rush of heat, the fire of Yol, emanating from him.

It was as if she knew what he was going to say, felt in her bones the rightness as he spoke. "What is better - to be born good, or to overcome your evil nature through great effort?" The dovah’s claws shifted as they gripped the snow packed ground. “You will see, joore, see as the dovah do. Drem, patience. And practice. Return to me with further questions on your travels, wunduniik. Su’um arkh morah.”

“Su’um arkh morah!” She called out in return, as Paarthurnax took flight. Wheeling around the summit, he roared his farewell, dipping as he took off for the north.

Drem. Patience.
Damn. She shifted, sorely desiring wings at that moment; if only to avoid the inevitable climb back down the seven thousand steps of the mountain.

Zofaas suleyk. Dreadful power, indeed. So many souls she now had crowding within her, fighting for control. And her with only one human soul to fight alone. With a curl of her lip, she felt strangely conflicted about her sympathy towards the werewolves, her friends in the Circle.

Was it like this? This awful desire, unnatural (at least, it used to be. She couldn’t remember a time before she knew what blood felt like. Smelled like. It scared her) in its strength.

But they had only one soul, one wolf to contend with.

What would the Dragonborn do? She had taken, no, claimed the lives of sixteen dovah, dragons in the last couple of months. Not to mention the alien energy that the Greybeards had visited upon her. The rash of burnings, of dragon attacks had pushed back the Companion’s plans to visit the Tomb of Ysgramor. It had delayed her meetings with Septimus Signus far, so far up north.

She had good intentions. It was on her list, yellowed and faded, hardly looked at anymore.

If only she could endure.

Zin krif horvut se suleyk.

Honor is fighting the lure of power.
Var Hjärtat Leder (Where the Heart Leads)

Chapter Notes

My inspiration for some of the traditions of the festival came from this website. That said, this IS fantasy. I stand by my right to make up anything and everything not explicitly obvious in the Elder Scrolls universe.

https://sweden.se/culture-traditions/midsummer/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the Midsummer Festival, a celebration of the longer days and shorter nights that heralded true summer. Greenery adorned every doorway, looped around lampposts and hearths. Fresh wildflowers, in a rainbow of colors and designs, were worn by men and women alike as the hum of excitement rose slowly over the morning. Food stalls were set up, the traditional herring and cold ales placed next to braided bread, fresh berries, clotted cream and the first cheese of the season.

It was, Sigrid thought with genuine joy, almost better than Christmas. Which she found out actually existed here, after a fashion. Her last Midwinter had been spent away from civilization, freezing and starved, walking in ill fitting snowshoes to the Glenmoril Coven cave. Though Farkas informed her, when asked, that the Dark Day was often just as eagerly anticipated. The day with almost no sunlight, when the world lay silent and sleeping beneath a blanket of snow...all the villagers drank spiced mead, sang the traditional songs and even exchanged kisses beneath wreaths of snowberries and pine. Almost like mistletoe, but with offerings to Shor and Kyne instead of the Christ Child. She was looking forward to it already.

But this...this was an effusive, colorful dance of sunshine and spring. Ribbons adorned the hair of girls and young women, and men vied with one another in fistfights and tug-of-war, preparing for the games of strength. Please, please let the Nords have something like kilts, Sigrid thought with an inward snicker. Then her life would be complete. It would be official - she was living in a romantic fantasy. With a dark, cruel slant, she reminded herself, as she packed away the dragon scales and bones she had harvested from her last kill.

Adrianne Avenicci had offered her best customer a personal storage chest at Warmaidens for lugging home ingots, hides, and other supplies. Sigrid made constant use of it, considering how often she hauled in random odds and ends of gear from her travels. Having trained on and off with Eorlund in the art of smithing over the last few months, she felt nervous but prepared enough to attempt to craft her very own suit of dragonscale armor. It would be a bold statement to Alduin, she knew, that the Dragonborn herself wore the skins of his soldiers against him.

Noting the activity and waves of greeting, she pondered the changes in Whiterun as she walked up to the Wind District. As time passed, Sigrid could not remember the details of the Bethesda game quite as well...nor did the old luxuries of life in a modern world have the same nostalgia as they once did. Taking in a deep lungful of fresh air, misted with the fragrance of blooms, fresh grass and festival foods, it was hard to imagine that she once missed the smell of exhaust from an automobile. Seeing the golden roofs, the doorways with their twined, almost celtic loops and stylized animals, Sigrid sighed in contentment as she basked in the feeling of being home.

Even Jorrvaskr had been done up for the occasion, she realized as she opened the doors and walked
towards the breakfast that had been prepared. Winding strands of spruce, dragons tongue and tundra cotton lightened the rich ambiance of the warrior hall, the furs and shields almost hidden by sprays of wildflower and the trestle tables of meat pies Tilma had stayed up nearly all night to bake.

“Sigrid! You’re awake! Here!” Lucia squealed, presenting her with a wildflower wreath wound in trailing ribbons. Smiling fondly, the Dragonborn leaned over so the girl could place it on her head. “There! Now, it’s time for salt porridge!” Grabbing her hand, Lucia dragged Sigrid over to the table, where Farkas, Vilkas, and Athis sat along with Njada and the other newcomers to the Companions.

Farkas had been chosen as this year’s Green Man, a symbolic figure of fertility and life. Bemused, she watched him scratch at the elaborate crown of green leaves that had been woven into his hair, threaded into the homespun green tunic and pants. None of them wore warpaint today, but someone had stippled green paint in a pattern upon Farkas’ face, like light dappling a forest floor. “And a good Midsummers morn to you, sister!” Farkas waved, attempting to reach for another jazbay crostata without losing any more leaves from his attire.

“So, why salt porridge?” Sigrid asked as she sat down next to Athis and Vilkas. Vilkas winked at her, and she slowly smiled in return as she realized they matched. Both wore their nicest casual wear, which somehow happened to be the pale sky blue of a cloudless day. Sigrid tugged at her dress, which bore the careful, almost lacy white embroidery Tilma had insisted Sigrid have as Harbinger. It was, possibly, the nicest dress she had ever owned; aside from her old wedding gown. Her roughened palms scraped and caught on the soft linen as she smoothed her skirt, and Vilkas (who never paused in his eating, the twins treated meals almost as seriously as training) pulled her hand away from her lap and squeezed it twice.

“You don’t know?” Lucia jumped up on her chair and began spooning porridge from the heated cauldron into two bowls. “Tilma says that Midsummer is special. Girls have to eat salt porridge, so that they’ll be thirsty. And when they sleep at night, on pillows that have seven different flowers hidden beneath, they’ll dream of their future husbands giving them something to drink. It’s like magic!”

Sigrid slowly flushed red as her man gave her a particularly lascivious look. Something to drink, huh. Shifting in her chair, aware of Athis laughing at her reaction, Sigrid tried very hard not to remember the last time she had swallowed something Vilkas had given her.

Not that he had offered marriage, or anything like that. She had caught him staring at her amulet of Arkay sometimes, eyes narrowed at the wedding rings that still hung at her neck. Looking at them herself no longer gave her such a pang of longing, the memories of Bryce more bittersweet now than an actual source of pain. It was something that did not come up naturally in conversation between them.

Coughing as she took a bite of the almost-overly salted gruel, Sigrid reached for a horn of chilled ale. “Well, if it’s tradition, then. What do boys do?”

Lucia scoffed, making a face as she swallowed a bit of porridge. “Stupid stuff, like wrestling and axe throwing. They just show off for the girls.” Drinking an entire horn of weak ale, Lucia wiped her mouth. “Will you dance with me in the circle festival? I don’t always remember the steps, but if I’m with you then I won’t feel so bad.”

Sigrid laughed. “Well, that sounds fine. I can promise you I won’t remember the right steps either. We’ll learn together.”

“Yay!” Porridge forgotten after a single bite, Lucia hugged Sigrid tightly, then ran outside, shouting at the other children milling in the square to wait up.
Farkas groaned in satisfaction, having demolished three rashers of pork, two bowls of porridge, an entire bottle of ale and countless jazbay crostatas. “Well, I guess that will hold me ‘till noon. Time to go to festival!”

Njada Stonearm gave an aggrieved snort and looked away as Farkas stood to leave, grabbing the great branches cut that morning to simulate the Spriggan-like Green Man. She had been caught and forced into wearing a flower crown by Athis, who complained that if he, a Dunmer, could wear one, then a true Nord must.

Sigrid laced her fingers into her lover’s hand, as they both shared a look as the two trainers argued. It was all but official. The strangest pairing she had ever seen, and yet Athis and Njada were matched in grumpiness, if not by mutual displays of overt affection. She snickered as Athis plucked a posy from his crown and dramatically bowed as he presented it to a scowling Njada. “Let’s just get this over with!”

“As you wish.” Unruffled, the Dunmer almost pushed the Stonearm outside into the sun. Trailing behind her Shield siblings, Sigrid was in no hurry as she followed them into the bustling din of noise; noise composed of sellers hawking their wares, bards strumming lutes and belting out their songs (the Age of Aggression was, thankfully not being played today) and the chattering gossip of hundreds of people.

She blinked against the bright sunlight as Jarl Balgruuf began the festival by offering the Green Man and Lady Kyne a symbolic tribute, the massive flaring branches of the Gildergreen framing the spectacle.

Looking even larger as he dragged around handfuls of leafy boughs, Farkas bowed, accepting the tribute of fine wine and a lit lantern. Carlotta stood next to him in a ceremonial gown of green embroidered in gold, smiling beneath her crown of yellow wildflowers as the Jarl presented her a staff of ashwood and a large goblet. Pouring the wine into the goblet, Farkas grasped the cup, his hand over Carlotta’s as they both intoned the words.

“With fire, wine and wood blessed three, let summer come. So mote it be!”

The crowd cried out in response, clapping and cheering as they took turns drinking from the goblet, offering the last to the Jarl, who poured the remainder upon the Gildergreen tree. Jostled by the surrounding spectators, Sigrid let herself forget, forget the burn of dragonfire. She allowed herself to relax as she put her responsibilities from her mind and enjoyed the day.

Hand in hand, Sigrid sampled ales, cheeses and fruit, arguing with Vilkas over which ones were superior. He preferred snowberry, she would only eat jazbay. After belaboring the quality of the soft goat cheese over the peppered eidar, Vilkas threw up his hands and dragged her, laughing into the revolving chain of dancers.

Kicking and stomping, she spun like a dervish, surrounded by smiles as the circles of entwined men and women expanded and shrank, snaking around the market in a wild race. Occasionally, she could feel Vilkas, feel the heat of his hands as he pulled her from the chain and twirled her around with the other couples. She could see Tilma waving at her pie stand, Lucia screaming with joy as Lars Battleborn chased her down the street. Faces she knew popped up in a merry blur; Njada accidentally stomping on her foot, sour face red as Athis pulled her away chortling as they vanished into the crowd.

The dancing dispersed occasionally, always returning as some damn bard strummed his lute in melodies familiar only to the Nords of Whiterun. Between dances, she sat with cups of ale and wine, cheering as the men performed feats of strength. Competing for the favor of women, she remembered
Lucia say, and she tried not to grin too broadly as the day went on to include axe throwing, tug of war, and something that involved a hay bale being thrown high with a pitchfork.

Farkas, the leaves almost gone from his garb as they shedded with every step, lifted Carlotta and Mila in a wooden chair high over his head, face red with effort as he walked slowly around the square, lowering them to the ground to thunderous applause. She gave him a kiss for his efforts, happy face stained with green paint as he rubbed his cheek playfully against hers.

As the morning became afternoon, people began to take seats around the stalls, bathing their tired feet in the streams. Jarl Balgruuf, looking far more relaxed than usual with sprigs of snowberry in his crown, called upon various bards and storytellers to entertain. Snuggled against Vilkas, his arm tight around her, Sigrid sipped ale and listened as ballads wound on, songs of Ysgramor, skalds who drummed to wild chants that made her feet tap in time. Her face began to hurt from smiling after the children put on a skit about the Dragonborn; with a fiercely scowling Lucia painted in blood, pointing a wooden sword at the cowering kids costumed as dragons surrounding, lashing at her with tails made from branches. She felt Vilkas rumble with laughter as Lucia mimicked the Thu’um, figures scattering dramatically as she stomped around shouting to a riotous encore.

“Looks like you’ve got competition!” Farkas roared at Sigrid above the noise of the crowd. She rolled her eyes in response, laughing anyway as Farkas stole his brother away to prepare for their ‘turn’. Vilkas just smiled when Sigrid asked him what he was up to.

She soon forgot what had piqued her interest when Athis and Njada appeared, encouraged with hearty slaps to their backs and mugs raised as they walked into the center of the cleared market square.

Picking up her shield, Njada raised it as the skalds began drumming a steady, rolling beat. Athis also raised his twin daggers, the two walking in a grand circle as they encouraged the crowd to cheer, working them up to a furious wave of sound.

As the drumming ceased, the bards chimed in with a guttural ‘hah’ and began a sonorous, almost toneless chant, accompanied again by a more militant drumbeat. Athis began weaving his blades in spirals and circular patterns, the steel flashing as it caught the sun. Njada shadowed him, in sync with the rhythms as she dipped and spun her shield in arcing blows against some unseen foe.

Together, they held the audience spellbound as the drumming only increased in tempo. Sigrid felt someone sit down next to her on the grass, and found Carlotta Valentina, who smiled and offered her a fresh bottle of wine. Nudging her in return, Sigrid took a drink and turned back to the warriors.

Athis and Njada continued their shadow battle, occasionally meeting against one another as the voices rose in guttural shouts. A wave of whispering slowly spread across the seated crowd when to her amazement Farkas and Vilkas approached the clearing, holding their massive warswords. Shirtless. In what looked like silvery-grey wolf furs belted around their waists, with ornate wolfshead buckled belts of leather.

They were wearing kilts.

Suddenly feeling lightheaded, Sigrid leaned against Carlotta in a mock faint, as the Imperial laughed quietly, hugging her around the shoulders. “Just wait,” Carlotta mouthed against the swelling roar that greeted the brothers as they saluted Athis and Njada.

“Blessed Shor, Lady Kyne,” Njada Stonearm intoned, sweat beading upon her brow against the wreath she wore still. The drumming increased to a fevered pitch. “Ysgramor, hear me, thee and thy Five Hundred Companions. We sing the songs, we tell the tales!”
“And here we stand before your judgement! Sovngarde, hearken now!”

Athis joined her in a long wailing cry, leaping aside as Farkas and Vilkas blurred into sudden movement.

Sigrid watched in fascination as the crowd began stomping their feet in time with the drums, the two men squaring off with Athis and Njada standing guard on each corner. They were well matched as the double handed broadswords spun lazily in memorized forms, feet stepping precisely as blade met blade in a dance of death. Farkas stood at least a head above his brother, with biceps trunk-thick as he roared in challenge, all the while battering his sword against his twin. Vilkas, she noticed, was far more aggressive, keeping Farkas on the defensive with skillful lunges and swipes as he snarled back invectives, to the hooting approval of the audience.

Already aware of the impressive stamina needed to continue fighting for such a stretch, Sigrid was seriously impressed that they managed to hurl insults at each other while showing off, the culmination of years of practice.

“They do a demonstration every year in honor of the Companions,” Carlotta whispered in her ear. “And every year it gets better. Once, when they were barely men Farkas dropped his sword by accident, hitting Vilkas, and they ended up wrestling in the mud in front of everyone! Kodlak had to pull them apart!”

Sigrid chuckled, eyes still focused on the Companions and their show. “I would pay a good amount of septims to see that.”

The two women giggled as the twins locked swords, bare chests heaving as they finished with a blood curdling war cry, echoed by the skalds as they beat a final blow to the drums.

The crowd cheered, hammering the ground with their feet as they clapped the Companions on their backs, pressing bottles of mead and wine into their hands as they nodded, taking it all in stride.

Vilkas flopped down in the empty space next to Sigrid. “Look at you; you’re filthy.” Sigrid murmured, trailing fingers along the sweat of his back as she traced his tree tattoo. “Can’t talk, need food,” gasped Farkas, who immediately started ripping into the roasted goat leg Carlotta offered him. Rolling over, Vilkas began wiping his sweaty forehead onto Sigrid’s dress. Trying unsuccessfully to get out from beneath him, she fought off laughter. “Ack, no! No, this is my only good dress, damn you, get off!”

She could barely see the corner of his mouth in a grin as he buried his face in her lap, hands holding tightly to her thighs as she huffed and attempted to push him away.

“Farkas.” Carlotta signaled. Leaning over, Farkas used his free hand to shove Sigrid over onto the grass, then continued eating with fervor.

“That’s not what I meant!” The Imperial scolded as Sigrid giggled. Rising over her, holding the bulk of his weight away Vilkas placed a whisper of a kiss on her belly, then rolled to join her flat on his back in the grass.

The light was fading, glowing in the west as torches were slowly lit across the districts of Whiterun. Shaking her head no when Farkas and Carlotta gestured to the circle of dancers swirling wildly around the newly stacked bonfires, Sigrid waved the couple off as she lay back against the soft, newly grown grass with a sigh. Vilkas opened a bottle of wine, and they took turns sipping from it, talking quietly as the sky grew slowly dimmer, fading into blackness. Pinpoints of stars gradually
appeared, sprinkling the sky in a haze of light as Masser and Secunda rose vibrant and full.

Cradled in the crook of his arm as they lay there, completely relaxed, Sigrid yawned. She didn’t even mind that her face was inches away from his armpit. Her time in Skyrim had almost made her immune to the smell of sweat and body odor, but even so, Vilkas smelled almost more like musk. She sniffed. Musk, pine, and something else. The product of living life as a werewolf, she supposed.

“Are you smelling me?” His drowsy voice drifted in the air as she snuggled even closer.

“Yes. You smell good. Even after...whatever that was you and Farkas did.”

“It’s a tradition that dates back hundreds of years, woman.”

“Too flashy.” Adjusting her neck so that her hair lay more comfortably against his arm, she placed a single finger upon his stomach and slowly drew circles. She felt his muscles jerk as her finger wound slowly lower. “Honestly, I’m surprised you even managed to hit each other with such pretty swordwork.”

“There are other things I could show you, with my sword.” Grasping her hand as it made a dive under his furs, he held it prisoner as she struggled playfully, snickering as an old couple walked past them on the street, sniffing in disapproval.

“Hmm. I think that salt porridge thing really worked. I am parched.”

She felt him suddenly grow still beside her. “I’m not asking for anything.” She quietly spoke, removing her hand from his as he let go. Sigrid could almost feel the air leave his chest as he sighed.

“You should.”

Tightness easing from her neck, she looked over in surprise. “What?”

In the light of the stars, she could see him swallow, throat moving as his lips parted. “Why, woman.”

He turned to face her, still lying on the grass with her dress rucked up around her knees. “Why don’t you want more?”

His eyes shone eerily in Secunda’s light. Werewolf, remember, her mind supplied as she shivered, not from cold. “I...honestly wasn’t sure this would ever come up.” She slowly spoke, thinking of the gossip she had heard. As Sigrid had become more well-known to the populace of Whiterun, she heard snatches of conversation that abruptly ended when it was apparent she was listening. She found herself receiving hostile stares from women at market, once even being shoved as she was carrying supplies from Warmaiden to the Skyforge. Carlotta had taken her aside and explained quietly that all the Companions had quite the reputation for being eager bedmates. Particularly Vilkas.

It honestly had never come up between them. She had never felt insecure before the niggling doubts placed by those sideways glances began to affect her. Never noticed him ‘looking’ at anyone else.

She turned to face him as well, forcing herself to look, really look at the expression of his features, what his eyes were saying, rather than the moon reflecting back in them. Moon called. “Vilkas, what do you want from me?”

Something in him shuddered, and he turned away. Sigrid felt a knot tighten in her heart as he pulled away from her. No no no... and then suddenly her mind went blank as he took her hands and carefully placed something in them.
Slowly opening her fingers, she stared at an Amulet of Mara. Lifting her eyes to his, she was sure her confusion was obvious.

“I...I know what this is, now.”

His silvery eyes burned, holding hers captive. “Do you, Sigrid?”

She swallowed, her throat suddenly so dry. “Then...ask me.”

Slowly, carefully he crept closer to her as she lay immobile, stars the only witness to the feeling that spiralled, flaring white hot as he placed his hand over hers.

“Marry me, woman.” He placed his forehead against hers, as her eyes fluttered, then closed as he breathed in her scent. “Be mine, in every way.”

She felt his other hand creep down to rest upon her stomach. “Bear my children.”

Her breath left her as he placed his mouth close to hers, barely touching. She could feel his lips move as he spoke against her, quietly. “Say you will.”

Oh, this was...it was too much. Her chest ached with the sweetness, the fire-hot feeling so entwined in grief and want and love that -

“Yes. Yes, I want to, I will…”

He cut her off with a heated gasp, his mouth branding hers as every nerve lit up at the feeling of his hands holding her tight against him, winding into her hair as his lips moved, slanting against her mouth with everything he couldn’t say.

They lay there like that, slowly kissing, heedless of the dancers and singers that still surrounded them as if some huge distance engulfed the two, as if they were completely alone.

When the drums finally ceased, the bards singing soulfully as festival goers slowly trickled back into their homes, Vilkas bit her lip gently between his teeth and helped her up off the grass.

She felt dizzy, weightless as though her heart was somewhere high in the night sky instead of beating in her chest.

“Here,” he brushed grass from her back, the other hand squeezing hers before he let go. “Let me find you something to drink. Then, we’ll head home.”

Smiling in response as he sauntered off to one of the remaining vendors, she stretched languorously, reaching for the sky, for that feeling of soaring that had somehow given wings to her heart.

“Hm-hm-hmm, oh-ho, how sweet! Romantic overtures in the dark! Here, let Cicero try!”

 Couldn’t move. No movement. Could not make a single sound, her tongue thick and unresponsive, as the needle prick in her neck burned like a sting. She smelled something rotten, like mold or graverot, as gloved hands manhandled Sigrid away, away from the lights of the market, far away from Vilkas who stood so unaware as he bought their drinks. Oblivious to her silent cry, her tongue, her Thu’um silenced by the poison stealing so coldly through her veins.

“Ooh, yes! Madness is merry, and merriment's might, when the jester comes calling with his knife in the night...”

The night was so cold as a veil draped over her vision, as Cicero dragged her, giggling and
wheezing, away. She felt drool pooling in the corner of her mouth, dripping in jerks as Cicero heaved her into a wagon. As the pressing weight of the toxin slowly, inexorably closed her eyes she felt something drop. Felt it fall, the only sign she could leave.

A cold wind blew across the tundra, as the jester clucked at the horse, snapping the reins as the wagon began to move its still burden.

Fallen from her pocket, the amulet of Mara lay in the upturned earth of the stables.

Waiting to be found.

Chapter End Notes

Don't hate me...*dodges rotten fruit*
Standing before the stove as she flipped a perfectly browned pancake over onto its bubbling side, Sarah yawned and rubbed her eyes. Staying up late playing the most immersive, addictive game ever had taken its toll. And Bryce was going to give her hell for it, she just knew. Though he had unenthusiastically played up to sixty hours of Skyrim with a Breton thieves guild avatar, it wasn’t his passion nearly as much as, say, Forza Horizon.

“I mean it! You’re going to be late for school!” God, where was the coffee? Leaning over to open the cupboard, Sarah released a caffeine-deprived growl when she realized they were out. Again. Not a coffee bean in sight.

“Bryce! Why didn’t you save me any? Bryce?!?”

No one was answering her, but she heard the chairs being pulled out roughly, and rustling sounds. The smacking of lips as something was chewed, dammit Bryce, she told him not to give the kids their gummy vitamins before breakfast. That, or they had snuck food before breakfast...a cardinal sin, in her book.

Yep. Someone was snuffling, breathing heavily. Tossing the hair out of her eyes as she poured maple syrup, Sarah sighed. It was probably Sean. That kid got sick so frequently that she was seriously considering homeschooling him, just so he would be able to catch up to his classmates.

More chewing, gargling noises. Those kids. She swore, if she didn’t remind them (kindly, gently, DAMMIT stop talking with your mouth open, god she had to work on her love language) they would act like savages everywhere. Just the other day she had pulled Robbie out of the park, bright red in embarrassment as he pulled up his pants. He had, she remembered with exasperated mirth, pooped on the park lawn in full view of all the other moms and their kids, who were pointing fingers and shrieking as he wiggled his little butt in pride.

Huffing, Sarah took deep breaths as she piled the stacks of pancakes layered in butter and syrup on a large serving plate. Easing her hand beneath the plate, she grabbed the orange juice pitcher with the other hand. “Ready or not, here’s breakfast, so -”

The glass pitcher shattered, dropped from nerveless fingers.
The chewing sounds continued as Sarah looked on in horror. The kids were seated neatly at the old farmhouse table. Plates, forks, napkins were tossed askew as their bodies bent fully over the blank, staring body of Bryce.

Wet pops and cracks reached her ears as Terence turned to her, his dark brown eyes bloodshot as he slurped and swallowed a length of glistening intestine. Fuzzed mold, white and greenish, carpeted his skin, still smooth for a preteen. Clumps of hair had fallen off, and she could see the outline of teeth moving behind thinned, dried lips as he crunched and chewed.

Peter had his face fully immersed in the open cavity that had been Bryce’s stomach, wet crackling sounds, as the little boy lifted his partially decayed, skeletal arm and lifted a wet chunk of liver, bitten neatly with little circular tooth marks, out to Sarah. Frozen in horror, she saw him blink slowly, one eyeball shriveled like a dry grape as her four year old held out his grisly feast.

“Mom, we saved you some.”

Bryce lifted his head from the table to look at her. What was left of the flesh on his face was clay grey, blackened with rot as shockingly white bone flashed at his chin, his brow. His nose was completely concave and sunken in, the dried stick of his tongue wagging in his open jaws as he spoke.

"Sorry I drank all the coffee, Sarah. But I did feed the kids breakfast.”

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Normally, she rather enjoyed speaking to her victims.

Oh, they sobbed and begged, pleading for her to have mercy. Have mercy little girl, you don’t want to do this, I have a family.

Always the same repetitive song.

But with this one, Babette mused as she ground powdered mammoth tusk and nightshade with mortar and pestle, she would have to be more careful. Well, more than usual.

One did not live for three centuries in the guise of a ten year old girl without clever preparation. And it was, she wrinkled her nose as her fangs itched, simply incredible that the one who hung, dead to the world in the torture chamber, had such explicit knowledge of the sanctuary. The old sanctuary, she amended to herself, long since burnt and gone. This, this frozen abandoned crypt, was home now. Home for her, for Cicero, for the Night Mother.

And, she smiled in triumph as the substance in the mortar coagulated into a fine sandy salve with one last press, it would be the final resting place of the two prisoners.

Tapping out a careful portion of her mixture, she poured it carefully into the bubbling beaker that was suspended over steady flame.

A Dragonborn would be a unique challenge to interrogate. Wisp wrappings for silence, nightshade to deaden and numb the throat. Powdered mammoth tusk to bind. Babette was a master, having spent thousands of nights studying, mixing, measuring her deadly brews. As long as the jester was kept at bay, she could keep the Dragonborn prisoner for as long as she liked. And ask questions, without
fearing the effects of the Thu’um, the unknown factor that had the vampire girl tense with delicious expectation.

She couldn’t wait to see her concoction in action.

Slipping off the stool, she held the hot beaker in a padded cloth as she strolled down the dank stone stairs, into the black corridor that led to the torture room.

It was an annoyance, she decided, that those meddlers in the Penitus Oculatus had found such assistance. While she felt a pang of nostalgia for Astrid, for Veezara and Gabrielle and the others, she was a practical thing. Her forebear had always instructed her that for the vampire, survival came first. Remember, Babette, there is always someone out for your blood. Others could fall on their own swords, defending some peculiar notion of honor.

Babette would survive. Her friends, no, her family that had passed away...they had been skilled assassins. Competent. Vicious.

But not skilled enough.

And she would outlive them all. Even the capering fool who she could hear cackling in the foyer where the Night Mother stood sentinel. Echoes of his hysterical mumblings echoed down the twisting passages, reverberating eerily. Babette sighed. At some point, she would have to explore the cave system for herself, if only to ensure that she would not be waking up to a Falmer blade at her throat some morning. Blinking as her glowing eyes readjusted to the single torch burning merrily in the chamber, she scanned the room for any new thing of note.

Nothing.

That Priest of Mara that Cicero had dragged in not a week ago still hung limply in his chains. He had defecated again, the stench making her undead nose wrinkle in disgust. The living just couldn’t help themselves, she supposed. Urine also stained the blue gown of the Dragonborn, who was twitching and jerking in her sleep. With amusement, Babette noted that even her eyes rolled behind their lids in delicate tics.

Whatever nightmare she was enduring was but a prelude of what was to come. Vaermina had found quite the alliance in the fool. He dragged that disgusting skull staff everywhere, now. It bothered her not a bit, for she had perfected the potion Dreamless Sleep ages ago.

Placing the beaker, which was now quite temperate, upon the table near the door, Babette prepared a thin, needlelike blade for insertion of her prized potion. Rolling the tip in the torch flame, the metal glowed a dull orange as the vampire slowly dipped the tip of the dagger into her solution.

There. It was but a moment for her to sidle over to the woman and prick her throat. A drop of blood beaded upon the skin of her throat.

Babette licked her lips, venom gushing into her mouth as her fangs felt...dry. Soon enough. When questions were answered, and Cicero was satisfied that the Night Mother was fully protected and hidden from all prying eyes, then. Then Babette would taste the Dragonborn’s blood.

Would it taste of brimstone and fire? Smoke and ash? She was sure the flavor would coil, delicious and complex, upon the tongue. A vintage to be savored.

Drawing a chair closer, she sat and waited. The woman moaned, still trapped in dreams. Growing impatient, Babette leaned over and gave her face a light slap.
Hmph. Another, then.

When the third, hard slap landed the Dragonborn opened her eyes wide, focusing immediately on the unchild.

The torch sputtered as they stared at one another. The blood on her throat had already dried, Babette noted with some sadness. Shame. It was a pleasant smell. Better than the urine that soaked the lower half of her gown. A rumbling filled the room, almost inaudible for its depth, and Babette realized with some trepidation that it came from the chest of the woman.

“Diil Kiir. Release me, undead child.”

The green-amber eyes were unusually clear, for having been under the influence of an amalgam of poisons and draughts for so long. There were faded scars etched into her face, upon her lips and hinted at on shoulders and bust, beneath the gown. The brown hair was probably much more fetching when brushed, but now it tangled limply in the amulet the woman wore.

She was not impressive. Not even with the echo of that voice. Babette was almost tempted to interview the woman sans potion, just to hear the raspy tones in their true power. It probably would not happen. Even now, as Cicero anointed and oiled the Night Mother in a profane ritual that the unchild was not privy to, she could not think of any other tricks or distractions to keep the mad man away. He would break in, and eventually kill her. She had only saved the priest by reasoning that he would make a splendid sacrifice to appease Vaermina, later.

Cicero was overjoyed. His dagger had been brought out of retirement, and Babette had had to clean up his many indiscretions since, to keep her erstwhile brother out of harm’s way as they traveled up here to Dawnstar. For all the fondness she felt for the fool, it was becoming a bother, babysitting her brother in this dank keep. She longed for fresh prey.

But, as always, family first.

“Hello, Dragonborn. Unfortunately I can’t do that. But I do have some questions for you.” The vampire girl crossed her ankles and bounced them against the rungs of the chair. She noted with amusement that the Dragonborn tracked every move, the pricked throat swallowing as undoubtedly the woman tested muted vocal cords. “None of that, dear Dragonborn. You won’t be able to speak above a very hoarse whisper for some time now. I simply can’t have you leaving just yet.”

The rumbling vibrations increased as the woman pulled, testing the metal cuffs chained to the wall. She coughed, murmuring over and over something that sounded like ‘feim, feim’ with no effect. Grimacing, the Dragonborn locked eyes with Babette once more. She almost shivered at the calculating look, the sheer rage pouring from those eyes.

“Very well, krah tafiir. We may speak, for now.” Her voice was barely audible, and still it vibrated the ground, shaking the table, the chair. Small rock chips bounced on the floor, settling as silence pervaded once more.

Tipping her head to study the prisoner, Babette folded her hands in her lap. “I suppose it would be pointless to ask how you knew our sanctuary’s password?”

Raspy chuckling seemed to shake the vampire’s very ribcage. “You wouldn’t believe me. Though I want to kill you very badly,” the woman was almost conversational about it. Babette could have liked her. "...I am your zaam for now. But does it matter? Here you are. And here am I.”

Leaning forward, the metal cuffs ground upon their hinges as the Dragonborn leaned far forward.
“Release me.”

“Or what?” Fascinating already. Babette bobbed her foot as the woman struggled to compose herself. Strange that she was not more discomfited by her capture. Most were. “You can’t escape, and I have taken measures to keep you alive purely out of curiosity. If you cannot, will not answer me, then I have no use for you.”

Hopping up from the stair, Babette took the beaker of potion from the table. Turning, she looked at the Dragonborn’s furious gaze. “If I were you, I’d come up with creative ways of distracting Cicero. The Keeper was beside himself that anyone would dare desecrate the Dark Brotherhood’s...no, the Night Mother’s sanctuary. He will probably kill you. Soon.”

The hoarse whisper stopped Babette before she could open the door. “What? No knives? No thumbscrews, or gags? I'm almost offended at how little you care.”

“Oh, Dragonborn.” Biting back a chuckle, Babette lifted her hand above her head to push open the heavy dungeon door. “You should know. The mind is so much more delicate, more easily broken than the body. Sweet dreams.”

Leaving the torture room, the unchild skipped down the stone corridor, humming in delight. Pausing to lock the door to the main chamber where Cicero hummed and chatted to his charge, she giggled. That would delay things, if just for a bit.

Oh, playtime was going to be so much fun.

Chapter End Notes

Krah tafiir - cold thief
Zaam - slave

I have been accused of having a very morbid imagination. It's just going to get worse from here on out.

All Dovahzul or Dragon Language has been obtained from the correct sources.

http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Dragon_Language
Trees rimmed her vision, slowly tossed by the night wind. She could hear the leaves fluttering, branches sighing as dark clouds scudded across the stars. Masser was full tonight; the smaller, paler moon Secunda half full in its shadow.

A deep lassitude had taken hold of her limbs. Sigrid lay unblinking, though she summoned the will to move. To look anywhere but up at the stars. Cruel, cold stars.

Rustling, nearby. Footsteps neared. Her eyes would not blink, would not roll in their dry sockets to see, to see…

“Ah, such a shame. Didn’t make it.”

Leaning over her, Aela blocked out the stars. Bright moss-green eyes trailed up and down Sigrid’s form. “She would have been an asset to the pack.”

A heavy arm snaked around Aela, pulling a face into her field of vision.

Vilkas...

He pressed an open mouthed kiss to Aela’s neck, as she smiled secretly and turned to him. Nuzzling him in return. “Stop that.” She sighed, as Vilkas’s arm caressed Aela’s front, slowly trailing lower out of sight, into Aela’s fur-wrapped leggings.

Sigrid could not even draw breath. With a icy prick of shock, she realized her heart was no longer beating.

“Well, it’s a shame to waste such a fine spread.” Aela flipped her head back, entwining her arms, her form with his as Vilkas made a noise of hunger. “Fine.” She captured his mouth in a heated kiss, his teeth nipping at her lips, the painted streaks on her cheeks, eventually descending to her breastband.

“We’ll do this your way, for now. Food first.” Shaking free, the huntress cautioned him with a wagging finger, eyes alight with fondness. “But, you owe me a kill, love.”

Frozen in time, Sigrid willed herself to draw breath. To shout, scream, anything. Oh, god, this wasn’t real, couldn’t be real not real not real wake up up up ...

Disconnected, almost pleasantly numb, Sigrid watched as the man she loved shivered, stepping away. Vilkas’s face slowly elongated, his jawline morphing into a hairless muzzle. Eyes that were such a familiar silver-grey brightened to wolf gold.

Fingers, toes. Nothing worked. Nothing moved. She was held captive as wet, plopping noises accompanied the crunch of bones as he shifted, long talons bleeding from human hands. Fur poured from skin, the dark hair spreading, lifting until the head became massively canine. Spreading like shadow, the werewolf stood before Sigrid, outlined by the full moon.

Out of sight, Aela sighed happily. “Save me the heart, will you?”
Dead to the world, Sigrid screamed inside, over and over as his fangs tore a wide ragged slice from her belly. Blood spattered, dark and hidden on his furry form. She couldn’t feel it, could feel nothing on the skin, inside the skin but horror. She was naked, she was in hell as his hot muzzle entered her, a parody of the act of love as the head ripped, tore, and swallowed. Devouring, tasting - Vilkas lifted his head, wolf eyes catching and refracting the moonlight as his jaws champed and gulped the long loops of intestine.

Drawing nearer, he briefly left her sight. Then reappeared as the penny sweet hot breath of the werewolf surrounded her, closing off what she could see as a rough tongue slid wetly over nose and unmoving mouth as the jaws bit oh so slowly down...

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“Life Flesh Heal…” she sighed, her voice casting itself towards the Priest who hung, too still, on his chains.

It was a Dunmer, she could see that. With the butter-yellow robes of a Priest of Mara. Erandur, then. It seemed the unchild’s threat might have had some reason behind it, Sigrid thought unhappily. That last dream had been a doozy. She had awakened with a sobbing pant, tears spilling from her eyes.

Sigrid, you're an idiot. Remember last time? She was thirsty enough; crying would not help her survive this. No more tears, until she had something to drink.

At least the Thu'um rumbled within her, alive once more. “Life Flesh Heal,” she crooned, willing the priest to awaken, to look at her. It would be so much easier to fight, to flee with his assistance. And she dimly remembered, he was a good mage. A solid follower. Erandur would do.

A twitch, then a full body shudder heaved through the Priest of Mara as he bent, wracked by coughing as fingers of healing power coursed through him. Brown feces stained his robes, with the more faded marks of urine and darker blood visible as he moved, shifted in his bonds.

“...ah. I’m no longer alone. How pleasant.” The hooded head lifted, and she smiled as dark eyes, bright as rubies found and caught hers in their stare. “Who are you, my daughter?”

“I am Sigrid Farstrider, Dragonborn and fellow prisoner of the Dark Brotherhood.” She replied as quietly as she could speak, her voice still rolling, shaking in dark timbred tones the stones in the walls, rattling the floor.

“Apologies, Priest.” His panicked face eased as she tried to smile reassuringly. “It has been...a trying day.” It would be better not to explain further. He didn’t need to know how close, how razor edged thin Sigrid’s temper held, to be taken here in such a way. Taken right from a festival, in her safe haven, her home town.

Oh Vilkas...

“Vaermina has won a mighty victory,” Erandur grimaced back, his thin lips twisted in disdain. “I should have returned years ago.”

Water dripped from somewhere in the room as Sigrid craned her neck around to look. Her shoulders ached, bound in one position as she slowly tightened, then loosened her arms. Not bad. Not...like last time. But awful enough.
She blinked, straightening as she heard footfalls echo somewhere beyond the chamber. The tunnels of Dawnstar’s Sanctuary meandered, twisted in hidden crumbling corridors. Designed to confuse, entrap. That sound could have come from anywhere.

They waited with bated breath as they listened closely for more sounds.

Nothing but the drip-plop of water. The torch sputtering in a gusty draft. Shifting in her dress, Sigrid wrinkled her nose as she realized she had pissed herself. That much was similar to her last incarceration. Though she hoped she would not be here as long as Erandur had, judging by the piles of shit surrounding the poor man, smeared over the back of his robes.

Clean clothing would be a top priority, once they escaped from here. If they escaped.

Of course she would, Sigrid chastened herself. She was the fucking Dragonborn. Harbinger of the Companions. She had killed Astrid buck naked with her bare blade. She could rescue herself. The vampire girl couldn’t keep her doped up on that potion all the time. It had almost completely worn off by now, and she heard no one approach.

Pulling, testing at her restraints again, Sigrid swallowed. Then spoke.

“Feim Zii Gron!”

The heavy weight of her material body dissolved, as her spirit form stepped forward out of the shackles. Fade Spirit Bind always reminded her of her childhood dream to be invisible, unseen by her sister as she snuck around the house giggling. Ignoring Erandur’s shock, she walked through the closest wall and looked around.

Dank darkness greeted her. Nothing but tunnels.

Walking back into the room, she noted that there was no lock on the torture room door. Cocky. They’d pay for that, she reminded herself, grinning as her form took substance once more and she ran solid fingers over the manacles binding the priest.

“W-what was that!?”

“The Thu’um. Dragonspeech, or Dovahzul.” She replied, distracted as the left cuff refused to budge. Bracing her wrist, she shoved her weight against the rusted bolt and sighed in relief as Erandur almost fell, free from his binds.

They’d hear that, if anyone was listening. Sigrid idly wondered if vampires had hearing as good as a werewolf. It had gotten her into trouble before, when as a whelp she had muttered sarcastic comments in the training field. Vilkas always heard, and never hesitated to reward her backtalk with fifty pushups, or twelve laps run barefoot.

She hoped against hope he wasn’t out of his mind with worry, right now.

Gesturing for Erandur to follow her, she bravely ignored the stench wafting from them both as they crept down the hall. There had been no weapons, no torture tools, nothing at hand in the chamber other than the torch that Erandur had taken.

At least the Dunmer had his magic.

She balled her fists tightly. Not without weapons, no, her Thu’um rumbled within her. Vicious thoughts circled like buzzards in her mind as they slowly wended their way to a hopeful exit,
thoughts tainted by dovahzul. She knew them by now, could almost label which soul had such acrimony, or a sense of humor. One of them liked to sing songs, old tunes with a dialect even Paarthurnax couldn’t name for her. She thrust them from her thoughts, for now.

Up ahead, a portion of the sanctuary that actually looked lived in loomed ahead. An alchemy table, with braziers still alight and powders carelessly tossed near bundles of ingredients. Sleeping rolls, half opened. A bottle of...something thick and viscous. Probably blood, she thought as she noted dark spatters coating the walls nearby.

“Eh heh hee hee hoo...what? Mother? Is that your voice I hear?”

They froze. Their breaths puffed fast, clouding the dank cave-like air with steam.

“...Hmm. No, no. Just my head playing tricks...foolish Cicero.”

He must be in the main chamber, guarding the Night Mother, Sigrid thought ruefully. Really, she should have known better than to relax her guard. Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary, remember? She placed a finger to her lips, cautioning Erandur as she slid quietly past the door that marked the main entrance, hoping with everything that it led to the surface.

_Sweet child, do not leave._

Gasping, her hand flew to her throat as she struggled to hold her shriek of dismay inside. She could hear her, hear the voice, that husky silk brushing like cobwebs over her mind, no no no -

_Come closer, and know me._

_You fight it still, but I know better. Lost daughter. Listener._

_Come to me._

- Crackles of electricity wreathed Erandur’s fingertips as Cicero tumbled from the shadows, his blade striking stone where the priest stepped away. As if in a dream, she ignored the battle between the two, uncaring of the priest’s cries for help as she walked dazedly towards the chamber. In her peripheral vision she could see the mad jester wield the Skull of Corruption, the foul staff glowing amethyst dark as Erandur struggled, his hands lit with fire and light as he fought off the influence of his former mistress.

Chamber of Horrors. Mother of Night, Sithis’s bride.

The room was dark, perfumed by the scent of hundreds of candles that had been lit and scattered upon the broken stones surrounding the coffin. It was open.

She was floating, hardly touching the floor, her heart pounding out of her chest as she approached.
Errant child, willful, disobedient child. Why do you kill your brothers and sisters?

The Night Mother had been freshly oiled, lovingly tended. Sigrid had no idea how old the woman was supposed to be, dead or alive. Or undead, as it were. She remembered reading that the Night Mother had once been a Dunmer thief, who took to murdering her victims for the ease of robbing their valuables.

She had also sacrificed her five children to Sithis, God of the Void.

“Bitch, you are not my mother,” Sigrid managed to grind out, struggling to feel the fire of rage. Panic and a deep crawling sense of fear skittered over her, like spiderlegs as she looked over the sticklike limbs, the fresh linen shroud that bound the dead woman upright. Her dessicated face was open in a perpetual gasp, eyelids crumbled shut. Sigrid thought, perhaps they might open, the sense of unlife radiating from this thing was...was...

I am Mother of All, Listener. The crone, who cuts the thread of life. Necessary.

Come closer, child.

Against her will, her feet dragged Sigrid closer.

She could smell her now, smell the rot that no oil or perfume could conceal. The air was hot and thick, now, with melting wax and the sweet stink of bodily decay.

You cannot defeat me. How can you kill death?

Sigrid blinked at the hands wrapped against the dried husk of a chest as they blurred, seeming to move, to entreat her.

Little hands.

“He is so beautiful,” Bryce marveled as he held his firstborn son close. The baby wailed, beet red, tiny fists waving as he twisted weakly, snug in his swaddled blanket.

“Oh sweet boy,” Sarah crooned, the sweat drying on her forehead. It had been a long labor, hours of pushing, anxiety and pain were finally over. The doctor whisked away the afterbirth as nurses flitted around the couple, lost in the grey-haze of newborn eyes blinking up at them.

“We should name him Sean, after your father.” Bryce lifted the little bundle higher, placing a tender kiss on his forehead. Sarah smiled, blinking back tears as all the emotions that had been running haywire for what seemed like the last nine months broke open. A flood of love enveloped her, as she took baby Sean from Bryce and set his puckered grasping mouth to her breast.
She felt a tingle as he latched on. Bryce sat heavily down next to her, laughing with her as she grimaced, trying to relocate his desperate sucking to include the entire nipple and not just the tip. Which was more bloody painful than she had thought; god, everything ached.

But wasn’t it wonderful, this little thing, this boy she and Bryce had created with their love. Gazing at his tiny, scrunched face in adoration, Sarah sighed happily as her baby sucked, bursts of heat flashing through her breasts as they gave life-nourishing milk to her little one. Little hands, tiny fists curled with the most delicate fingernails and pudgy wrists she had ever seen...

Brought abruptly back to reality as Erandur skidded across the floor, Sigrid blinked as she realized she was almost completely surrounded by the walls of the Night Mother’s coffin.

A calm peace pervaded her as she thought about tiny hands growing, covered in peanut butter. Painting on walls. Cupping her cheek. Larger hands, placing a gold-bright ring on her shaking hand. Different hands, dirt covered and callused, placing an amulet oh so carefully in her waiting hands.

“I can’t destroy death.” Sigrid spoke, aware of the conflict behind her as Babette and Cicero raced into the room, intent upon her now that Erandur had fallen down. Vaermina’s staff was still in Cicero’s hands, and Babette brandished a wicked looking daedric dagger that gleamed a poisonous ochre.

In the seconds she had left, thoughts flashed like snapshots through her mind. Thoughts of life and death. A never ending circle, the eternal tree branching into infinite possibility. His eyes, grey and soft as he offered all he had, all he was.

“But, I can destroy you.”

“YOL TOOR SHUL!”

Fire blurred the dead dry limbs, licking eagerly at the oil soaked linens. “No, dearest Night Mother, no!” Cried Cicero, heaving Sigrid out of the way as gloved hands danced desperately, seeking to put out the flames.

“Oh, Dragonborn, what have you done?” Babette cried out in shock.

With a speed she didn’t know she was capable of, Sigrid reached Erandur as black webs burst in her retinas, a voice howling in the recesses of her mind, raging as she dragged the priest out of the room. Hesitating at the doorway, she could see Cicero, his jesters motley ablaze as his black hands crisped, burning in the fires as he wailed in desolation. Vaermina’s Skull of Corruption lay forgotten upon the floor, spilled against the sleeping furs, the swords and daggers she never noticed before in her thrall. Babette had turned to face Sigrid, somehow larger than her girlish form as her glowing eyes caught the inferno. The unchild opened a mouth lined with fangs, and -

“Ven Gaar Nos!”

- And the vampire’s eyes widened as she was tossed like a rag doll in the winds, cycloning around the room, picking up candles and flame and weapons in a dizzying whirlwind that rattled the door and shook the walls.

She shut the door. Lowered the crossbar, heaving quick panting sighs as leaned her whole weight against the door that shook, threatening to burst off its hinges. She heard Cicero scream, high and unending...the clatter of edged weapons spinning off of hard surfaces, the sound of a girl shrieking -
- until it cut off suddenly. The winds seemed to endure forever, the hurricane she had created from the cruel intelligence of the dovah gusting in fitful bursts, easing slowly down to stillness.

Soon, there was only silence. The sound of liquid, dripping somewhere. Erandur coughed weakly.

Steeling herself for...something, she pushed open the door.

********

They remained for a few hours more, to finish burning the last remnants of the Dark Brotherhood.

The coffin had been enchanted, and would not budge. Not even beneath the heavy blows of a warhammer. But the body within had disintegrated into so much ash, drifting into the eddies of air caused by the roaring fire Sigrid and Erandur built high, high enough to burn all bone and flesh into soot.

Erandur destroyed Vaermina's token himself.

Finally, it was done. Slumped against the rough black sand of the shoreline, they both dragged in heaving gulps of fresh air, untainted by smoke as they looked out over the port of Dawnstar.

Slowly, pink and gold stained the grey sky as a new day began.
Broderskärlek (Brotherly Love)

Chapter Notes

I listened to this while writing this chapter.

Helvegen, by Wardruna.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UY3EKzvjeE&index=8&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The letter from the courier came four days after the Midsummer Festival.

And not a damn minute too soon, Farkas thought as his brother rushed around his quarters, packing his bags, checking weapons and potions for an immediate departure to Dawnstar. The manic energy that had driven him to search all over Whiterun Hold, snapping at the most casual remarks about Sigrid, had been exhausting to watch. Farkas was tempted to drug his ale, just so the poor damn fool would get some sleep.

Then again, if someone - anyone - had tried to kidnap Carlotta or Mila right from under his nose, he would have torn down Dragonsreach block by block, to the foundation until he found them alive and well.

Kind and thoughtful as his future wife was, Carlotta had helped spread the word about the Dragonborn’s sudden disappearance. She had visited Arcadia, Olava, all of the gossips with questions about who had seen her, had anything strange been noticed. Despite their differences, the Imperial felt a certain sort of empathy for a fellow widow, for which Farkas was grateful. Trouble followed his shield sister like a hound trailing a chicken...and now where the his Harbinger went, his brother followed.

The Companions hadn’t heard anything about her disappearance at all, until the morning after when Vilkas had walked into the main hall, fingering an Amulet of Mara and looking as poleaxed as that time Farkas had hit a major growth spurt at fourteen and with one haymaker had laid him out cold. Eventually, Farkas got the whole story out of him - the proposal, her acceptance, how he had left to buy drinks only to return and find her missing completely (damn that was bad timing), unnoticed by any of the other drunken revelers still lingering late at night.

...Which any of them could have told Vilkas was not like Sigrid at all, to leave without notice or farewell. In fact, the newest Harbinger was at times a bleeding heart, all motherly and...involved, in a way that Farkas admitted to himself was pleasant. And in other times was just unnecessary. Farkas could shave his own damn beard, thank you very much, without someone pointing out the uneven spots.

The less said about that night when the moon was full, the better. His memories of that night was more a blur, a rush of feeling than anything solid...although there were moments that stood out that he tried very hard to forget. Farkas refused to think about the smiling, eccentric Sigrid in any way other than as a shield sister, or potentially, his sister by marriage.
If they ever found her again. He was going to make her wear armor with bells, when they did get ahold of that woman.

Ensuring his own sleeping furs and supplies were securely fastened, Farkas hurried to catch up with Vilkas as his twin practically raced down the stairs towards the city gates. “What, no goodbyes?”

“They know where we are going.” If anything, Vilkas ran faster. “We have the hagraven heads, Kodlak’s notes, and spare clothing and sword for Sigrid. If we push hard, I think we can make it to Dawnstar in three days. The Tomb of Ysgramor, a day or two past that.”

“...Only on four legs.” Farkas grumbled. But he also lengthened his stride, catching up to the long legged walk that ate miles over long distances and could be sustained.

“Hey Vilkas,” he called out as they rose over the mountain ridge that marked Blizzard’s Rest. Mammoths grazed peacefully on the plentiful grass, cropping it with their trunks as the twins stopped for a rest. “...this is good news, right? That she was kidnapped.”

Vilkas shot him a look. “How so?” Opening his pack, he threw Farkas some dried meat and bread.

Chewing placidly on the tough fare, Farkas swallowed. Wasn’t as though Sigrid had never been kidnapped before. Although this time seemed to have worked out a bit better for her than the last. “Well, brother, this means she didn’t run away screaming at the thought of marrying you for life.”

“Always the optimist.”

“I can see her now, kicking. Screaming. Begging for someone to take her far away…”

Vilkas hit him, but not like he meant it. Farkas grinned. See? Things were already getting back to normal, if his brother was punching him. And not even in the face. Yet.

“So, do you think she found more chests of gold and jewels in this assassin hideout?”

Tearing off a hunk of bread, Vilkas tore it apart with his fingers, his eyes distant. “Maybe.”

“Tell you what.” Taking a swig from his ale, Vilkas wiped his mouth and sighed. Ah, good stuff. “If she didn’t find anything special, I’ll give you back that toy we found down in Falkreath.”

“Huh?” Hell, his brother wasn’t even listening to him.

Replacing his travel pack on his back, making sure his sword was available to draw at a moment’s notice, Farkas frowned at him. “I didn’t use it, if that’s what has your breeches in a twist.”

"Right. Yes.”

“Carlotta didn’t use it either.”

“Uh-huh.”

Farkas narrowed his eyes. “I licked your woman’s birthmark on her upper thigh, that night. Hope that’s alright.”

“Aye, Farkas.”

Shrugging, Farkas pushed ahead, deciding to take the lead. It wouldn’t do for his brother to dawdle all absent minded straight into a pack of Frost Trolls. This once, Farkas would look out for his brother, and not the other way around.
“Since I have your attention, you should know that I was the one who set your bed on fire, back in Second Seed. Just to get you two out of there for one day.”

No response. Vilkas had taken the lead again, and was running directly into what Farkas could smell was a camp of giants, herding their mammoth towards the green pastures of the Northern Pale.

Farkas sighed. Some days, it was a real pain being the responsible one.

***************

Night fell quickly in the Pale. Snow fell here even in the summer, and the two Companions rolled out their sleeping furs in a small rocky overhang that almost could pass as a cave. Only a couple of sabre cats, not a big deal. They sure tasted good rubbed in salt and elves ear, all roasted over the fire, after nothing but hard bread and dried beef all day.

It wasn’t the most comfortable outdoor spot Farkas had ever slept in. Not like the time he had hunted down that Priestess of Dibella, years ago. Cold and fogbound the Reach might be, but Farkas had learned quite a bit from her warm charms. He’d never look at honey, leather strips or horker tusks the same after that. He smiled fondly. Good times.

“Hey Vilkas!” His brother did not turn from his scrutiny of the snowbound horizon. Probably wondering how little sleep he could get away with until he reached Dawnstar, Farkas thought with some amusement. Or praying for a frost troll or wolf to attack. If his twin had a prayer of actually bedding the only woman Farkas had ever seen him stutter over when they reached Dawnstar, he would need some sort of distraction. Something to relax him to the point of sleep.

Like a good joke. He nudged the butchered skins of the sabre cats. “Hey, what did the sabre cat say to the other as they ate a jester?”

He heard Vilkas heave a put-upon sigh. Hah, he was listening.

“This tastes...funny.” Spreading his arms, Farkas walked around in a circle, accepting unseen accolades of applause as Vilkas finally looked at him in exasperation. “I got a thousand of these. Hey Vilkas, do you know why the graveyard in Falkreath looks so old? That’s because it’s…”

-“Arkay-ic. Like archaic...look, I appreciate it, Farkas. I truly do. But I think I’d rather drink myself to a stupor than go through the Red Book of Riddles ever again.”

Not offended in the least, Farkas smiled and clapped him on the back. Vilkas coughed. “That’s alright. Just as long as you sleep. I got more of those jokes ready for ya, if you want to stay up.”

Huffing a short laugh, Vilkas flopped over in his sleeping furs. “Think I’ll pass, brother.”

“Oh, just as well. I’m tired out.”

“G’night, Vilkas.”

“Good night, Farkas.”

***************

They made it to Dawnstar in two days.
“Hey, brother.” He jogged up to Vilkas as the scent of salt sea air drifted over the treeless tundra. Not long now, and his brother looked almost ill as he pounded out the miles, relentlessly unstoppable.

“Hey. So, have you heard what they call the wenches who serve hot desserts in the Mage’s College?”

Panting, Vilkas stopped, blowing hard as he put his hands on his knees. Farkas walked in front of him, less winded, since he hadn’t been running at full tilt like a crazy person. Not like some.

“I...I haven’t heard that one.” Vilkas wheezed. “Do you think Sigrid…”

“No. Think about it.”

“Honestly, I give up. Pretty sure it’s something stupid, though.”

“A pie-romancer!” Fanning his hands with flair, Farkas thought he almost saw his brother crack a grin at that one. Damn, that was Mila’s favorite. “Cheer up. Looks like we’re almost there.”

It took Vilkas four of his best child-approved jokes to get Vilkas stumbling, exhausted across the threshold of Windpeak Inn. The warmth, the smell of hot food and the sound of lutes and drums...Farkas rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“Farkas! Vilkas! You’ve arrived!”

Rubbing at the under eye circles that were not the smears of leftover warpaint, Vilkas jerked his head left then right, looking for her. Farkas sighed in relief when in three great strides his brother picked up the woman running for him and practically squeezed the life from her. A priest followed her from the table they had been seated at, a smile wreathing his grey features as he folded his arms within their golden sleeves.

What a relief. And she was walking straight and everything. Ah, and now they were kissing. Great.

“So, please bring us some bowls of your stew. Hot. Oh, and about half a dozen bottles of mead.” Farkas slouched down in front of the fire, sighing in relief as he took off his travel pack and rubbed the soreness from his shoulders. If he were a betting man (which he wasn’t, no matter how often Athis asked) he would bet that Vilkas would fall dead asleep the moment his head hit the bed. No matter how engrossed they seemed to be, locking lips like that.

“And one bottle of wine!” Sigrid surfaced for air to yell that out, then was forcibly recaptured as Vilkas dragged her face back down to his.

Farkas hid a smile as some of the inn patrons hollered and cheered the couple entwined in full sight.

“For Kyne’s sake, get a room,” grumbled an aged woman hauling in buckets of water.

“That’s enough, alright. Move over.” Shoving his brother away, Farkas leaned over to hug Sigrid, who hardly looked worse for wear. She was wearing a new dress of rich red patterned in gold braid, along with her ever-present smile. “Looks like you got the best of them, this time. I’ll bet everyone will think twice before stealing you again, Harbinger.”

She laughed. “I hope so. I’m done with the surprise getaways.” Clapping the priest on the back, she faced the brothers. “Time for introductions. Boys, meet Erandur, Priest of Mara. He saved my life, back there. Also got rid of the nightmare problem that Dawnstar has been dealing with for months.”

“I think it’s safe to say you saved me first, sister.” Clasping hands to shoulders, Farkas greeted the Dunmer with a smile. The priest reached out to Vilkas, only to frown as the idiot stumbled a step back. “Are you alright?”
“Well, mostly. The fool decided to run all the way here. With only a couple hours of sleep. So, I guess he must be alright, if he had the stamina for that.” Farkas rolled his eyes at Sigrid, who blinked, then put a hand to Vilkas’s head. “You know, I think you gave yourself a fever.” Her brow knit in concern as Vilkas coughed. “I’m fine, woman. Just need some sleep.”

“Right.” Taking the bottle of mead from the blushing barmaid, Farkas upended it, draining it entirely in one go. Ah, what the hell. It was small. “So, Priest, you do weddings, right?”

Erandur smoothed the folds in his robes. “When the occasion requires, yes, my son.”

Farkas grinned, opening another bottle. “Grand. Well, it just so happens that we have a double wedding coming up in Whiterun hold. And we haven’t found a priest to marry us yet. What do you say, sister?”

Sigrid, who had been speaking quietly but quickly to Vilkas turned suddenly. “I hadn’t even thought of that, yet!” She exclaimed. Vilkas sighed, weariness etched across his features as he nodded, once, to Farkas. The larger twin gave him a sly grin, then handed Vilkas some mead. “Really, Farkas? Erandur, would you be willing to marry us? And Farkas with Carlotta? Oh my god,” she turned back to the twins as the priest nodded his agreement. “A double wedding. That…”

With some trepidation, Farkas noticed his Harbinger’s eyes begin to well up with tears. “Oh no. None of that.” He stepped forward, waving his hands as if there was a spell to ward off womanly crying. God, what a septim spinner that would be. “If it really makes you happy, you won’t cry. I know those are just tears of terror now that my brother has got you where he wants you.” He slapped Vilkas on the back, causing him to choke on the mead he had just swallowed.

Sigrid rolled her eyes. “Right. Thanks Farkas.”

“Your welcome, sister.” He winked as she began to pull his brother away from the crowd slowly gathering around them in the tavern, offering congratulations. “Don’t wear him out!” He called after her, only to be answered by a strange hand signal, with the middle finger extended as the couple disappeared into their room.

“Whatsoever. Barmaid, where’s that stew?”

***************

Farkas hadn’t been kidding. After holding her tightly in bed, like she would slip away if he didn’t keep her enclosed in his arms, Vilkas drifted away into sleep and didn’t awaken until late into the next day.

Sigrid woke earlier, with her lovers’ breath puffing gently onto her forehead. Dim light leaked through the roof of Windpeak Inn, with the sounds of timbers creaking and voices murmuring outside her door. She tried to relax back into sleep, only to hear coughing and the sounds of a broom sweeping the floor. Blinking, she slowly snuck out from under Vilkas’s heavy arms and stretched, invigorated after another night free of nightmares. Months of waking with the sun, and now she could no longer sleep in. Sigrid wasn’t sure if it was a blessing or a curse.

She walked out into the main hall to find Farkas blearily sipping some thick concoction by the firepit. “Morning.” Judging by the wrinkling of his nose, she bet it was the famous morning-after chaser. She had been forced to drink it, a time or two. Njada had told her never to ask what went in it.

“To you as well. How’s my brother?”
“Dead to the world.” Holding her hands out, she shivered as the blazing logs slowly heated her hands. “How can it still be so cold at night? It’s high summer...Last Seed.”

Farkas took a sip, then made a face. “We’re in the Pale, Harbinger. Almost above the treeline. It’s pretty damn cold up here all year round.”

“Ugh.” Pulling out a mammoth tusk-carved comb, Sigrid began to sort out the snarls in her hair. It had grown quite a bit since its last chop, and now reached her breasts. Finger combing it into three parts, she rapidly braided it into a heavy plait.

“So...” Replacing the comb back in her bodice, Sigrid tilted her head to look at Farkas. “You guys brought the hagraven heads, right?”

Trying to hold in a belch (unsuccessfully) Farkas pulled his hair back from his face and began tying the length into a messy knot at his neck with a leather thong. Clucking her tongue, Sigrid stood up and helped pull it back evenly. “Aye, we did. They’re still frozen from being in the root cellar so long, though being stored in the inn might have done something to them. Brought the notes too.”

“Good.” Her eyes were distant as she stared into the leaping flames. Sigrid rubbed her hands together and heaved a sigh. “It should be fairly easy, once we make it through Ysgramor’s tomb, and the ghosts.”

At the questioning look Farkas shot her, Sigrid backpedaled a bit. “...Look, Kodlak’s notes detail everything. All that we can expect to face there. It even has the ritual for cleansing the-the blood.” She quieted her voice for the last part, aware of the curious looks they were getting from the other patrons who were slowly waking and eating in the hall.

“And, you agree with Vilkas on this? You’re going to do it for...yourself, as well as him and Kodlak?”

Farkas downed the last mouthful of his drink, spitting into the fire. “Ugh. Hate that stuff. Gotta drink it though. Yes, shield sister, I agree with my brother in most things. And if he says the wolf is bad for the soul, well...I trust him.”

As she smiled in response, Farkas narrowed his eyes at her. “And I trust you. You’re not going to do anything suicidal, like break my brothers’ heart, are you?”

The woman looked offended. “Farkas, the Companions are my life now. My family. And Vilkas, he’s...” Pushing a strand of hair back from her eyes, Farkas noted with an inward grin that she was blushing, her freckles almost disappearing. Aww. Cute. “He means everything to me. Believe me, I would never have just left like that. Not...”

“Oh, I know you wouldn’t leave. Just, try very hard not to die, while you’re out there doing Dragonborn things. That one time I asked how you were doing after Solitude, he gave me a look that almost melted my face off. Without magic.”

She giggled, shaking her head as his eyebrow quirked. “No, no no...that’s one story that’s definitely staying private!”

They both looked up as Vilkas stumbled out of the room. “Well, look who finally decided to grace us with his presence.” Picking up the tray they had saved for him, Sigrid handed it over. He poked at the oat gruel unenthusiastically, hiding a yawn behind his hand.

“Well, it’s not much longer until we reach the tomb of Ysgramor. Sigrid, we brought your sword and spare clothes, but we didn’t manage any armor. Is the smith any good here?” Farkas stood and
stretched, rolling his shoulders as his shield sister drank the tea the barmaid offered her.

Swallowing, she set the mug down. “Hmm. Rustleif is good. Nowhere as good as Eorlund, but we can’t have everything. I worked out a deal with him these last few days...a new set of leathers for some help around the forge. Don’t worry, I just need to get changed. Then we can head out.”

“Good. Tired of hanging around here.” Noticing his twin was marginally more awake, Farkas smiled. “We’re finally doing it, brother. Sending Kodlak’s spirit where he always wanted to rest.”

“SoVngarde.” Tracing a finger against his own mug of tea, Vilkas looked pensive. “Farkas, do you remember anything about...before? Our parents, before we ended up with Jergen?”

Feeling Sigrid aware and watching them both, Farkas kept his voice low and unhurried. “Don’t remember much. Just fire and screams.”

Taking in his brother’s disappointment, the giant man watched as Sigrid patted his hand. “Vilkas, I asked Runil in Falkreath about that. He said he would look through his records of the dead for you and your brother. To see if...if he had any names that matched the time you were saved and brought to Jorrvaskr.”

“That’s...something, I guess.” Standing heavily, Vilkas rubbed his eyes. “I suppose it doesn’t matter now. We can only hope they made it to Sovngarde, as well.”

“Even the simple life can be one of valor.” Nodding, Sigrid stood as well. “I’m sure you’ll see them again. Many, many years from now!” She fixed her glare on both of them. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get into my new armor and make sure everything fits right.”

“Don’t forget the furs, woman. I’ll help you.” Farkas watched them both go, shaking his head fondly. All this sweet sentiment was going to rot his stoicism. Vilkas would be plucking a lute somewhere by the end of the month, singing with flowers braided in his hair. Heh.

‘Course, Mila had already done that to him at the festival. Pink and yellow wildflowers. Carlotta had laughed, like the trill of a songbird.

Damn. He was getting soft.

**********

“Greetings, Shield Sister.”

Approaching the ghostly form of Kodlak, Sigrid held her sword at the ready as she watched the old Harbinger warming his hands. The flames in the raised firepit popped and crackled merrily, and she could almost feel the old man become more solid, the closer he crept forward.

“Kodlak!” The wolf brothers both wore looks of astonished recognition. Sigrid bit back a grin, shaking her head. Of course they hadn’t believed her, when she said they would literally be able to speak with their old master once more.

“Ah, my sons. Good to see you again. I see you’ve been busy.”

Vilkas shuffled his feet, clearing his throat. “Harbinger, what are you doing here?”

“Ah. My fellow Harbingers and I have been warming ourselves here, trying to evade Hircine.” The
old man’s voice was almost jolly.

“I don’t see anyone else.” Farkas looked around the dim tomb, as if expecting more ghosts to pop out any second.

“Well, you wouldn’t, lad. You see only me because your heart knows only me as the Companion’s leader.” His bearded mouth pulled into an amused smirk. “I’d wager old Vignar could see half a dozen of my predecessors. And I see them all.”

He turned to Sigrid. “The ones in Sovngarde. The ones trapped with me in Hircine’s realm. And they all see you, girl.”

Sigrid bowed her head, humbled by his regard. Kodlak continued, “You’ve brought honor to the name of the Companions. We won’t soon forget it.”

Vilkas stepped forward, his hand lifting to reach out to the old man’s spirit. Thinking better of it, he retracted his gesture. “Kodlak, there is still a way we can cure you. Cure you of the the beast blood.”

“Is there, now?” His spectral voice echoed in the round chamber. “I can only hope. You still have the witch’s heads?”

All three nodded. “Excellent. Throw one of them into the fire. It will release their magic; for me at least.”

Farkas nodded, his face solemn and proud. “We will follow you in this, as in all things Harbinger.”

“It is well. Do it, girl.” Unwrapping the heads from their packs, Sigrid gestured to the brothers to ready themselves. Grasping the lank greasy hair of one of the hagraven heads, Sigrid turned her face away from the grisly sight. The flesh clung still to bony skull, but the smell of decomposing flesh had only gotten stronger as they had traveled. Sigrid would be glad to see the heads burned and gone.

Throwing her burden into the fire, the disgust she felt at the sudden smell of burning hair and flesh was replaced with awe as Kodlak suddenly jerked, writhing as a great blood-tinted beast poured out of him, snapping and growling as the brothers circled it with their warblades. She hovered in the periphery, slashing as the beast approached her with clear, murderous intent.

With one final overhead stab, Vilkas finished the beast, kicking it away with an armored boot. Waivering, flickering in and out, the spirit of Kodlak walked over to the three warriors and extended his hand.

Sigrid took it, feeling a shiver as the insubstantial hand passed almost completely through her skin. “And so, you have slain the beast inside of me. I thank you all for this gift.”

Vilkas put his hand on Sigrid’s shoulder. “It was our honor, Harbinger.”

Kodlak’s blurred features became a knowing smile, as he saw Sigrid huddle closer to Vilkas. “The other Harbingers remain trapped by Hircine, though. Perhaps from Sovngarde, the heroes of old can join me in their rescue.”

Farkas whistled in approval. “Yes...the Harrowing of the Hunting Grounds.” Kodlak continued. “It would be a battle of such triumph. And perhaps some day, you three will join us in that battle.”

“But for today, return to Jorrvaskr. Triumph in your victory.” Placing a ghostly hand on each of their shoulders in turn, Kodlak’s spirit dimmed, and gradually faded altogether with a parting remark.
“Lead the Companions to further glory. Family and honor. You...have chosen...well.”

The three Companions stood there silently in the tomb that felt suddenly darker without Kodlak’s light. Sucking her lip between her teeth, Sigrid turned towards her bag and held up another head. A piece of skin fell off with a meaty plop to the stone floor.

“Yuck. Who is next?”

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“Is it over?”

“Yes. Here,” Sigrid hauled Vilkas to his feet, gripping his hand as she helped him stand. “How do you feel? You alright?”

Sensing his brother and woman regarding him, Vilkas looked away from the...the thing that had been Brother Wolf, already fading from sight. Red rage and snapping teeth. Had that really been a part of him for so long? Taking stock of himself, stretching his limbs, he sniffed.

He could still smell. Smell the sweat, the smoke of the fire. The dust in the tomb. But it was no longer overwhelming, owning his senses as it had, before. Farkas was right.

“It’s...like waking up from a dream.” Running fingers through his hair, he blinked and looked around. Seeing Sigrid’s joyous smile, he tentatively smiled back. “I can...breathe more deeply now. I can’t smell your heart beating the way I used to. But my mind is...free. Unburdened.”

“Like sinking into a warm bath.” Farkas offered, sheathing his battle blade and nodding in agreement. “Or drinking a mug of spiced mead.”

“Yes.” Looking at the tomb of Ysgramor with new eyes, Vilkas blinked back the dust and sleeplessness of the last week. “I’d like to spend some time looking around here.”

“Aye.” Farkas smiled widely, moving with a relaxed pace that Vilkas suddenly realized he felt as well. A looseness, a lack of tension. Had that always been there before? They moved, circling the tomb and staring at the inscriptions and carvings on the walls, speaking quietly.

He found Sigrid picking through chests of armor, jewelry and potions. “I’m not sure I should even be going through these things,” she laughed nervously. “Isn’t this desecrating Ysgramor’s tomb?”

“Should have asked Kodlak,” Farkas quipped, looking over Sigrid’s shoulder. Lifting a chest lid, Farkas barked a laugh and pulled out gleaming ingots of what appeared to be gold. “If they wanted to keep this for the afterlife, they should have buried it in their graves all proper.”

Vilkas looked at Sigrid’s face as a slight frown line etched itself between her eyes. “What do you think, Vilkas? Should we leave everything as it is, or take some of this back to Jorrvaskr? It’s part of your history, too.”

Taking in a deep breath, he could still smell her. Lavender and sun. He smiled. At least that hadn’t been taken from him. He could think so clearly now. “Is there anything that appeals to you?”

Touching Ysgramor's shield with a thrill of wonder, she smiled warmly and handed it to him. Feeling the smooth curve of the metal against his fingers, he looked it over, turning it around. "This...this would be a mighty prize. It can hang where the shards of Wuuthrad once lay."
A wry grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Hmm. I don’t know. I’m not sure I trust this new Vilkas, who smiles and dances around like a girl at festival.”

Farkas laughed as Vilkas raised his eyebrow at that. “I’m not dancing.”

“You may as well be. You two are acting like we didn’t just fight a pitched battle through five hundred of Ysgramor’s best fighters. Not to mention the frostbite spiders. Or the wolf spirits.” She shivered suddenly, sitting down on the edge of the barred wall that held the remains of Ysgarmor.

Joining her, Vilkas gestured for Farkas to give them some space. The woman had been mysteriously silent on the matter of her brief incarceration in Dawnstar. He had asked that night at the Windpeak Inn what exactly had transpired. He remembered how she had shivered, the sudden stink of fear. He didn’t ask again. She would tell him in her own time. “Perhaps there was some healing involved, when you cleansed my soul.”

Lifting her eyes to his in shock, she swallowed as she caught him gazing at her. Peaceful. It wasn’t an expression she was used to seeing on him. “You really think...Vilkas, I didn’t do anything you couldn’t have done yourself. You made this choice. I just...helped it along.”

Face grim, he shook his head as fingers came up to trace her cheekbone. “No, woman. I enjoyed the strength, could blame my temper on the beast. I would have ran with Aela, with Skjor and Farkas, always on the hunt. Unless Kodlak had insisted, I would have remained tied to the moon all my life.”

His thumb traced her lips. “But you. You believed. Knew that there was something more here, than a monster.”

Inhaling raggedly, he traced his nose alongside hers, feeling her swallow. “You made me feel like a man, at last.” He whispered. Her lips trembled, then captured his as she took him, took his mouth in hers. Fisted her hands in his hair as she pulled him even closer. He gave back gladly, his hand cupping her chin, the smoothness of her cheek with her warpaint flaking beneath his thumb. She moaned into his mouth as his tongue swept against hers, enveloping her mouth as he tasted her.

His. His woman. Soon to be his wife. He mentally thanked the gods and whoever else was watching over them that this, this outlander had shaken the bedrock of his beliefs, had altered his life so. Shor knew he didn’t deserve her.

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They left the Pale, burdened only with trophies of war, to be displayed in the glorious hall that held strong still, after thousands of years. Their heads were held high and their hearts were clean and free.

Free at last.

Chapter End Notes

I can totally see Farkas as one of 'those' dads who uses puns for everything. Especially on their kids.

Not gonna lie, I was thinking of Spike from Buffy as I finished Vilkas's thoughts. Not quite the same, perhaps, since our heroes are genuinely in love, with considerably less
hangups than before.

But I truly believe that you can't really change a person (i.e. by nagging, praying, etc) unless they are willing to change as well. True love takes a hell of a leap of faith. Tons of trust, mutual respect, a good sense of humor, because we mortals can and will screw up.

Love can alter us more than any type of censure. When we really love someone, care about their wellbeing above and beyond our own, and know that they feel the same way, it's pretty special. Hold on to that, if you have it in your life, fair readers.
Sigrid had seen many incredible things in her time spent wandering Skyrim. She had seen the shaking aspen forests of Riften and the regal Blue Palace of Solitude. Trudged across the snows of the pale, held her hands in the cold north seas to taste the salt of the water. She loved the green, mossy woods of Falkreath, and though it wasn’t exactly her favorite, she had walked through Markarth in awe of the misty waterfalls spilling over the crumbling rock ruins.

But Blackreach was...haunting, in a way that felt almost primeval. Deadly. She had gasped when she and Vilkas had first opened the great gates of Fal Zhardum Din. The ceiling was so high, it might have been the sky with that glowing greenish-bronze sun casting a cold light upon the massive cavern. She had reached out with wonder to touch the floating fungus that wavered in unseen breezes, only to have Vilkas clasp her hand and draw it away. “Don’t touch anything,” he warned quietly. “The spores and the water have sometimes killed explorers here. If the Falmer did not get to them first.” She heeded his advice. But once when he wasn’t looking, she dragged a finger along one of the glowing stalks. The bioluminescence smeared off against her hand, as she rubbed her fingers together, then faded in seconds. She wondered if the light was emitted from the mushrooms themselves, or if it was a chemical reaction from the fake sun that she definitely was not going to explore. She doubted that they could kill all the Falmer, along with the sadly indoctrinated slaves that wandered the old city still.

The Falmer. Poor, vicious sods. She killed them reluctantly, remembering the one surviving snow elf who still lived, somewhere far west deep in the Forgotten Vale. His brethren were truly feral, whatever they had been was lost to the depths of history as they skittered, snarling and hissing around Blackreach. She avoided them as they turned their blind gaze left and right, listening for the footsteps of the Companions as they crept along.

She stopped them several times to gawk. Once, they passed a giant strolling along, holding a long broken piece of dwemer metal, scratching his back with a puzzled expression. How he had gotten down here, she could never know. Secrets long hidden...exploring this place had given her a taste of the curiosity that drove mages all over Tamriel to do, as Vilkas dryly put it, the most skeever-brained of experiments. He had told her stories of the jobs he had taken protecting scholars and mages as they poked around in caves and ruins. Often completely oblivious to any danger, he had snorted and told Sigrid that no amount of gold was worth babysitting a magical theorist with an idea in his head. Unfortunately for Vilkas, the spirit of adventure was alive and well in the outlander. She wanted to see it all, while she could.

Sigrid got distracted by everything, peeking into old dwarven halls, paging through books. Sometimes she painstakingly mined the white, gleaming geodes that she whispered would fetch a fine price. When Vilkas huffed at her as she knelt down to harvest yet another handful of crimson nirnroot, she shushed him and reminded her man of the benefits of her foreknowledge. It would not harm her...as long as she didn’t stuff it in her mouth, or anything.

Finding Sinderion’s remains in that sad little house had been gut wrenching. Sigrid remembered, like in a dream, the memory of playing Oblivion. The puffy, glowing graphics, the way she had savored all the quests and exploration. She did remember the enthusiastic, slightly dotty Altmer who lived in a cellar studying the alchemy of nirnroot. To step over his bones was...more surreal than anything that she had seen yet in the depths of the Dwemer ruins.
As they wandered past the waterfalls and glowing giant mushrooms, Sigrid could make out the tower of Mzark. They entered as silently as their armor allowed, with the Harbinger making silent oaths to study stealth more thoroughly once they had finished this slog of a journey.

Reaching the glowing, mechanical buttons and levers, Sigrid placed the strange cube device upon the pillar. “Right, right, left…” she murmured to herself, noting that Vilkas seemed hyperaware, his fists tightening around his blade as he searched for anything moving. Anything alive.

With a hiss and clank, the wide metal arms parted to reveal a malachite hued egg that cracked down the middle, revealing what had to be an elder scroll. Touching it with reverence, Sigrid wrapped it in the lengths of linen she had procured for this purpose, and gesturing to Vilkas to follow as they exited through the rusted elevator.

Sniffing the strange hydraulic fluids, she was vividly reminded of her father’s garage, where he tinkered with antique automobiles and motorcycles. The acrid, almost gasoline smell of dwemer oil mixed with the tang of rust made her strangely nostalgic. A car, driven on actual paved roads, now that would have cut her travel time down considerably in Skyrim.

Not that she wanted the aftereffects to spoil the atmosphere, though. Even in South Dakota, where the population barely supported itself with the home grown businesses and one-man medical clinics, there was sometimes a haze of pollution in the air. Especially in July, when the Sturgis Rally held full sway, and thousands of motorcycles roared through Rapid City.

She got lost in a teensy fantasy of Vilkas all gussied up in black leather, leaning against a vintage 1950 Indian Chief Black Hawk. Mmm. Even his smeared warpaint wouldn’t look that out of place at a bike rally, with his hair messed up the way it got, all ruffled in the brisk winds. She could just feel the sun on her face as she climbed on behind him, running her hands across the jacket, dipping under his black Hanes t-shirt to find...

“So, now what? Back to the old man up north, that Septimus?”

The reality stood before her, frowning as she came back to the present with a twitch. They had exited the tower to be greeted by the fading day. No more snow had fallen recently, thank the gods. But it didn’t really feel warm enough to be late summer. Even August in South Dakota had held more sunshine. She shivered, feeling the weight of the elder scroll tug against her pack.

“Later, maybe. He’s a bit of a crackpot, and the less I have to do with Hermaeus Mora, the better.” She had intentionally skipped the visit to the College of Winterhold, after much deliberation (and discussion with Vilkas, who agreed that had they known where she came from and what she knew, they might have chained her to the Arch Mage’s desk and kept her). Sigrid knew what had to happen, next.

It was just a matter of working up the nerve to open that damn scroll at the Tiid Keld, the Time Wound. Learning a shout that was crafted of pure hate. Perhaps the Greybeards were onto something when they had refused to have anything to do with Dragonrend.

Vilkas on the other hand had looked mildly intrigued as she explained the journey past Ivarstead, all the way up the seven thousand steps to the top of the Throat of the World. She had done it...damn, four, five times now? Not counting the trip down. She didn’t want to tally just how much time those steps had stolen from her life. No view was worth that.

Maybe, with him keeping her warm, it would be a tad more pleasant this time around. Sharing their furs, their naked bodies gliding against each other in the firelight...
Hell. They needed a vacation. Maybe after the wedding? She hadn’t even given it a spare thought. Vilkas had been adorably awkward when she brought anything marriage-related up in conversation. The way he tilted his head, refusing to look at her, all bashful...

“Well, no time like the present.” Sheathing his sword, Vilkas readjusted his pack, then checked hers. “We can ride in a wagon again, if you want. Climbing seven thousand steps sounds…”

“It sounds exhausting. And it is, especially when the ice wraiths come out to play.” Grimly preparing for the long haul ahead, Sigrid unlocked the gate of Mzark for later. Just in case.

“Let’s get going, then.”

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“Bahloki nohkip sillesejoor. My belly is full of the souls of your fellow mortals, Dovahkiin!”

Gritting her teeth against the sound, the terror of Alduín’s powerful voice ripping through her, inside of her, Sigrid steeled herself. Wind blasted snow almost sideways, as rumbling thunder clouds revolved ponderously around the mountain peak. “Ruth Strun Bah!” She heard Paarthurnax spit, almost buzzing with frustration as she moved at a glacial pace.

She could see Vilkas behind her, with Paarthurnax hovering protectively in the air around them both.

“Die now, and await your fate in Sovngarde!”

Readying her sword for what was probably going to be the shortest fight of her life, Sigrid stood shaking in terror as the monstrous, black scaly beast that was the firstborn of Akatosh swooped lazily overhead. “Lost funt, you are too late Alduin!” Paarthurnax rumbled behind her.

“Dovahkiin! Use Dragonrend, if you know it!”

Currents of snow laden air whipped her hair into her eyes, obscuring her vision as she looked wildly around for Alduín. She knew, oh, she definitely had felt the spiny claws of Joor Zah Frul hooked into her soul when she learned, learned from those ancient Nord heroes in the time wound.

As Alduín roared yet again, words triumphant yet indistinguishable from the howling storm, Sigrid prepared herself. The dragon was a paradox. He reminded her of the cheap fantasy statues sold in asian markets down at the mall, where the scales were flaking off their paint as they were handled by bored customers. Cheesy. Unrealistic. A caricature of evil.

And at the same time, the dark billowing presence was like the most terrifying horror flick she had ever seen; the kind that made her check the locks on the doors at night, dig her back into the sofa and cover her eyes because god, if she looked they might see her, reaching those black claws straight out of the television and -

- “Joor Zah Frul!” She couldn’t risk it, couldn’t risk the great drake diving down and entangling Vilkas, who looked so fragile, so small on the mountaintop, in his teeth or claws. Alduín had already screamed something; syllables that had brought down rocks emblazoned with fire, like meteors raining from the sky. She dodged them, pushing Vilkas out of the way as a rock as big as a VW bus came crashing down.

Her Dragonrend shout began to take hold, as binding blue light wrapped itself around the fearsome limbs, dragging the black body down, down to the snowy peak. Paarthurnax howled in triumph as
Sigrid shakily approached the dragon, sword first.

“Dovahkiin, you call yourself?” His voice rumbled, haughty and proud. “Arrogant mortal!”

Striking with the speed of a snake, Alduin snapped his teeth at her, at the Companion following close behind. “This is your chance, Dovahkiin!” She heard Paarthurnax call, as if from far away, his words blown with the wind. “Strike with all your force!”

She did. Hacking and cleaving, she dodged the swipes from his armor plated tail...bobbing and weaving away from the red gullet surrounded by dagger tipped fangs, stretching, seeking to consume her.

Her steel held true. She used every Shout she knew of, Fus Roh Dah, Yol Toor Shul. She would not chance creating a hurricane on the mountaintop where Vilkas could be swept completely off. She could see him at times, dazed and barely clinging to the surface as the battering powers of the Thu’um broke and crashed, like mighty waves of sound, against each other. Dragonborn against the Firstborn of all Dragons.

She hiccuped with a weak laugh as Alduin taunted her, calling out Dovahkiin. It would have been a hell of a lot more awe-inspiring, more the stuff of bards songs and tales had her limbs not been shaking, trembling with fear as she forced herself to move closer, to keep swinging her sword despite the awful, wrenching panic that his dark, deep voice called inside her. Every nightmare she had endured under Vaermina, in the keep of the Thalmor, in her own head was played on a video reel, over and over, _gods make it stop..._ 

Vilkas yanked her out of the way of a sudden snap of jaws. Shoving her behind him, the Companion’s blade bit deep into the ebony scaled neck. Jets of black blood spurted in stops and starts, as Alduin shrieked his rage at the impudence, the raw daring of these _joore_ to trap him, to cut him with steel tooth and claw...

She heard it all, as the souls within her all cried out in varying degrees of triumph and hate. Her head pounded with the fury, the emotion of dovah long dead, overtaking her.

“Well, while he is grounded!” Paarthurnax landed atop Alduin in a predator’s dive, claws digging into his brother’s back.

And all she could see were those flashing red eyes, directing all their violence towards her.

“ _Meyz mul, Dovahkiin. You have become strong. _”

Her teeth chattered as his eyes became rubies, became blood glinting in fathomless pools as she was drawn into his gaze. “But I am _Al-du-in_, Firstborn of Akatosh! _Mulaagi zok lot!_ I cannot be slain here, by you or anyone else!”

Heaving suddenly, Paarthurnax cried out as Alduin curled, ripping into the soft belly of the elderly dovah. “You cannot prevail against me. I will outlast you...mortal.”

She squinted, tracking his wings as they took the black dragon higher, soaring above the thunderclouds. Lightning flashed, outlining the dragon in brilliant white light as a fork of electricity hit the rock arch nearby with a resounding boom. Boulders crashed into the snow.
Slowly, her hearing came back through the static whine of sensory deprivation. She could hear Vilkas panting, grey eyes furious and staring after the World Eater. She tried for bravado, allowing her sword arm to hang limply at her side. _Gods, her limbs felt as though they were going to fall off._ “That...was more intense than I had expected.”

“You think?!?!” Wiping his sword in the snow, the dragon blood smoked, thin wisps of black trailing from the edge as Vilkas dried the blade then sheathed it. Turning to her, he was about to speak, when Paarthurnax wheeled down and landed with a thundering crunch.

“Lot Krongah.” The massive, wedge shaped head nodded approvingly. “You truly have the Voice of a Dovah. Alduin’s allies will think twice after this victory.”

Pursing her lips, Sigrid saw Vilkas shudder in the cold. Leaning over, she wrapped her arms around him and whispered. The fires of _Yol Toor Shul_ immediately warmed them both, bathing them in embers of flame that she contained with difficulty; living fire scorching her throat in its desire to break free.

Satisfied that they would not die right then and there, Sigrid turned to her teacher. “I need to find out where Alduin went. Though, I do have a sneaking suspicion.”

“Ni liivrah hin moro. True, this is not the final _krongrah_ - victory. But not even the heroes of old were able to defeat Alduin in open battle.”

Well. That was just _great_ news. And the game had made killing Alduin seem so simple, almost an afterthought to the Halls of Shor in Sovngarde. She remembered complaining about the ease in slaying the World Eater. _What had she been thinking?_ “So...not much of a victory, if Alduin escaped.”

She felt Vilkas huff out a shuddering laugh, and tightened her arms around him. Breathing superheated air onto his neck, he nuzzled against her, grey eyes wide as Paarthurnax stretched his ragged wings, re-adjusting his stance on the shifting snows. “Alduin always was _pahlok_ - arrogant in his power. _Uznahgor paar_. He took domination as his birthright.”

“This should shake the loyalty of the dov who serve him.” The old dragon mused. “Yes...one of his allies could tell us. _Motmahus_...But it will not be so easy to...convince one of them to betray him. Perhaps Odhaviing.”

“The _Hofkahsejun_ would work very well, to trap a dovah.” Dovahzul almost rolled from her lips without realizing it. Such ease, in an alien tongue. Paarthurnax grumbled _vahzah_ in agreement, his brow ridge arching at Sigrid in such a way, that—was Paarthurnax _winking_ at her?

Oh. Well. Yes, she was holding Vilkas rather tightly. With a wave of exhaustion creeping up over her, she thought they sort of deserved some comfort after the hellish week they’d both endured.

“Tiid Bo Viing,” she cautioned the Master of the Way of the Voice. Please, no more. If she lingered just to have the old one tease her, they would end up as ice statues, trapped on the top of the world. Her breath of fire would not last forever.

Heavy chuckles, like the rasp of a drawbridge being opened, echoed around them as Paarthurnax bore himself aloft once more. “Good luck, dovahkiin! _Dahmaan_, remember to call upon Odhaviing soon.”

“Pruzah wundunne, Paarthurnax,” She whispered, the farewell unreciprocated as Paarthurnax
laughed once more. “Orin brit ro, Dovahkiin!” Paarthurnax gestured to Vilkas.

“Kren sosaal...” She muttered balefully, as the dragon swooped away, laughing still in that rusty-hinged voice.

“...I’m almost afraid to ask. What are we doing now?” Damn, she could feel the ice from the man’s cold hands seeping past her leathers. Not even his vaunted Nord endurance would save them if they stayed.

“We are getting the hell off this mountain. Stand back, so I can clear up this storm a bit.”

Staring at her, with snowflakes encrusting his eyelashes as he blinked in stunned amazement, Vilkas spoke shakily, “You can do that? Gods, woman, is there anything you’re not capable of?”

For the first time since opening that dratted scroll, Sigrid smiled. Holding her arms up high, she spun around. “Fly. Now step away, so I don’t blow you off the mountain.”

***********

The Greybeards were surprised, but welcoming when the Dovakhiin and her companion trudged in from the blizzard, cold and worn out.

Vilkas left the cold stone chamber he had been led to by Arngeir, searching for Sigrid. The elderly Masters of the Voice had been courteous, but so silent. He had spoken a few times without realizing, though he had been told quietly by Sigrid that they would be unable to respond. He could still feel the aged eyes following him as he stepped quietly through the tomb-like stillness of High Hrothgar.

He found the woman deep in the throes of meditation. Kneeling on cold stone floor, he watched in fascination as wisps of smoke escaped from her nostrils and parted lips. She wore nothing but a binding cloth on her breasts and smalls to cover her nakedness. Vilkas could smell the sour-sweetness of the snowberry soap they had used to wash up, water turning cold fast in the high altitude of the mountain keep. Almost too cold to wash with, though the water had been near boiling when placed before them.

Kneeling next to her, Vilkas waited for her to finish...whatever it was that she was doing. Minutes passed, and the peace he felt must have spread to Sigrid as well. The fine lines caused by worry slowly smoothed, and eventually she opened her eyes to smile at Vilkas.

Who smiled back. His lips quirked at the sight of smoke still escaping from her mouth. So that was why she often tasted like fire. It wasn’t just the heat of his blood that made her that way, to him. She made him burn.

“Thank you for waiting.” She stretched, shivering suddenly in the cold as she hugged her nakedness.

“I didn’t mind.” Handing her a heavy, almost rug-like ice-wolf pelt, she hopped up from the long corridor and jerked her head, indicating that he follow.

He trailed after her, eyes scanning the worn but expensive furnishings that were housed in the Greybeard’s keep. Books seemed to be the most dominant feature. Every wall and nook bore
groaning shelves filled with volumes. His fingers longed to run over the embossed surfaces, to open and devour the pages.

He would ask later for that pleasure. At the moment, as he watched hungrily as Sigrid stripped off her breastband and coverings, he could think of only one thing he desired.

“A long week, yeah?” She yawned, cracking a grin as she felt him spoon her from behind. Still dressed, he wrapped his arms around her as the furs cocooned them atop the stone slab that passed for a bed around here.

“Too long.” Resting his chin atop her head, he sighed. “We might have gotten better rest in a ditch than...whatever this is.”

He felt her chuckle, feeling the echoes of her voice thrumming through him. He only noticed her Thu’um, really, at the extremes of her moods. “True. I think we need about six more layers of furs before this bed would be even remotely comfortable.”

Curling his head into the curve of her neck, Vilkas breathed out slowly, his exhale tickling the sensitive skin of her neck. He grinned, feeling her squirm beneath him. “Hmm...you are getting soft, Harbinger. But,” he slowly traced her hipbone, moving stealthily as he slid his hand down, cupping her womanhood. “I’m sure we can find better ways to keep you warm.”

“Oh yes,” she moaned, as he pushed slowly against her, behind her. Wrapped up like this, she could almost imagine they were all alone, on some alpine retreat, and not sharing a drafty castle with a group of crusty old men.

Even traveling alone together, she had not had much success in seducing Vilkas away from what he considered his honor-bound duty; to protect her. Even at night, they took turns taking watch over the night against bandits and beasts. Hurried embraces and stolen kisses were all well and good, but it had been so long. So long since they had been free from vigilance. Way too long since they had slept somewhere that wasn’t a cave, or under some tree, all exposed in the open. Usually covered in an unenticing mixture of sweat, blood and dirt.

Sigrid felt as though her stomach were tied in knots. Every touch was a delicate torment. And her bastard of a fiance knew it, too, knew what triggered her toes to curl, to make her pant with want.

She could feel his length, warm and hard as he slowly, carefully pushed against her back, against the cleft of her ass. Arching her back, she encouraged him, writhing sinuously as he gasped in response. Grabbing his hands from their place at her thighs, she placed them on her breasts, pressing on his hands with her own as he mouthed the shell of her ear.

But he wouldn’t, refused to give in to her. He would make her come first, drawing it out until she literally begged him to end it. He could be so patient at this, that she wondered if all the irritation and angst he poured into training and warfare at Jorrvaskr was just a cloak, a concealment for his true nature -

- That of a torturer. Gliding his hands lightly up and down her torso, she whined, wriggling against him, begging without words for more friction. Something. Anything.

She felt his chest expand against her back as one of his hands parted her folds. Stiffening at the intrusion, she leaned her head back, trying to catch his lips in a kiss as he bit his lip, going further. Adding two fingers, as he pumped slowly, achingly inside her heat.

The tightness was driving her wild, and when he added a circular movement with his thumb she just
about lost it. “\textit{Faaz nah,}” she snarled, her throat sparking, rumbling as she felt his lips widen in a superior smirk, bucking against his hips as he held her still, still tracing her clit with all the patience in the world.

She came hard, \textit{so} hard she saw stars. His arms were tight around her as she jerked against his chest, gasping for breath. Her entire body rumbled with echoes of her voice, and dimly she realized that the books in their shelves nearby had all fallen over. She’d pick them up later.

Still holding her as she came down from her sensory high, Vilkas pulled her earlobe tightly with his teeth as, lifting her leg, he slowly entered her from behind.

The hot sensation of fullness, right after that mind blowing orgasm...it was almost too much. She whimpered pathetically as he took his time, gliding in and out, his hands tight as he pinned her hips against his. This time, he was too distracted to avoid her, as she leaned her head back to kiss him. Her knees bent, toes curling as her mouth leisurely explored his.

It was her turn to smile crookedly as his breath came faster, losing his timing as she reached back, holding what she could of him as his hips pumped against her, moaning against her mouth.

He came with a muffled oath, pressed against her lips. She held him tightly, eyes fluttering as the furs slid off, forgotten. Trying to capture forever the butterfly feeling of his hard on slowly softening inside of her, as she basked in the hot flush of afterglow.

She could feel the long muscles of his torso and legs relax, slowly easing away from her as he sighed, breathing on her neck. Snuggling against him as she turned, she wrapped a leg around his hips, pulling him in even further as he grabbed the furs that had fallen down off the bed, covering them thoroughly from the cold.

Curled into the cradle of Vilkas’s arms, Sigrid slowly fell asleep, soothed by his even, steady breaths.

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She didn’t think about how loud her Thu’um may have been until she sat at table with the Greybeards and Vilkas that next morning.

Borri caught her gaze, then flicked his eyes at Vilkas. Dumbly, she stared back, chewing a very dried out boot of what was supposedly bacon. Damn, Klimmek needed to bring fresher supplies once in a while.

Raising hoary eyebrows, Borri puckered his lips, then pointed to his throat.

\textit{Oh.}

She blushed a deep, hot red. \textit{Damn.} Well, if Borri wouldn’t (or couldn’t) say what was apparently on everyone’s minds, then she wasn’t going to bring up how loud she was during sex.

And honestly, that had been downright tame. She was pretty sure the reason Njada Stonearm hated her was the fact that her room shared walls with Vilkas’ room in Jorrvaskr. But now that Athis was keeping her busy, perhaps the Block Trainer would be a bit more...friendly. Relaxed, maybe?
Hell. Like that would happen. She told Vilkas about Borri later, as they descended the seven thousand steps.

His laughter warmed her, even as it echoed out over the valley.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s note: If you get the movie reference Sigrid referred to, you get a cookie.

Also, my dovahzul phrases are pulled from this handy website.
https://www.thuum.org/learn/practice/phrases.php
“Mama, they’ve returned!” Mila danced in the road, still chewing one of the green apples Carlotta had set aside from trading for her. One of her best sellers, she had almost sold them out. The last of the shoppers were slowly trickling away, back to their homes to prepare for the midday meal.

Squinting against the light, Carlotta stepped away from the stall to better see the cobbled road that led to Whiterun’s gates.

“I see them, little fairy. They all look unharmed, thank the Divines.” Wiping the sweat from her forehead, the Imperial straightened her gown, smoothing down stray hairs as she hurried to make herself presentable. She could see them now, see the tall head of Farkas dwarfing that of his brother and the Harbinger as they strolled leisurely towards the market district. She smiled in relief.

Safe. He was safe, they had found Sigrid. They were here.

Every time Farkas arrived home from attending to a job or errand, the tight knot in her chest eased a bit more. She still remembered that fateful day, years ago when Mila was still in swaddling clothes, when the Imperial courier had delivered to her the death notice of her husband, Arcturus Valentia. It had felt like the end of the world, had tied up her heart in cold fear. Fear that had not loosened, not completely, even with the strange serendipity that was Farkas arriving, like the sun in her life.

It hadn’t been all that long ago, really, that Mikael had become almost intolerable in his attentions. There were not very many child friendly places to take little Mila to dine. The Bannered Mare was comfortable, clean. Hulda heaved out any nasty drunks by her own hand, and if they were too rough for her to manage, then the Companions who frequented the tavern would do so gladly.

It had reached the point where the bard leered at her every night she crept in, Mila in tow. That night, she had paid for their meal. Had taken the roasted potatoes and seared mammoth steaks to a quiet corner, to be enjoyed in peace. Until Mikael had grabbed her, and despite her cries of angry protest, tried to kiss her, groping as Mila yelled at him to stop. Laughing as she beat at him ineffectually, her blows glancing off the Nord’s chest.

“That’s enough. The lady doesn’t want your company, bard.”

He had seemed larger than life, then. Almost blocking out the light of the fires as Mikael turned to sneer at the approaching Companion, who had a face so grim that she feared him at once.

The ensuing fight had been short, with few blows exchanged. The bard had crawled away, holding his head in pain, nodding when Farkas had warned him, clenched fist still knuckled tightly, to leave and bother her no longer.

“Thank you, Companion. Life’s hard enough with all these men propositioning me. But that bard was the worst.” Slowly, so slowly he had turned to face her. Peering down from his great height, Farkas had scratched his head and given her a careful smile.

That had been the beginning of the end, Carlotta thought ruefully. It wasn’t long before Farkas began to frequent her produce stall. Buying simple things, such as the green apples or fresh carrots, which he munched in seemingly deep thought, standing by her stall.

Later, he brought a carved bear of wood for Mila, who had cried happily, clutching the precious toy to her chest. “Oh, thank you! I’ve only ever had dolly, but now she has a friend!”
Mila had struggled to make friends with the Nord children of the hold. Many never let her forget that she was Imperial, outlander. Unwanted. It was difficult for Carlotta, as well. She had only arrived in Whiterun during her husband’s call to serve because of Arcadia. The alchemist was a distant relative of her mothers, and had invited her warmly to come visit. Carlotta had fallen in love with the wide, blue skies, the fresh air so different from the close humidity of the Imperial City.

And now, she had fallen in love with a Nord.

She cracked a smile. The most barbaric and warlike of Nords. Farkas was hard to miss, walking along the streets pursuing a job, running errands between the smithies, helping Tilma with her shopping. Once, she was passing the Shrine of Talos with her laundry when she had spied him training, shirtless in the yard with his brother. She had dropped the wet clothing in the dirt. Blushing, she had picked it up only to find him reaching down to help collect her things. She had stared in fascination as the bunched muscles of his shoulders flexed; the coiled, curved ropes of tattoos snaking across his back in a tangle of lines.

Vilkas was steel and sinew, tightly coiled and sharp as a blade. His harshness appealed not at all to Carlotta, who feared the the gruff man, saw him as unapproachable. But Farkas never shouted, never raised his voice even while wielding that sword that was almost as tall as Mila. How those two ended up as brothers was a mystery.

She knew, later, when she presented him with a baked apple pie as thanks for Mila’s toy, that he was kind. He had eaten only a slice, his eyebrows lifting in appreciation as he tidily licked his fingers (and there was a memory that would keep her up at night) insisting that she keep the rest for Mila. Her little fairy had been delighted. The next day, she had been pleasantly surprised to find the two of them, hulking warrior and little girl, having a tea party on the stone steps near the waterfall. The carved bear and dolly were in attendance, as Mila primly cut and presented slices of pie to them all.

Those who called him oaf, or dim-witted...gods, Carlotta could recall with perfect clarity Brenuin’s sour face crumpling in shock when she belted him with a fist. The old drunk had laughed at Mila when she had refused to share her dumpling, insisting that Farkas have the first pick. “Peh, that ice brain couldn’t appreciate a rock cake! Give it here, girl.”

It had hurt, that first time she had ever hit someone in anger. She had held her shaking hand in shock as the beggar hightailed it away, only to gasp when Farkas had appeared from nowhere. Frowning, he lifted her hand, his rough fingers feeling for breaks, gently squeezing with enough pressure that she shuddered, though not in pain.

“Shouldn’t hit someone with your thumb in your fist, woman. It will hurt less, next time, if you make a fist like this.” And he had shown her, shaping her fist with his giant, careful hands.

“Thanks. I may just be an Imperial widow, but if that beggar thinks he can bully my girl or her friends, that drunken sot can think again.”

Farkas had blinked, slowly stretching his lips into a wide grin. “Aye. That’s the spirit.” Looming over her, it was her turn to blink as those warm grey eyes locked onto hers. “I’ve hoped to be considered your friend, as well.” he spoke softly.

And so he was. Until he wasn’t. Was no longer just a friend, that night she had invited him to stay for dinner. She had spent the day in a flurry of activity, rolling and baking and tasting the meal she wanted to prepare. Scolding herself for the unseemly excitement she felt, only to be surprised when Mila had announced that she was staying with Braith overnight for her nameday, and would Carlotta mind?
No. Carlotta hadn’t minded. Not at all, not even when Farkas had pushed the devoured remains of her days labor to the side and had oh-so carefully pulled her in closer, capturing her chin with his callused hands…

She had forgotten what it was like to be held, to be filled by a man. So lonely. All those years, she had kept herself locked away, telling herself she needed no one and nothing but what kept her and Mila alive. She had moaned, almost in agony that night the first time he made her come as he pressed her against the hastily cleared dining table, hands tightly holding her down as she writhed against him. The first of many, many such nights.

And now, as she watched them approaching, it was almost too good to be true that they were to wed. That she had been accepted, fully, without reservation into the society of Whiterun.

It seemed Sigrid felt the same way. Later, as their men joked and bantered over the fire at Jorrvaskr, Carlotta had dared to sit down next to the new Harbinger.

She wore a beautiful wine-dark dress that bore golden threads at the neck and wrists, with her sword still belted on top of the gown. Her rich auburn hair had also been braided back, her usual tear trails of bloody warpaint missing for once. Uncaring of her finery, Sigrid twisted the rings that hung upon an amulet around her neck, deep in thought.

Where was her amulet of Mara?

No matter. Some couples waited to exchange tokens until the wedding day. Perhaps Sigrid and Vilkas followed that tradition. “I heard about your engagement, and I am happy for you.” She nudged the woman playfully. “I’ve always wanted a sister!”

“I had one, once.” Sigrid’s amber eyes were far away. “She was about six years younger than me; a surprise for my parents. Annoying and spoiled. Gods, I loved her.”

“Ah.” The Imperial winced, wishing she hadn’t been so free with words. “I’m so sorry.”

“No need for that.” Realizing Carlotta sat there, Sigrid stood a bit straighter. Reaching behind, the Harbinger unfastened her amulet and offered it to Carlotta.

Curiosity prompted the Imperial to take it, examining what appeared to be a very well-worn amulet of Arkay, with two gold rings strung on either side. “Arkay? I’d have thought Vilkas would go with Mara. Tradition, you know.”

“He did. Give me an amulet of Mara, I mean.” Sigrid’s fingers twisted in on themselves. “I don’t have an amulet for him, yet.”

“That’s easily remedied. I’m sure Eorlund could find one for you, somewhere. His wife carries a good variety of jewelry in stock.” Sensing her discomfort, Carlotta placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Are these rings meaningful?”

“They…one belonged to my dead husband. And the other was mine. We married young.”

“I see.” The rings were finely made. Replacing the amulet in the Harbinger’s hands, Carlotta turned more fully to face her. “My husband Arcturus died somewhere in the Pale Pass, about seven years ago. He was an officer in the Imperial Legion. Even though I originally came here to be close to him, I stayed. And I’m glad I did.”

The Imperial woman reached out tentatively, patting Sigrid’s scarred hand. “Are you…alright? You don’t seem very happy, for someone who will soon be a bride.”
“I am. Happy, I mean. It still doesn’t feel real, you know.” Twisting her free hand in the red cloth of her skirt, Sigrid bit her lip. “I keep expecting to wake up in my old house, with...with Bryce and the kids, all needing something as we prepare for the day. For so long, that was my life. And I loved it.”

Her hand twitched under Carlotta’s fingers. “But, I love this too. And I feel so god damn guilty about it.”

Quietly laughing, Carlotta leaned closer. “The guilt of the survivor. You’re not alone in feeling that way. I...I hardly knew Art, before we were wed. And Farkas is, well...he’s Farkas. It’s wonderful and new and terrifying, all at once.”

Someone began playing a cheerful tune on a flute, with a drum quickly sounding in accompaniment. The two women sat there, contemplating their thoughts. Sigrid broke the silence with a hoarse chuckle. “I never realized how much we have in common. We’re both widows...outlanders. Hoping, somehow to built a new life.”

Carlotta smiled, squeezing the woman’s hand one final time, then retreating to grab a bottle of wine from a nearby table. “You know, I think Eorlund could melt down those rings to make you an amulet, if you like. That would be incredibly romantic.” She poured them both a cup, handing one to Sigrid with a nod.

“Too romantic!” Sigrid laughed, taking a sip. “I wouldn’t want Vilkas to think I actually like him. Ruins the whole balance of power I’ve got going here.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want that,” Carlotta teased in return. “Divines only know we need all the help we can get, against those two.”

“Hmm.” The Harbinger hummed in agreement, swirling her glass. “What do you think about a harvest wedding? Later in Hearthfire, or early Frostfall?”

“That sounds perfect. A double wedding, I can’t believe it.” Carlotta finished her wine. Noting the lines of worry that still marked Sigrid’s forehead, the Imperial sighed. “You should know...I’ve never, not in all these years here seen Vilkas so upset as when you were taken away. That man is in love with you.”

Sigrid huffed, her eyes focused on the subject of their conversation, who was with his brother attempting to play the drums and laughing at their failure. “I wish it never happened. I’m not sure I can promise that it will never happen again. What I have to do...it’s not safe, Carlotta. I’m afraid for him.”

Shaking her head, Carlotta could almost feel the sadness seeping from the woman before her. “You never know what the future will bring. When I found out that Mila and I were alone in the world, I thought that was it. My life, such as it had been, was over. Maybe you’ve felt like that too?”

Seeing Sigrid nod, Carlotta continued. “Then why are you worried? No one, not even the gods can predict the future. I can’t imagine what it must be like, being...well...Dragonborn. And Harbinger of the Companions. That’s a heavy burden. But Vilkas...he’s strong.”

Patting her on the back one last time, Carlotta stood up. “He’ll help you carry that burden, if you let him.”

Leaving the Harbinger sitting, staring forlornly at her amulet, Carlotta banished melancholy from her mind. Wrapping her arms around Farkas, she felt him smile as he placed a kiss upon her wrist. “Hey there, beautiful. Ready to head home?”
Tracing a finger along his amulet he wore around his neck, Carlotta lowered her head, kissing his forehead. “I can’t wait.”

Love could be simple. Steady, like the sun that always rose and set. They walked hand in hand, towards her home. Their home, where Mila waited for her parents to return again.
Bit melancholy, this chapter. Here's a good song for it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMTJoUe8jYs&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&index=9

It wasn’t fair. Not to him. Not to Vilkas.

The insistent, trailing thought had dogged her mind for so long, now. Couldn’t quench the pain, the fear, not even in his arms. He knew there was something bothering her, though he respected her enough not to ask. What was it about guy talk, she thought in some amusement, that it kept them from asking straight out what was wrong? Men were so forthright about other things. She almost wished he would, if just to release the poison she kept deep inside.

Sigrid sat on the roof of Jorrvaskr, watching the sun rise in the east, painting everything in pre-dawn light. No one else was up yet, no one there to see the Harbinger stewing in indecision up here.

She couldn’t let him hurt, hurt as she had, when Bryce had been taken. When her babies had been buried.

Sigrid felt the omen of her death, felt it in her bones with a weary assurance. Knew it as Paarthurnax had bid her farewell. Saw it in the Greybeard’s eyes as she meditated long and hard upon the Voice, seeking the clarity she glimpsed only infrequently. The calm, unfeeling nirvana of peace.

She was going to die. Soon. No one could live through the quest she had undertaken, to fly on the back of a reluctant dragon to a mountaintop only a dovah could reach. Entering a portal to the Nordic underworld. Defeating the black demon that still crept in the shadows of her nightmares, a grinning black hole of teeth and red glowing eyes.

He was still young. Not more than a year or so older than she. He could still father children, attract some young, winsome slip of a Nord girl. They could live at Breezehome (she had passed by so many times, looking through the open door at the current occupants who had recently moved to Markarth. A family, with three young children.) He would be a good, if stern father.

In her painful fantasy, this Nord girl would be plump and smiling, with wheat blonde hair and sky blue eyes. She could give him children, boys and girls milling around Jorrvaskr, being fed sweetmeats by Tilma as Vilkas tried to balance the accounts. She could almost see the smear of ink that often stained his chin as he chewed upon the nib of the quill, studying the numbers…

Choking back a sob, she sat back against the weathered tiles of the roof.

She had to. Would not, could not chain him to her, to a dead woman whose soul was more draconic than human.

Allowing herself to feel, to feel this at least, Sigrid lost herself to the grief. Tears poured from her eyes, chest shaking as she curled into her hands and wailed, over and over. She yelled at Heimskr when he approached, chasing away with angry oaths the batty priest who had ventured over to see
what all the noise was about.

Such a beautiful dream. She would have spent the rest of her life with that impossible, stubborn, wonderful bastard. Lived it fully. But how cruel, how cold it would be to marry him right before her imminent death?

It could only be a dream.

************

She had wavered long enough. It would be kinder, more just to make this his choice, Sigrid thought sadly. She decided to ask him when they returned from High Hrothgar, recovering from their battle at the Throat of the World.

What was it Runil had said, so long ago? *Life is far too short, my friend. Don’t waste it.*

She had not yet reclaimed the amulet of Mara from Vilkas. After the horror show that had been Dawnstar (and all those nightmares) she felt strangely reluctant to talk about the upcoming nuptials. And to think, Sigrid thought wryly, she had once been worried about his commitment issues.

But when the wedding was discussed, all she could see was the gaping maw of Alduin. Black wings shrouding, encasing her in airless silence as she disappeared forever, down, down into the darkness…

Or worse. The darkness devouring him.

*Be brave,* she scolded herself. There were no guarantees. No restarts, no saved files this time. Vilkas had been fighting far longer than she had. He knew the risks they took, every fight, every venture into the wild.

It only took Eorlund a moment to melt down the gold rings, fashioning an amulet of Mara beneath Sigrid’s inquisitive gaze.

She felt an echo of bittersweet longing, seeing the rings that she and her husband had worn for so long dissolved into a sun-bright puddle of metal. The clanging racket of the master smith’s work was strangely soothing. It felt as though her own past was disappearing, at last…the final link to her old life, gone.

Not like that. Remade. Forged into something that perhaps, could last the test of time. It would depend upon him.

She hovered near the Skyforge, staring out across the windy plains as Eorlund plied his craft.

“Here, lass. It is finished.” Looping the still-hot amulet on a newly fashioned chain, Sigrid examined the work with a critical eye. The gold had been blended with quicksilver, giving it a lustrous gleam.

Thanking the old smith, she walked towards Jorrvaskr. Her head held high, as she mentally prepared herself for the worst.

*Be brave.*
“Sigrid? Are you there?” Vilkas walked down the hall, weary after the long day of catching up with the business of running Jorrvaskr. Gods, he was getting old. These trips were taking their toll on his body. These last few weeks, a new book and Sigrid cuddled up to him in the hot springs was all he craved. If he had told himself, two years ago, that his ideal pastime involved a good soak and the arms of the same woman, night after night, he would have scoffed at himself in ridicule.

But he was not the same. Never would be. Thank the gods.

*Where was she now,* he wondered with a yawn. Pushing open the door to his personal quarters, he shut it. Only to pause in surprise.

Sigrid sat, stark naked, on his bed. She wore nothing but an amulet of Mara around her neck. No warpaint. Even her hair had been combed out of their usual braids.

“Hey there.” She smiled oddly, as he faltered in his steps at the look in her eyes. Patting the furs on the bed next to her, she beckoned him closer. “I wanted to talk to you for a second.”

“Is this some sort of trick, woman?” He seated himself gingerly on the edge of the bed.

She laughed almost ruefully. “No. No tricks.”

Pulling something out of her lap, she handed him a small bag. Quirking his brow, he frowned at her passive expression as she motioned for him to open it. He upended the bag. Out spilled a brand new amulet of Mara, along with the Falkniven knife she had offered him months ago.

Vilkas was at a loss for words, as his hands tightened around the amulet and knife. “They’re yours, if you want them.” her voice softly spoke in the stillness.

“I’ll always want this, woman.” He moved to place the amulet around his neck, only to be stopped by a gesture from her. She sighed. “That’s what I need to talk to you about.”

A cold curl of fear snaked into his belly. He swallowed. “What is this about, Sigrid?”

Shaking her head, the woman took off her amulet. Reaching out her hand, she took his unmoving fingers in her own. The amulets lay there, trapped by the cage their clasped hands made.

“Vilkas, I...I release you, from our engagement.”

He could hardly believe his ears. “What the *fuck,* Sigrid…”

“No, just...just hear me out.” Tamping down the fury and bone-deep sadness, he forced himself to look at her. Her eyes were bright with tears, turning the hazel almost sea green in the wavering light of the lantern.

“Vilkas. I love you.” Her hands squeezed his, as his held breath shuddered out with relief. “Don’t talk yet. I have to get this out, somehow.”
He felt his lips tighten into a thin line as she continued to speak. “Taking you to the Throat of the World was so dangerous. I didn’t realize, until we were there, just how...how god damn easy it would be, to lose you. I couldn’t bear it. And what I’m doing is not exactly safe.”

She looked down, her free hand tracing the scars on her legs, the bumps in her feet that remained from broken toes that had healed, lumpy and uneven. “It isn’t fair to you, to marry someone who doesn’t have long to live.”

“Sigrid, you -”

“I’m not done yet.” She cautioned him to stop with a sudden tightening of her hand on his. The metal of the amulets bit into his skin, as he forced himself to stay calm. “You should know, know that you have options. We don’t have to marry yet. Not until after all this has ended.”

Shaking his head, Vilkas huffed a laugh. “You’re the Harbinger, Dragonborn. I’m the Master at Arms of Jorrvaskr. Did you think our lives would be easy?”

He tilted his head, grey eyes sharp and intrusive as he seemed to look into her soul. “Is that it, woman? You want to give up? Go wander off somewhere, to till a farm and pluck cabbages. To keep me safe from you and your duty?”

Vilkas felt her tighten, the look of misery on her face like a blow to his gut. “Ah,” he breathed, almost rigid in his fury. “That’s what you think, isn’t it. That you won’t survive this...fucking hell Sigrid, how many monsters do you have to slay, to prove your might to yourself?”

Seeing her shoulders droop, he pulled her in close as the woman began to cry. Sighing in resignation, he held her close. “If it’s what you want...we can delay the ceremony. Until...after whatever it is you’ll be doing that has you tied up in such fear.”

Lifting her face with a hand, he forced her to look up at him as she sniffled, tears streaking her cheeks. “But you should know, I’m not giving up on you so easily. Now that I have you where I want you...” his other hand stealthily reached around, tickling the back of her knee as she yelped in surprise.

He managed to get a hysterical laugh from her, along with hiccups, as he brought her back from the wave of despair he could see she had been fighting, holding off for so long.

“Oh,” she gasped, still naked as she stretched out on the furs of his bed. Freckled and scarred, her body was a marvel. So soft, yet hard. Vilkas thought he’d never seen anything so beautiful. “Oh, that almost hurt, I laughed so hard.”

Feeling the remaining tightness in his chest ease, Vilkas lay down beside her. “Woman...I love you too.” Feeling her start as he pulled her into his arms, he smiled in triumph. He had never said that before, not out loud. Not for lack of trying. He had almost bitten out the words, that midsummer night. Pride kept them in, sealing his throat against words that could not be reclaimed.

But after this, he just didn’t give a shit anymore. “I love you. Don’t you dare ever say anything like that again.” He felt her shudder against him, still wound so tightly.

“There is something Kodlak used to tell us, back when the old man still taught us himself.” Vilkas spoke softly, stroking the curve of her hip. “It reminded me of your Greybeards, up there. What you said about the Way of the Voice. Kodlak liked to say that in the heat of battle, a warrior must control his rage. Focus on the calm, the peace within. Or else, that rage would overwhelm a man. Consume him, until all control was lost. A battle within a battle.”
He could feel her listening intently, as his hands continued their path down her legs, up again to trace her shoulders. He traced her freckles, sun spots that reminded him always of stars. Constellations in the night sky. How he longed to map out her entire body, to hold it forever pictured in his mind.

Clearing his head, he focused on what else Kodlak had said, that had impressed him so at such a young age. “There are rules, you know, for living life as a Companion. Glory in battle. Honor in life.”

His hands reached up to cup the fullness of her breasts. “Deal with problems head on.”

As she arched her neck, eyes tightly shut, Vilkas held her tightly against him, fingers working, rolling the softness in his palms as she bit back another sob.

He would make her see the fault in her fears.

“Love…” Vilkas rested his chin on her shoulder, his lips barely brushing her ear. He could feel the wetness of her tears as they dried, the puffiness of her cheeks. She inhaled a rattling, soggy breath as he closed his eyes as well, considering what to say.

“You should live such a life that your shield siblings would proudly say that they fought at your side.” Feeling her legs entwine with his as her breath hitched shakily, he smiled against her shoulder.

“Cowards die a thousand deaths, but the brave die only once.” Her hand reached up to cover his, over her chest. He could feel the hammered pounding of her heart slow as she calmed.

“Family and honor, Sigrid.” Vilkas whispered, holding her as tightly as he dared. Never. He’d never let her go. No matter how much time remained. “Family and honor.”

“I’m so sorry…” she whispered, grasping his hand in her own. “So sorry I put you through this. I just…” her breath puffed out tiredly. “Thought it would be more fair. Fair to you, to have you choose.”

“I chose you a long time ago.”

They lingered in his bed, wrapped together with no more words to say. Carefully pulling back, Vilkas felt her breathing slow as she drifted off to sleep in his arms. Being in a relationship, he reflected, had seemed so simple at the start.

But Vilkas had never in his life ran away from a fight. And he wouldn’t stop fighting, now. If this was to be how his life ended, then he would follow her. To Sovngarde, if need be.

Lulled by her soft snores (she never admitted it, but he found it strangely charming, that what she called snoring was more like a heavy sigh) Vilkas followed her into dreamless sleep.
Politics have no relation to morals.

*Thanks Machiavelli,* Sigrid thought sourly as she left the peace summit in a tangled snarl, men and women shouting as she escaped. Her footsteps took her to the room she and Vilkas had stayed in the last time she had visited High Hrothgar.

So simple. Gods, it had been so simple, to say, sure, let’s trap a fucking dragon in Dragonsreach. No problem.

Closing the heavy door, she began ripping off the heavy fur stole, the ornately embroidered gown that Jarl Balgruuf insisted she wear. It was lovely, the heavy velvet-like fabric a deep gold with a celtic knotwork pattern of green-gold thread running along the seams, gracing the cuffs that spilled almost to the floor. Tearing the matching circlet from her carefully coiffed hair, she tamped down the urge to throw it across the room.

Jarl Balgruuf had agreed to an audience with the newest Harbinger of the Companions, as well as the Master of Arms and the Head Instructor. A month ago Farkas and Vilkas, their heavy wolf armor replaced with a new, more Nordic design, flanked Sigrid as she strode into the Jarl of Whiterun’s study.

Sigrid wore plain red leathers and her weeping blood warpaint. Her hair was simply pinned and braided back, away from her face. She wore no jewelry or adornment aside from an amulet of Mara and a newly crafted Nordic sword. Its cruelly curved edge glinted in its scabbard, catching the firelight as she sat at the Jarl’s behest.

The Jarl of Whiterun was a handsome man, despite his declining years. His steward and bodyguard sat behind him, growing more distraught the longer Sigrid spoke.

She didn’t hold back. The Harbinger did not delve into the source of her knowledge, hinting in a roundabout way at the Sight her family passed to her, similar to Jarl Idgrod Ravencrone.

Balgruuf seemed to believe that part well enough. Her stance on the civil war, he had accepted with less equanimity, his knotted fists grasping the armrests of his chair until the knuckles turned white.

Having argued about it on message boards back in her world, Sigrid felt ambivalent about choosing either side, herself. She could certainly see where the Jarl was coming from as a neutral party.

The Empire of Cyrodiil was a dying carcass, being picked at by ravens named the Aldmeri Dominion, Morrowind, hell, even Skyrim had taken territory in the last hundred years or so. All had gone downhill for the once proud Empire after Martin Septim had broken the Amulet of Kings, saving Tamriel from the invasion of Mehrunes Dagon. He had saved them, yes, but at such a price. The dragonblood no longer flowed in royal blood, dead and faded. The Septim line was gone.

Well, dragonblood still technically flowed in her veins, Sigrid thought with an inward shrug. But she was from an entirely different world. Don’t ask her to explain how the hell that worked.

Point being, the Empire was no longer a sure thing. They did a shitty job protecting their supposed provinces. Skyrim was dotted with crumbling forts, watchtowers and prisons that had long since been abandoned to the ravages of time. Only bandits, rogue mages and beasts infested them now.

And while the Empire still heavily taxed Skyrim, Sigrid had learned that the benefits of trade only
went so far. It was true that in game, Vittoria Vici of the Empire East Trading Company, had extorted the spiced wine seller for a hefty tariff. Two thousand septims...the woman would be lucky to make that in half a year. She had always shaken her head in dismay, performing that little fetch quest.

And the whole White-Gold Concordat...god, what a mess. Sigrid wished sometimes that some form of video...holographics...something existed in this world to enable the spread of knowledge through vision and sound. Wished she could show the people of Skyrim the cruel consequences of appeasement, the slow drain of power that occurred when one gave in, and gave in until nothing was left to give. Skyrim already felt the pinch. Talos, god of men, had been banned from worship. And Sigrid still saw the defiant secret worship, the shrines hidden in mountains and secreted in caves, watched as the townsfolk of Whiterun muttered ‘Talos guide you’, despite all risk and punishment.

But, the banner of the dragon still protected those of all races who flocked to it. Which was more than Sigrid could say for the Stormcloak movement.

The rebellion, while popular with the native Nords as a nationalist movement that inspired pride and hope in her people, was spread out thinly...too far apart to effect a change as it was. There simply weren’t enough fighters to spare from the villages, the farms, the lumber mills to fill Ulfric Stormcloak’s army. Most fighters had served in the Imperial Legion and were still fiercely loyal to the brothers they had fought and died with during the last Great War.

Not to mention the issue that was Ulfric Stormcloak. After her imprisonment with the Thalmor, Sigrid honestly felt sorry for the Bear of Markarth. She had read his dossier, before turning it over to Delphine, and having endured much of the same torture that he had experienced...well. It made her more sympathetic than she otherwise would have been.

But the problem remained: Ulfric hungered for power. It wasn’t enough to merely kill the previous High King. He had to boast his use of the Voice, a move that rankled Sigrid. How could the man use the Thu’um in a political battle? Every time one used the voice, like a blade it cut deeper inside. Ulfric had used it for personal gain, for recognition and to solidify his claim to the throne. One who had been personally trained by the Greybeards should have known better.

Power corrupts. The more powerful one was, the greater the temptation, the easier it was to misuse that strength. Ulfric Stormcloak was already edging the line. Raised in a palace to be a politician, it was obvious that his soldiers, who promoted him so eagerly it was painful to see, were mere pawns on a board to the man.

She and Vilkas had talked at length about how she should present her case to the Jarl of Whiterun. As the single neutral party of a powerful Hold, Jarl Balgruuf could sway either side, providing soldiers, supplies and most importantly, food. The farms that clustered near Whiterun were the bread basket of Skyrim. She had often walked in the fields of wheat and rye, trailing her fingers over the golden stalks and marvelling at how such a simple thing spurred trade, won wars, and influenced royalty.

Vilkas had made a convincing argument to Sigrid about the necessity of choosing a side. Well, Sigrid thought darkly. She would choose a side, alright.

She chose Whiterun. Just as Jarl Balgruuf had, in-game, she would hold him to his personal loyalty, his dedication to his people that was far stronger and more believable than that of the other rulers she had encountered in her many playthroughs.

“And that is why, Jarl Balgruuf, I would support you as candidate for High King of Skyrim. Let it be at the upcoming Moot, or a peace council of your choosing. I believe you are the best choice for
Skyrim, if she is to survive the coming years.” She finished what had turned out to be almost an hour of speaking. Her throat had run dry as she expounded upon the pros and cons of choosing either side in an alliance, the potential outcomes that could ensue.

Farkas had stepped out to bring her a pitcher of wine, his solemn face radiating an awe that she was uncomfortable with as she nodded in thanks, taking a drink to soothe the soreness of her throat. It had been difficult, resisting the temptation to use the Dovahzul, the more sly overtures of entralling the mind that she knew, she knew with the alien strange knowledge that now existed inside of her, could win her any opinion. Any influence she chose.

It was evil. She would not, could not go so far as to actually force a man, to tell him what to think. It gave her a chill of terror, knowing that the Voice had been used eons past to influence man in this way. Not just in violence, but in guile. Never. She would never use it like that.

Leaning back in his chair, Jarl Balgruuf interrupted the shouted responses of his counsel with a raised hand. His clear blue eyes, rimmed in laugh-lines, peered at Sigrid thoughtfully. “Why, Dragonborn? Why me? I have not made any claim to the throne. Ulfric and Torygg’s widow, Elisif have already done enough damage.”

“But I believe you are the best choice, to bring lasting stability to our country.”

The Jarl fingered his mug of wine, seeming to think hard on what she had said. His fingers traced the carved rim of his goblet.

“What you’re asking will make Jarl Balgruuf even more of a target than he already is.” Irileth, Balgruuf’s Dunmer housecarl, spoke forcefully. Her greyish fingers gripped the hilt of her sword, red eyes restlessly roaming around the assembled men and women. “There have been many assassins, Dragonborn, assassins and spies. Why should he place himself in even more danger?”

“The Dark Brotherhood is...no longer a problem.” Sigrid looked away from Irileth as if in pain. Vilkas took her hand in his beneath the table, squeezing it in a show of support. Raising her head, Sigrid looked at Jarl Balgruuf squarely in the eye.

“But if you are worried about Jarl Ulfric...don’t be.” She smiled, a hint of cruelty hovering over her mouth as a throaty growl rumbled across the room. Proventus leaned back in his chair, shaken. Hrongar crossed his arms, grunting in approval. Farkas and Vilkas remained silent, solid sentinels surrounding her defensively.

Jarl Balgruuf stared back. “That man has already slain one High King. What’s to stop him from doing so again?”

“Me.” Releasing Vilkas’s hand beneath the table, she brought both her hands up and folded her fingers together, squeezing as she struggled to contain the wrath of the Thu’um. More difficult, every day. “Ulfric studied for years, and does not have the innate gift. How many Words of Power can he speak, even after all that time? No, Jarl Balgruuf, he is no threat to me.”
“I will protect you, as your Champion, if you will allow it.”

Again, the counselors of Whiterun’s ruling body broke out into heated argument. Some even stood, red faced as they spewed vitriol at the stone-faced Dragonborn and her Companions.

It had taken repeated meetings to bring Jarl Balgruuf to agree upon a peace council. Even longer to obtain the Greybeard’s approval to host the council at High Hrothgar; neutral territory for the Empire and the Stormcloaks.

One quiet night, when they were as alone as their watchful bodyguards would allow, Jarl Balgruuf and Sigrid Farstrider sipped at juniper mead upon the wide porch of Dragonsreach. The sun was setting, gold and pink painting the clouds that hovered over the far mountains, lighting up the tundra and rocky plains.

The Jarl was silent for a long time, swirling the mead in his glass. “Not since Numinex has a dragon been caught and contained, here. It will make for a fine tale for the bards to sing.”

Swallowing, Sigrid winced at the burn of the drink. Juniper belonged in healing mixtures, not alcohol. But it was his favorite. She would defer to his taste, this time. “I have Seen that Odahviing will be successfully captured here. It is absolutely necessary, my Jarl, for him to be lured here, so that I may reach Skuldafn in time.”

“Yes, so that you may fight this...World Eater.” Leaning over, the wooden chair creaked as Jarl Balgruuf looked at the Dragonborn, weighing and measuring. “Harbinger, I appreciate your show of confidence. But I am no whelp, all wet behind the ears. What do you gain from my ascendance to the high throne?”

Sigrid sighed, echoing against the wide hall in thunderous reverberation. “I gain peace, my Jarl.” The sun continued to set, as stars sparked, appearing slowly in the descending ink blue sky. “I get to know that I did my best, my very utmost for the people of Skyrim.”

“And perhaps, these choices we make will have saved lives, in the long run.”

Nodding as he continued to scrutinize her, Jarl Balgruuf lifted his glass. Raising hers in kind, she tilted her head as they drank to the dregs, both watching. Aware.

The sun disappeared, casting Whiterun into the night.

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The Peace Council had been a shitstorm of epic proportions.

The Blades, represented by Esbern and Delphine, were there. The Thalmor Embassy was present in the form of Elenwen, her cadaverous face pinched with distaste when she recognized Sigrid. Jarl Balgruuf and his scowling housecarl. Ulfric and Galmar, Elisif, Tullius and Rikke, they had all shown to give their two cents.

Arngeir of the Greybeards had presided, watching with steadily furrowed brow as the arguments ricocheted back and forth in the chamber.

It was as she had thought. No one agreed, no one was willing to budge an inch for what they viewed to be their high moral ground, their stance on the conflict tearing Skyrim apart.
Jarl Balgruuf had stayed silent much of the time, tapping a finger against his lips slowly as he took in the impassioned debates, the mud flinging. Thinly veiled barbs were slung on both sides. No one looked good here, and obviously the entire room felt it, as they strived to make up in volume what debate had lost.

“Enough!” Sigrid finally roared. The thunderclap of her Thu’um caused a visible recoil in the guests of the peace summit; with Elisif actually leaning away in something akin to horror. Arngeir watched silently, his eyes betraying nothing.

“I have listened to your debates.” Her voice rumbled as she managed a whisper, choking on rage. “Have endured the name calling, the childish casting of blame. No more!”

Turning towards Ulfric, then Tullius, Sigrid gestured to each. “By the power vested in me by the Greybeards as mediator of this council, I declare it to be over.”

Raising a hand to silence the babble of sudden refusal, she shook her head, lips tight. “You have been arguing for hours. I hear nothing but arguments chased in circles; endless. Hopeless.”

“There will be a Moot, a reconvening of Jarls at this same location one year from now. At that date, the vote will be cast as to who shall be Skyrim’s new High King. Ulfric Stormcloak, Elisif the Fair, or Balgruuf the Just.”

Cries, shouts, accusations, all were flung at her in a moment that seemed suspended in time. Ulfric glared at her as Galmar stood, spraying spittle as he gestured wildly at the Dragonborn. Elisif appeared to faint, as Tullius wearily eased the nerve-addled woman to the floor.

“In the meantime - “ They quieted somewhat as she quelled them with her hard stare. “There will be a cessation of hostility. That means no more fighting,” her lip almost quirked in a fiendish grin when both Tullius and Ulfric shot her looks of shock and rage. “No more. Not until Alduin has been ended, the dragon threat gone from our land. Gentlemen, we are tearing ourselves apart from the inside, while we suffer the loss of all we hold dear.”

Her voice swelled, shaking the snowberry branches in their vases, making the chandelier above shake and jerk. “This council is concluded. Depart.”

They would, she thought viciously, listen. They had begrudgingly accepted the terms. They would heed her...or there would be Oblivion to pay. At least she had caught their attention with her mention of the World Eater. An oncoming headache pounded in her temples as she tore off the heavy robes, the circlet, desiring nothing more than to feel clean cold air upon her skin. Perhaps the numbness of the mountain would chill her, calm the anger that so easily clouded her mind and choked her throat.

Blood painted upon claws. The taste upon her tongue, dripping in dagger teeth.

Was she human, still? Could one be human when one thought Dovahzul and dreamed of flight?

In all likelihood, this was the end. In Skuldafn, in Sovngarde. In some dank tomb, surrounded by draugr. Despite the faith her lover had in her, she was not naive to the dangers approaching.

Blood, fire and death. One way or another, it would all be brought to an end.
“Horvutah med kodaav... caught like a bear in a trap.” The giant red scaled dragon grumbled fitfully. The guards who had clamped the massive chain link harness down upon Odahviing were still here, shaking in their boots.

Smiling despite the ever-growing weariness, Sigrid strode forward to the massive head. Ignoring the appraising looks Jarl Balgruuf and his councilors were throwing her way, she cleared her throat. “Drem yol lok, Odahviing.”

“Zok frini grind ko grah drun viiki, Dovahkiin.” A massive golden eye blinked at her, diamond pupil slitted in the light. “Ah, I forget. You do not have the dovah speech.”

“Not entirely, no.” She smiled, despite her misgivings.

It had been the work of a moment to call out for Odahviing, daring Alduin’s dragon to attack. She felt fairly confident, considering all the preparation and hours of work that had gone into simply being allowed to call a dragon down on the hyperventilating folk of Dragonsreach.

And now, here they were.

She could pat herself on the back for how simple this task, at least, had been.

“My...eagerness to meet you in battle was my undoing, Dovahkiin. I salute your, hmm…” The head tilted, examining Sigrid with the other, bowling ball sized eye. It blinked a secondary filmy lid as she checked him out in turn. “...hmm, low cunning in devising such a grahmindol, stratagem.”

Barely checking a laugh, Sigrid planted her fists on her hips. “Tinvaak los grah, Odahviing,” she rumbled playfully.

The great red beast shifted, swaying his head in the confines of the brace. “Zu’u bonaar. You went to a great deal of trouble to put me in this...humiliating position. Hind siiv Alduin, hmm? No doubt you want to know where to find Alduin?”

She could see the amber-gold of her eyes reflected in that pitch dark blackness, as the secondary lid opened once more over the iris. “Devouring the sillesejoor, I imagine. In Sovngarde.” She stepped forward, perilously close to the giant jaw as she lifted her chin.

“Tell me where Skuldafn is.”
He laughed, leathery wings beating against the wind in hurried gusts as the bass chuckling seemed to vibrate straight through her. “Ahh, Dovahkiin. You have the Thu’um of a dovah, but without the wings of one, you will never set foot in Skuldafn.”

“Of course…” His pupil thinned even further, until it was a mere slice of shadow. “I could fly you there. But not while imprisoned like this.”

Sigrid nodded slightly, eyes still fixed upon the dovah. She thought she could sense the subtle influence of Odahviing through his Thu’um, his desire to be free of the cage of Dragonsreach as his voice slipped tendrils of thought inside her mind.

Not on her watch. She quashed the foreign desire to walk over and unleash the beast. “I agree. But later, at a time of my choosing. Erei mu grind.”

The Dragonborn walked quickly away, before Farengar could begin snooping around the dragon’s hindquarters. A smile still pulled on her face as she passed down the hall, hearing the dragon’s rumbling discontent, following by a high yelp and what was probably breath of fire.

So far, so good.

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Ah. It was nearly complete.

It had required the patience of a saint, and plentiful assistance from Eorlund (who griped just for show, as he greedily took in all the plans she had drawn up and dramatically improved them) but finally Sigrid’s set of dragonscale armor was complete.

The armor was lighter than she thought it would be. Most of the scales had come from the dragon Vuljotnaak. Dark Maw Eat, she thought, was quite an irony, as she had encountered the golden-green dovah consuming a mammoth in the wrecked remains of a giant's camp.

But the scales were tough, and gleamed almost like fingernails. Keratin, with a coat of polish. Turning the armor this way and that, they caught the light...similar to the dandelion grass gold of elven armor, but with a rougher texture. It had taken some false starts (and she had ruined quite a few scales, bones and lengths of dragon hide) before she had come up with a suitable pattern that overlaid the scales in sufficient protection without being bulky.

Eorlund had helped her choose the right metals and ores to smelt the scales onto the tough hide. He always preferred a blend of steel and quicksilver, and so she let him do what he would. He was the master, and she the humble student. And who could argue with the result, she thought happily as she stood in front of the polished sheet of steel Eorlund kept for this purpose.

Badass. From rippling scaled gauntlets to spiked knee guards and sturdy overlapping breastplate….a thing of deadly beauty. It was light, comfortable, and even shifted with her movements better than the skin-tight leather she usually preferred for flexibility. She swung her new Nordic style sword, giving it a few practice slashes as she stretched the leather chainlink ties and laces, moving this way and that. The helmet looked vaguely samurai-like, with arched horns giving her a draconian profile.
Eat your heart out, Flemeth, she thought with a rusty chuckle. She had played through all three Dragon Age Games in her previous life, and her new helmet was a smashing blend of Loki, Flemeth and Maleficent all in one.

...and wasn't that a relief, she thought with a shudder. Could have landed in Thedas instead of Tamriel. Shit. What a clusterfuck that would have been...give me Skyrim and the Nords any day over Orlais and darkspawn...eeek.

Even though she had trained reluctantly in the skill of blocking, Sigrid had developed a fighting style that was almost pure offense. Disdaining shields, she often grabbed a secondary blade or dagger to parry and thrust with. Or she took after Vilkas and Farkas, and used both hands. Especially when decapitating something particularly grisly, such as a giant or dragon.

Vilkas often despaired of her as they fought while travelling on the road. Though he rarely bothered with a shield, he often lectured her on the importance of knowing when to block, when to push back and when to strike. She always responded in the same way; a sassy retort about the futility of blocking dragonfire. “If I can move swiftly and dodge their Thu’um, I have a better chance of lashing out when they least expect it.”

They agreed to disagree, at least on the art of blocking it seemed. Though the more they spoke on other subjects, Sigrid found she listened more than she thought she would lecture in turn. Vilkas was almost fun to debate, especially when it came to the virtues of the civil war, or of previous battles in the Great War against the Aldmeri Dominion. The man loved his battle strategy, she thought with a mental yawn. Good for her. She didn’t have to read it, if she could pick his brains.

They often spent their nights winding down with a good book and a bottle of something just alcoholic enough to relax with. She favored romance and humor, he enjoyed myths and war stories. Vilkas preferred reading in the hot spring, but after about thirty minutes Sigrid just couldn’t take the heat anymore, and would walk around in the nude to cool, much to his bemused delight. Sometimes she could convince him to relax in bed. It wasn’t quite wide enough for both of them, but if he lay on his side, and she read on her stomach, they just about managed it. They usually ended up wrapped around each other later anyways.

After the battle with Alduin (and her resulting panic attack) Vilkas rarely left her side. She often found plenty to do in Jorrvaskr as it was. The harvest was approaching as summer slowly wound down, and the people of Whiterun were in a constant state of motion. Tilma had Lucia airing out all the mattresses and tapestries while the weather held warmth; Sigrid had walked out one day to find herself startled at how suddenly bare the stone walls were. Training practice continued every day at dawn; and she found herself enjoying the routine more now that Vilkas was no longer breathing down her neck. He was now too busy to correct her, having found the new recruits fodder for his steely stare and punishing calisthenics.

Lucia had decided to pursue her dream of becoming a warrior. But much to her dismay, Sigrid had started her off running laps around the track at Jorrvaskr. “It’s what we all have to do, sweetheart,” she told the rebellious, sulking girl that day.

The other Companions (who were eavesdropping, naturally) all held in their smiles as Sigrid lectured Lucia on how physical prowess was built, brick by brick, as a solid foundation for weapon work. “Says the newblood, not a year ago,” Athis whispered loudly, red eyes gleaming in mischief. “Disregard that.” Sigrid coolly replied. “Now, go get running,” she finished, patting her on the back,
to the applause of the Companions. They had followed the girl, much to Sigrid’s amusement, hollering insults and encouragement as they all ran around the track with their newest whelp.

And boy, were there now quite a few new whelps around Jorrvaskr. She didn’t even know them all by name yet, though she tried. Since Kodlak’s old rooms had remained unused since the old Harbinger’s death, Sigrid insisted that they be used by the new bloods as upgraded quarters. Taking Athis, Farkas and Njada aside, she allowed them to pick their rooms first, as they had more seniority. There was quite a marked improvement in morale, after that.

Mmm, but those rooms held too much history, Sigrid thought as she watched Companions moving tables, dressers and furnishings up and down, driving Tilma to distraction. And Vilkas seemed to agree. More and more, she noticed him poring over courier notices, sneaking glances when he thought she wasn’t looking at sale lots listing land prices.

Would he be amenable to moving out in the wilderness, Sigrid wondered? Like the Hearthfire add-ons (which had seriously kept her happy and occupied for hours). Perhaps it would be too far away from Whiterun, from Jorrvaskr and family. But, Lake Ilinalta was lovely this time of year…

“Oh Dragonborn! Hello there!”

Sigrid looked up from her book where she had chosen to sit at table, next to Vilkas who was currently measuring out payment to Tilma for groceries and supplies. The Harbinger blinked. She had never expected to see Farengar, court mage, grace the halls of Jorrvaskr. But there he was. “Is there something I can do for you, Farengar?”

“Actually, yes. It seems our captive dragon friend has certain…preferences for his meals. Would you happen to know what they are?”

“Well, I’ve heard he’s rather fond of mage…” She drawled, slowly marking the book with a length of cord as Farengar’s face paled. “Just joking. Why don’t you ask him?”

The mage’s face drooped. “I have tried, at my Jarl’s behest. The beast does not wish to converse with me.”

Sigrid hummed thoughtfully. “Well, he won’t be a problem for you much longer. It is the middle of Hearthfire, and it looks like we will be feeding Odahviing for only a few days more.” And cleaning. Bethesda never addressed the issue of scooping out massive heaps of dragon dung from a captive dragon. She was pretty sure the housemaids of Dragonsreach hated her guts.

She didn’t turn to look at Vilkas, but she could feel his eyes upon her as she finished her conversation with the court mage. As soon as he left, Vilkas closed up the treasury chest with a sharp snap. “A few days, Sigrid?”

Rubbing her head, she nodded dolefully. “It has been days, and every time I visit Odahviing he is more snappish and spiteful than usual. I’ve been…putting it off, but the armor is complete and…and my affairs are in order.”

She swallowed as he looked dismayed at her news. “I can’t run from this any longer,” she whispered, looking away. Scratching her ear, she looked back with a timid smile. “Besides. Someone very smart told me a while back that a true Nord never backs down.”

“You’re not a Nord,” he quipped, the reference bringing the smallest of smiles to his lips, as they both climbed down the stairs to the basement.

“Whatever I am, it is close enough.”
“If you were a Nord, you’d actually enjoy climbing that mountain you grumble about so often.”

“Well, if you were a true Nord, you’d carry me on your back up said mountain!”

“Ah. Only a true Nord could be so assertive.”

“You can insert something later, asswipe.”

“Hah, Nordic charm. Never gets old.”

Teasing banter got them past that first night. Making love filled in for the words that just wouldn’t come afterwards. He had said them. She remembered, and was content to take what was offered to her. Enjoy the moment was her new motto, she thought, and she watched eagerly as the harvests of autumn continued to sweep Whiterun into a hive of activity.

Soon, the wind that swept the districts of Whiterun had a discernable bite of chill to it. Great sheaves of grain stood propped up in fields, prepared for the threshing and milling of wheat that would be stored and shipped all over Skyrim. Tilma and Lucia were constantly darting back and forth to market, bottling, brewing, drying...Sigrid marveled that they found the time to attend to the cooking on top of all the harvest preparations for the winter.

She had been pleasantly surprised when the day before her departure on Odahviing came. At breakfast Sigrid didn’t miss the pointed looks the Companions were trying to sneak around her. As she headed for the training ground, she was relieved of all duties by Farkas. The bigger twin had winked saucily, then led her out of the main doors to see none other than his brother, waiting outside by the Gildergreen. Without his usual armor, just a grey tunic with casual pants.

Vilkas looked almost naked without it, she thought. “Hello.” His silvery eyes were alight with...a secret, she decided. Nothing else would be so suspicious.

“What is it.” She folded her arms, as he cracked a grin.

“Already prepared to lay into me, eh? There is nothing untoward going on here, Sigrid. Just a fine stroll with my future wife.”

She laughed, nervously looking around for anything that might surprise her. “You know, I’ve heard that one before.” And she had. The first week she had been home after Dawnstar, recuperating, news had spread about her engagement to be married. Apparently something similar to a singing telegram existed here, and she had opened the doors of Jorrvaskr one morning to be greeted with a gristly old bard, wearing a very out of place golden sash with a large open-petalled flower adorning it.

He had sung thirteen verses in praise of love, Dibellan virtues, and suspicious metaphors that Sigrid was certain had something to do with sex, judging by the poorly hidden laughter that was being muffled behind her in the dining hall. And because she had been raised never to be rude to a gift giver, she had stood there, red faced, and had taken the dubious honor like a champ.

But after the fourth one came and went, so did her tolerance. Sigrid grew more certain that someone was shitting her with a practical joke. She blamed Farkas.

Yet Vilkas, she thought, narrowing her eyes, might possibly have enjoyed seeing her squirm. “If there is a bard hiding out somewhere in a bush, I’m going to wear your balls for earbobs,” she warned her future husband.

Snorting, he walked arm in arm with her as the daylight slowly stretched over Whiterun. “Right. Like I have a death wish. That would be my brother.”
“I knew it.”

Enjoying the rare feeling of having nothing immediate to do, Sigrid and Vilkas walked down into the market square, past the vendors and into the residential district.

She noticed he seemed...well, damn, Vilkas actually looked nervous. “Alright, now I’m actually concerned.” She stopped him as they neared Warmaidens. “What’s wrong?”

He heaved a sigh. “Nothing gets past you, does it woman?” Pushing his fingers through the dark hair that fell over his forehead, Vilkas drew something out of his pack and handed it to her.

She turned over the key in her hand. “A key.”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat, gesturing with one hand. “To, ah...to Breezehome. I remember you spoke of it.”

Damn. So he did actually hear her sometimes, when she rambled. Her feet took her without any conscious thought to the doorway, where her hands almost fumbled the key as she eagerly turned it and clicked the lock open.

“Oh. Oh! Oh my god, this is...Vilkas!” Walking in the main room, which had been fully furnished, with the fireplace burning merrily, was just overwhelming. Breezehome was the first real home her characters ever had, playing Skyrim. One of the best, most memorable homes located conveniently right next to the city gates and a blacksmith. She knew everyone got Breezehome for their Dragonborn, but it had a certain nostalgia for her.

He remembered...remembered her relaxed musings about Breezehome. About having more privacy, more space. She jumped him, hugging him tightly as he faltered back in surprise, almost falling out of the house before his hands scrabbled for the door. Closing it, he returned the hug with a sigh.

“Thank Shor and Kyne you like it. It’s...well. It’s a wedding gift.”

She pulled away long enough to show him a wide smile, eyes shining in gratitude. “Really?”

“...Yes.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “So you always have a home to come back to. To fight for.”

“Oh, Vilkas.” She cupped his face in her hands, lips quivering. Like an idiot, she couldn’t stop smiling. “I already have so much to come back to! But this,” she turned to look at the humble home, the layout almost exactly the way it was in the game. “This is perfect.”

Rubbing her nose against his, she sighed into his mouth. “Thank you.” Catching his lips with hers, she wrapped herself more fully around him as she kissed him, hard.

“Aha, that reminds me.” Just as he was becoming very interested in exploring the bedroom on the upper floor, Sigrid tore away to riffle through her knapsack. He leaned against the doorway, tersely trying to quell the sensations Sigrid stirred in him all too easily, as she finally found what she was looking for.

“Yes! You’ll love this. I mean, I hope you do. It took forever, but here.” Placing the roll of parchment in his waiting hands, she looked up at him through her eyelashes, a mischievous grin coloring her features. “This is your wedding gift. From me.”

Impatiently, Sigrid shifted on her feet as he slowly drew off the ribbon and opened the scroll. Reading it, she could almost see the recognition click as he jerked his head up, grey eyes wide.
“You found them.”

Her smile was going to split her face, it almost hurt at this point. “I did! Oh, it took forever, and Runil needed help so I had to pay an assload of couriers, but I found them!” She hugged him, as he stood there dumbstruck.

“My parents. You found out who...my...Farkas and I...our parents were.”

“Yes. They came from Falkreath, just like I thought. No last names, but hey...your father’s name. It was Thadrig. Does that spark any memories?” Seeing him shake his head, she deflated a bit. “Huh. What about your mother’s name. Gydda?”

Gydda. Ma. Something stirred, forgotten and far. He couldn’t reach it, or remember. “Almost. It...sounds familiar. Perhaps Farkas can remember more.”

Pulling a bit farther away from him, Sigrid frowned slightly at the dazed look on his face. “Do you like it? I know, it’s not a house.” Nervously playing with her braid, Sigrid looked down.

“No one has ever done something like this for me, before.” Hearing the rustle as Vilkas placed the scroll on a nearby bookshelf, she felt his hands grasp her shoulders. He pulled her close, tight in his embrace. “I don’t know how you’re going to top this one, woman.” He spoke quietly.

“Me either. Seriously. It took forever. I took etchings with charcoal and everything. Maybe, you and Farkas can go visit their gravesites sometime. If you like?”

He continued holding her, contemplating the future and all its possibilities. “I’d like that.” he replied simply.

“Hmm.”

“Just…” she could feel his hands rising, touching her neck, holding her chin as brought her face close to his. “...try. Try not to fall off, up there, on that beasts neck. When you go to Skuldafn.”

Sigrid swallowed, feeling him almost trembling against her. “I promise.” She vowed quietly. “I’ll come back, if I can. Safe and sound.”

They held each other quietly as the sun continued to rise, filling the small room in dusty rays of golden light.

Chapter End Notes

Tinvaak los grah - Talk/speech is battle.
Erei mu grind - Until later
“...And so then came clashing and slashing of steel, as the brave lass Matilda charged in, full of zeal!”

Sigrid sat in the hall of Jorrvaskr, hands clasped firmly over her ears, eyes tight shut.

“No. I beg you. No more.”

“And the braggart named Ragnar was boastful no more...when his ugly red head rolled around on the floor!” The warriors ended with a resounding chorus of cheers, applauding Njada who had mimicked Matilda’s fearsome decapitation, with Athis gasping and writhing in mock pain on (you guessed it) the floor.

“That was the best! Can we sing it again?” Rubbing her eyes and blinking sleepily, Lucia looked hopefully at Sigrid. But it was Tilma who responded first. “No, girl. Time for young ones to go to bed, now.”

“Thanks, Tilma. Sleep well.” Sigrid and the others waved off the youngest of the whelps to bed. Somehow, Lucia had stayed quiet and unseen while the other newbloods had been politely ushered out of the hall to sleep. Most needed no prompting - they had done log drills earlier that day, with twelve whelps (including Lucia dangling at the end, helping where she could) lifting and carrying a peeled log up, down and all around the training yard. Supposedly it taught teamwork, but from the satisfaction Vilkas derived from supervising Sigrid rather thought it was more punishment than anything.

“So, anyone up for a drinking game with our esteemed Harbinger?” Athis leapt up from the floor and ran to the closets where they kept bottles of mead, ale and wine. Njada scowled, wrapping her lute in linens and placing it in a chest. “Does this Harbinger have time for us, anymore? I hear she’s rubbing elbows with Jarls and nobles, now.”

“There’s enough of me to spare.” Smiling, Sigrid offered her drinking mug to Athis, who poured a good portion of Skingrad red in it. Taking the bottle from the Dunmer, she continued pouring around the table. They were all alone now; Sigrid, the two brothers, Athis and Njada.

“So, what kind of game did you have in mind?” Farkas sipped his wine.

“What about ‘I have never’?” Leaning back in her chair, Sigrid narrowed her gaze at Athis, who stared innocently back. “What? Dearest Harbinger, don’t look at me like that. It will be fun.”

“Fine. I’ll go first.” Njada gestured for someone to fill her cup. “I...have never been Harbinger.”

The group all groaned. Sigrid rolled her eyes, taking an overly exaggerated gulp, coughing as the strong vintage went down with a kick.

“This game will be over in five minutes if this is how it’s going to be,” Vilkas sighed.

“Hey!” Sigrid swatted at him. “I’m not that bad at holding my drink.”

“Says you...” Farkas murmured wryly, quirking an eyebrow at her when Sigrid pulled a face.

“Hey, I grew up in a religious household! It was not okay for children to drink where I’m from. I have the handicap, here.”
“Poor milk drinker.” Vilkas took a sip, smiling as he fended off Sigrid’s slaps as she rolled her eyes.

“Very well. I have…” Athis sighed, taking his time as he grasped his chin in thought. “…never been to Windhelm.”

There was a rolling grumble as Njada, Vilkas and Farkas all took a drink. “Is it as depressing as I’ve heard?” Sigrid asked the room as she opened another bottle.

“Worse.” Njada sighed. Taking in the Nord’s tumbling brown locks and long eyelashes, Sigrid realized that the Stonearm was really rather pretty. Once the helmet came off. And the shield. Hell, take away all her weapons and the woman was downright feminine. “With the Stormcloaks, the slums where the Dunmer live and the docks where the Argonians are made to stay, it has always had this…air about it. I hate going there.”

“That’s why I’ve never been. Too close to the Red Mountain. Or what’s left of it.” Athis swirled the wine in his cup, his sharp features thoughtful. “Your turn, Harbinger.”

“Well…” she drew it out, trying to think of something not completely obvious. She didn’t want to explain bungee jumping, television or airplanes. “Aha. I’ve never not had children!”

“That’s not how it works!” Athis complained, while Farkas hesitated over his cup until Sigrid gestured for him to drink. “You’re a father now, Farkas. Adopted or not, Mila just loooves you.” She grinned, bumping him with her elbow. She thought she detected a slight flush on the man’s cheeks. Nope. Probably just the booze.

Vilkas waved off further questions, saving Farkas from any more embarrassment. “Fine. My turn. I have never been rescued from the Thalmor, only to return to their Embassy alone.” His silvery eyes alight with triumph as his woman sent him a death glare, the group broke out in questions as Sigrid defiantly took a drink.

“Seriously? All the way up north! Why?”

“Do you have a death wish after all, serah?”

“No no no,” Sigrid fanned away all inquisitive looks, blinking against the haze of smoke and wine. “It’s a stupid story, and more boring than you’d think. Farkas, you’re up.”

“Very well. I have never passed a year in the company of only one woman…save this year, of course.” Leaning back in his chair, there was a smug expression on his face as a sea of whines, complaints and laughter greeted him.

“Now that’s really not fair,” Athis muttered as he sipped discreetly.

“Doesn’t count! I’ve never slept with a woman!” Pumping her fist into the air, Sigrid did a little dance as Vilkas, Athis and whoa, even Njada took a sip.

“Well now you’ve done it.” Njada shot back. Was that a smile softening that stony face? Sigrid wished she had a camera, for the millionth time. “Alright. The gloves are off now. I’ve never slept with less than…oh, three people in my life.”

More complaints, more groans as Farkas slumped forward, hitting his head against the table repeatedly while Vilkas laughed. “Honestly, I’m not surprised, judging by all the gossip around this esteemed company.” Sigrid said slyly, as the other Companions managed another drink.

“Hey Harbinger, you forgot to take a drink.” Examining her with a twist to his lips, suddenly Athis’s
red eyes stretched wide open. “No. Oh sweet Azura.”

Sigrid slowly blushed red as all four of her friends stared at her in astonishment. “What?” She snapped, wriggling in her chair at the look Vilkas gave her. There was a delicious looseness in her limbs, and with a huff, she noticed that her mug was almost entirely empty. “Religious school, remember? I’ve only ever had sex with...with two men in my entire life.”

Njada looked affronted. “You might as well be a squeaking virgin, Harbinger.”

“Hah, don’t think so. Pretty sure the last few months got rid of whatever virginity was left in there.” Farkas managed, trying hard not to laugh as both Vilkas and Sigrid glared at him.

“Was this religion especially cruel? With only one partner...how do you even know what you like?” Athis demanded, slapping a hand on the table.

“Not a single one night stand, Harbinger?” Folding her arms, Njada leered at her suggestively.

She laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of her neck. “Just one. But I don’t think it counts.”

“Ugh, I knew it. I knew it was you.” Njada sighed in disgust as Athis hooted in laughter. Farkas made a face as Vilkas looked on, untroubled. Sigrid could have sworn there was a twinkle of something in his eyes. “And you didn’t have the decency to clean up all that water afterwards? Inconsiderate ass.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll tell all.” Sigrid waved a hand lazily. Damn, she would never be this open without the burning warmth of the wine in her gut, echoed by the heat of the fireplace. “I think I only kissed about two boys before I met Bryce. Total amateurs. Way too much tongue.” She added as Farkas pretended to vomit, Njada finally joining in the laughter.

“And when I met Bryce, it wasn’t exactly a place you could go to, say, get it on.” She smiled in remembrance, tapping the wood of the table with her fingers. “We met in a hospital...kind of like a temple of healing.”

“What were you doing there?” Vilkas asked, curious. Sigrid never offered much about her previous life, and he’d be damned if he wasted the opportunity.

“I volunteered there, to be close to my mother.” Seeing no further need to wait, she took a sip and beckoned for a refill. “She was dying of a wasting illness. Something we called cancer. It took a long time for her to die, and it was just me and my sister by then. Father died two years before.”

“Sorry to hear that.” The Dunmer’s eyes were sympathetic, as he pushed an entire bottle of Cyrodiilic brandy towards her.

“Me too. It was a long time ago.” Sigrid hummed thoughtfully, wondering how to continue. It all seemed so far removed from where she was. The hall was dark and warm. It smelled like the roast slaughterfish they had enjoyed for supper, the smoke from the fire curling above their heads, pulled out of Jorrvaskr by stray breezes that found their way through the timbers. The fire popped and crackled, lighting the expectant faces of her friends.

She sighed. “Bryce was a soldier who had just graduated from his military academy. He was delivering toys for charity to the sick children, when I ran into him by accident.” A pang of homesickness stole through her, as she remembered the Christmas season that felt like it was a lifetime ago.

Sigrid, then Sarah Kincaid, had taken a variety of odd jobs to be available for the hours when her
mother most often stayed awake. Leukemia had stolen so much from her; her hair, her smile, her desire to eat. Sarah had been looking for the kitchen, to find any remaining gingerbread to tempt her with, when she had run smack into a chest covered in crisply buttoned uniform and medals.

“Oh! I’m so sorry!” Sarah had leaned over to pick up the assorted stuffed animals and toys, when she saw him bend over as well. “Don’t be. Hey…” his hand lifted her up off the ground.

“I’m Bryce. Corporal Bryce Ferguson, of the 101st Airborne.”

She blushed, aware that she was looking at him in surprise as he laughed, his teeth very white against the dark caramel of his skin. “I know, right? Ferguson was my dad. My madre came from Veracruz as a girl. Dad got lucky. Said so himself.”

He poked the silver pin that hung from her scrubs. “Convent of the Sacred Heart, huh?” He looked her over, appraisingly. “I’m gonna guess...Irish. That skin. Probably volunteering out of the goodness of your soul, while you study how to stitch up orphans and kiss babies.” Bryce’s tone was teasing, but his dark eyes were kind.

“Something like that,” She had smiled shyly.

“We were married about six months later,” Sigrid continued, half-aware of their eyes upon her. “My mother made it to the ceremony, but died during our honeymoon. His family outnumbered mine by about six to one at the reception. The after wedding party,” she added, when Farkas shook his head in confusion. “It was a complete zoo...er, madhouse.”

“How romantic. And were you completely shocked on your wedding night?” Njada gave her an arch look.

“Not...entirely.” She blushed even brighter, remembering Bryce’s stunned delight and incredible patience as he had taught his sweet virginal wife the ins and outs of lovemaking. She scowled at her own embarrassment, as Vilkas smothered a grin with his hand. His chair creaked as he moved closer next to her. Uncorking the brandy, there was a liquid splash as he filled both their cups.

“We both wanted, ah, big families. Lots of children. We, um, figured it out pretty well.” Ooohs and aaahhs greeted that statement, as she squirmed under their amused scrutiny. “I had one baby boy, and was pregnant with another when the war in Iraq started, and Bryce was called on tour with his division.”

“Iraq? Where is that?” Athis frowned.

“Somewhere in Hammerfell,” Vilkas offered, none too subtly as he pulled Sigrid against him. “Perhaps you’ve had too much, woman.”

“No! No, I’m good.” Her mind was a bit jumbled, but she didn’t care. If this was to be her last night of life, before daring the eyrie of the World Eater, she would live it up. No holding back. “I never had been with anyone else, until now.”

“And what a voracious appetite. Kyne knows I can hardly get any rest when you’re around. You’re a regular slave driver, woman.” Vilkas laughed, free and joyous, as she growled in mock anger. “It’s always the religious ones,” Athis sniffed primly, crimson eyes dancing with humor. “Run away while you can, armsmaster. Far away. The wedding hasn’t happened yet!”

Thank the gods the subject had changed after that to more mundane topics. It was pitch black outside when Vilkas and Sigrid finally stumbled, still laughing and waving goodbye, towards the road that led to Breezehome.
During their farewells, she had presented Farkas with a brand new pair of boots. Farkas had roared with laughter, and of course had to retell the tale of her proving in Dustman’s Cairn. The room had spun dizzily as she leaned against Vilkas, who had pulled his arm more tightly around her. Her first kill seemed ages ago. Had she really ever thrown up over the sight of a head? Shaking her head, she bemoaned her loss of innocence. Killing hardly bothered her anymore; though it was true she had never lifted her sword to any beast or man who hadn’t attacked her first.

“So, you were entirely inexperienced then?” Her fiancé asked her, as they weaved their way down the darkened streets towards the gates. Willing her thoughts to clear, she recalled the earlier conversation and scoffed, kicking her boot into the dirt. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“No.” Slowing as they reached the lit sconces of the front door of Breezehome, Vilkas steadied her swaying walk with one hand. Reaching down her arm, he took her hand in his. “It’s one of the things that first drew me to you, Sigrid.”

Blinking in the light, Sigrid could see his pupils retract, the icy grey of his irises somehow still sharp, focused after countless glasses of wine. “That night…” his fingers twitched, thumb sliding over her knuckles. “…in the bathing room. I could smell you, smell the strength of your need.” He breathed out shakily. “I don’t make a habit of pursuing my fellow shield siblings, but I don’t think I was thinking at all, that night.”

Feeling something akin to disappointment, Sigrid turned away. “So, it was mostly out of pity, then. I was an easy lay.”

“No!” Pulling her arm, Vilkas leaned over, trying to capture her eyes with his. “No, Sigrid. It was nothing like that.” She rested against the door, suddenly tired, as he tried to find words, seemingly tongue-tied.

“I have never lied to you about my past. I’ve been with many women.” Swallowing at the flat look she gave him, Vilkas ploughed on. “I never thought much of it, until lately. I fucked around, mostly for fun. To release tension. A diversion from training, from hunting as the wolf.” He sighed, his breath fogging the cold night air.

“But you…” his hand tightened around hers. “You did not sleep with me, because you wanted something that night. Not because I was a Companion, or...Shor’s beard...even to stop the unfair tasks I set you.”

He was close, so close she could count his eyelashes. She felt a curl of expectant lust, tightening her deep inside, her own breath coming faster as he leaned in. “You, you wanted me. So badly I could almost taste you. Your lust was...a heady perfume. And there was nothing but the need, the need that I could ease, that night.”

Sweet talker. Feeling the prickle of wood against her gown as he pressed her back against the door, Sigrid strove to control her breathing as his hand lefts hers. Tracing up her inner arm, his fingers slowly brushed the side of her breast. His other arm leaned above her head, trapping her beneath, against him.

Close. So close. She knew, knew with the heat coming off him, that if she just arched her back she would feel him, hard and ready against her. The warmth of his breath puffing against her neck made her shiver with goosebumps. God, what was this, that after months of lovemaking it still felt so raw, so real. She shivered as his thumb deliberately circled the cloth covering her nipple, making it pebble in the cold.
Familiarity had not dimmed the fire, not really for them. Sigrid knew that with long years of marriage came a loss of novelty. Truly, it was one of the things she feared when she had the time to contemplate what was growing between her and Vilkas. The wild infatuation of early love had deepened for her and Bryce into the steady burning of embers. Solid, reliable, anchoring her in the assurance of time. They had learned together, grown together.

Undeniably some of that was here, as well. Nakedness was no longer quite the titillating experience it was once. She had joked one night as they lay together in the hot springs that he would get used to her breasts, if she kept them uncovered much longer. He had done his damndest to make her swallow those words, as he had tried to take as much as he could of her breasts into his mouth, that night.

Try as she would to cloak her insecurities, Sigrid could not escape the consequences of their combined pasts among the townspeople. Ysolda had approached her earlier that week, as Sigrid had been window shopping in the open air market. Should have known the pretty woman had been one of his. She winced inwardly as Ysolda scrutinized her scars, her hair, the missing fingernails on her left hand.

The merchant had whispered a warning to Sigrid that she was a fool, to choose so poorly. Vilkas was not the marrying kind; would love her and leave her. Huffing in scorn as Sigrid awkwardly walked away, the Nord woman had joined the slowly gathering throng of women and begun speaking softly, watching. Judging. She had felt on her back the stares of the jilted and jealous.

But, then, just when Sigrid felt the spiralling anxiety begin to peak as she tried so hard not to compare, to complain that her experience could never rival his, he would do something so untoward, so surprising that she forgot her worries.

The bastard, she thought with frank admiration, had just admitted to her that she affected him. In their constant, amusing game of one-upmanship, rife in teasing and friendly insults, neither of them was frank enough to openly admit defeat. Until now, it seemed.

“So, even with all your... experience ...” her own hand slid to his tunic, slowly lifting the tucked fabric out of his pants. His breath became harsh. “You admit that...that I arouse you. Me.”

“-Isn’t it obvious, woman?” Trapping her hand as she wedged a finger beneath his breeches, he pushed her fully against the door, thrusting his leg between hers. Giving in to the urge to pant wantonly, she squirmed as she bucked her hips shallowly against his thigh. His arms barred the way, no escape for her as she struggled to regain her dominance. Lowering his head, Vilkas traced his open mouth against the revealed skin of her collarbone, her shoulder, easing off so slightly as he breathed carefully against her ear.

It was like a sparking line of gunpowder had been lit - straight from the curve of her ear, pooling in the pit of her stomach. Trapping her, Vilkas slowly ground once, twice against her. Helpless against the onslaught, she pushed her hand even further in his pants, biting back a moan as he took her ear in his teeth and gently bit down.

“So real. So beautiful...gods, woman, you never fake this. Never with me!”

She felt him twitch, hard and rising to meet her as she stroked boldly, his body arching in response. Feeling like she had been fairly lit on fire herself, she angled her face and body to meet his (and shit, he was there, waiting) then…

“Ah, um. Hello, my Thane. Will you be requiring anything from Breezehome tonight? I was just about to head in for some rest.”
She felt Vilkas freeze against her, as her head leaned back to hit the wood of the door.

*Lydia.*

Her new housecarl had been fully forgotten after that disastrous peace summit. Jarl Balgruuf had openly declared Sigrid a Thane of Whiterun Hold before the meeting, for her efforts at ending the war. She remembered Lydia briefly, remembered being amused more than anything else. The eponymous follower, beloved for her catchphrase ‘*I am sworn to carry your burdens!*’ had been an interesting footnote to the never ending political slog of the past few months.

Until now, said footnote had been unobtrusively tucked into Dragonsreach, lingering in the barracks somewhere.

“Lydia, what are you doing here?” She managed to squeak out, her cunt throbbing in sympathy as Vilkas groaned against her.

“This is your new place of residence, right my Thane? The steward informed me of your ownership this morning. I am sworn to protect all you own, my -”

“No.” Turning away from her, Vilkas gave Lydia a glare so cold Sigrid was surprised the woman didn’t turn tail and run.

“But -” The housecarl tried again.

“No.” Unlocking the door with swift, jerky movements, Vilkas nearly shoved Sigrid inside. She could barely see Lydia’s face frown as slow realization finally happened. *Yes, dumbass. Walk away.* Sigrid snickered mentally.

“You can return later. *Much* later. Your precious Thane has enough protection, at present. Go back to the barracks.” Slamming the door in the affronted Nord’s face, Sigrid had a moment to laugh out loud, just once, before Vilkas locked it and turned to her.

The naked hunger that raked over her in his grey gaze undid the last of her fears.

Swallowing, Sigrid lifted her chin high. The fire was almost gone, only hot orange coals glowing visibly in the cooking pit behind her. Enough light for this. Slowly, she lifted her hand to her bodice, keeping his eyes fixed on her. With a twist of her fingers, a lace popped free.

His breath rasped as he took a step forward. She stopped him with a sharp shake of her head. Working her hands down the front of her gown, she continued unlacing the tight corset front, watching as want darkened his face the looser her laces became.

The soft red fabric slowly pooled around her ankles as, uncaring, she pushed the sleeves from her shoulders. She stood naked before him, nothing but an amulet between her breasts.

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He was, she noticed with smug pride, completely rock hard with tension. The tendons in his hands stood out as he balled them into fists. She could see every outlined muscle, shadowed in the darkness of the house and against the roughspun cloth of his clothes.

*Fortune favors the bold.* Clearing her throat, as the coolness of the air tightened her nipples, Sigrid tilted her head at him.
"I want to try something, tonight. Something different."
"I want to try something, tonight. Something different."

She felt so free, this last night of life here, with him. It would be...yes, the last chance she had, to try something so daring.

In all her travels and studies, Sigrid had picked up quite a bit of Dovahzul, or Dragon speech from the tombs and Word Walls. She often read books, only realizing when she was surprised into speaking that she had been translating the Nordic text into dragon runes. The Thu’um was complex and starkly beautiful in its simplicity. Mostly, the shouts she had discovered were about attack and defense. There were shouts that controlled the weather, influenced health, slowed time...

And even, she thought with a shiver of expectation, shouts that conjured pleasure.

She really hoped the Greybeards had not noticed her particular interest in that section of their library. Really really hoped they never used said shouts among themselves. She grimaced. Now there was a mental image burned into her brain.

Feeling powerful and bold, she took a deep breath, then stepped forward.

"Can you follow me? Upstairs?" Damn, she could barely speak the words, much less concentrate with that look on his face.

His jaw tightened as he seemed to fight some inner battle. When he grasped some degree of control, Vilkas ground out, "You have nothing to prove, woman. You can have me, in any way you want."

His hand lifted, as if to reach out and touch her.

The honest reply prompted a laugh from her. "Oh, love." Turning and walking away with short fast steps to the stairs, she stopped just as she was about to ascend. Feeling the silken weight of her hair brush her back, her head lolled on her neck slightly... just enough to see him, see the man standing there in front of the door as if spellbound. Something defiantly dark and primal surged within her.

A dragon dominated. Dovah delighted in conquering new territories, gathering riches and slaves.

Mine.
"It would be so much more fun if you would..." She struggled, seeking to find words that encapsulated the raw rapture she felt welling within her. Huffing, Sigrid decided to couch it in terms he would understand. "...fight me, on this. You're always boasting that you are more more experienced than me. More...skilled."

Her hazel eyes were calculating as she bit her lip. He was waiting, oh so patiently, waiting for her to speak. She willed the right words to come to mind, to be said.

Fuck it.

"Vilkas..." Arching her chest out as she slid slowly down the stairs banister, her fevered eyes never left his as she uttered in a rough whisper. "I'm going to make you come in my hand. Then again, in my mouth. And finally, I will ride you, taking you in me until you fucking come 'til you see stars."

"And love, there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

******

This wasn't happening.

Vilkas was dreaming. No, he had died and was currently skimming over Dibella's realm in some skooma drugged fantasy that soon he would wake from. In no reality that he was familiar with did Sigrid ever speak so boldly, so sensually, about what she wanted to do to him. Fuck, the woman could barely stammer out what she wanted him to do to her in bed.

But now, she had issued a challenge. As though he were a helpless whelp beneath her.

Gods, this was going to be fun.

"Bitch, I'm not going to come for you." He snarled, the familiar flare of temper softened by gentle amusement.

So, she wanted to play a game, did she? Vilkas would play.

Watching her flash him a smug smile as she slowly sauntered up the stairs, her naked ass bobbing back and forth...

He kicked his foot against the door. Ouch. Huh. Still not a dream.

What could he do but follow? Whatever crazy idea his woman had cooked up for him now, he was far too invested not to be intrigued.

Silently ghosting behind her on the stairs, he watched with bated breath as she lit a lantern with some spark rocks. The flame glowed brightly in the dimness of their new bedroom, casting a golden glow over the marriage bed he had prepared.

He took a moment to admire the pile of furs he had collected from every corner of Skyrim, ice wolves and cave bear, displayed like some barbaric treasure horde before his woman. Firelight caught every curve...the shadow and slope of her skin. His hands trembled to touch it.

Slowly she turned, looking him over as he tried very hard not to think about his rock hard erection tenting his pants. God damn it, he would not lose this strange challenge she had set. He was a true Nord. He would die with his dignity intact.
Tapping her chin with a finger, Sigrid smirked. "Off with your shirt, please."

Simple enough. His shoulders rippled as he balled the tunic over his head and threw it down to the floor. Looking up again, he caught her staring, frankly admiring him as his lips pulled into a slow feral smile.

He moved, itching to put hands on her, when she held up a hand in sudden censure. "No. We're doing things my way, remember?"

Sighing dramatically, Sigrid sauntered over to the wooden chest that rested near the foot of the bed. Lowering herself to kneel on all fours, Vilkas tilted his head; the better to enjoy the view as she shot him a saucy look, shuffling the contents of the chest until she found what she sought.

Standing and facing him once more, he could see the leather thongs she had retrieved from the chest. She snapped them playfully. "Since it seems I cannot trust you to to keep your hands to yourself, we'll have to use these." He thought he saw a flash of mirth in her eyes. A light draft from the roof fanned the flame in the lantern, flickering across her hazel eyes. For the briefest moment, they turned slitted, golden. Her voice was the echo of thunder.

"Down on the bed. Face up."

Doing as she asked, Vilkas squirmed as the furs bunched beneath his back, wadded up against the mattress tick. As Sigrid leaned over to help smooth out the furs to be more comfortable, he stole a long, lingering kiss as she froze in surprise. He made it worth his while, her eyes fluttering closed as he stroked his tongue against hers, tangling their mouths until her taste filled him, scalding in the heat of his desire.

Pulling away, he retracted his tongue, grinning in triumph as her eyes narrowed. "Sneaky...You'll pay for that." She warned, tying his wrists to the bed posts tightly enough that his arms were suspended slightly above the bed.

Testing his binds, Vilkas shifted against the thick furred pelts, watching her every move with unabashed hunger as Sigrid sat primly on the end of the bed.

Leaning over, she sprawled onto her stomach next to him. Smiled. "Comfortable?" He watched her feet kick, scissoring back and forth, her breasts pillowed upon the furs.

"Cute. But he'd never tell her that. Rolling his eyes, he taunted her. "I've had meditative shits more exciting than this."

Her smile widened, teeth glistening in the wavering light. Making no sound, she merely watched him, watched his bare chest slowly moving with each inhale and exhale. His cock was slowly softening, pants no longer quite so tight as they had felt before.

Moments passed this way. The heated boldness she had displayed earlier melted into something more soft, tender. He couldn't look away...her round eyes barely blinked, more green than gold.

With the softest of caresses, Sigrid reached out her arm to touch his hip. He saw her mouth move, the words uttered as if from an impossible distance as they roared through him.
Every nerve suddenly sparked, a crescendo of adrenaline coursing through him as his back bowed off the bed. Everything was buzzing; color that had been softly warm was almost too bright. He heard harsh, rapid panting and realized with some horror that it was his own.

Her fingers moved, the barest of movements. He watched, transfixed in agony as her hand slowly, surely wrapped around the length of his manhood, covered by his pants.

Her hand stroked down, only once. A tease.

He came anyway. It was almost involuntary, the orgasm ripping through him, destroying any and all barriers. He throbbed, shuddered with the glorious power of it, his teeth clenching so hard his jaw fucking ached.

Dimly, he heard soft laughter and realized it was his woman, still laying beside him.

"Oh, that was fun. Are you all right?"

Her voice was throaty, velveted in assured superiority. Inhaling shakily, he managed to gasp out a response. "What the fuck was that?"

Vilkas felt a deep, almost thrumming purr reverberate through him. He realized it was coming from Sigrid. Fascinated, he watched the muscles of her throat flutter as they vibrated. "The Thu’um, naturally. A very unusual Thu’um."

No longer capable of speech, he watched dazedly as Sigrid slid down the furs, gripping the top of his pants and shucking them down his legs. He heard the soft impact as his pants hit the floor, then felt the rope springs of the bed bounce as Sigrid reappeared.

The raw edge of excitement his nerves had been riding was slowly easing down, and he felt almost boneless. Relaxed.

Damn it, he had lost the first battle. But he would win the war. Even if it was won by his sheer inability to participate. "Perhaps, we should delay the rest of this. You haven’t had satisfaction yet, woman."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that." She laughed breathily.

Feeling a palpable sense of foreboding, Vilkas warily watched her as she draped herself over him. He felt some pressure as she laid herself carefully down. Folding her arms upon his lower stomach, she grinned lazily.

His cock twitched, nestled in the depths of her cleavage. Pathetic, he told himself. Steeling his will against further attacks, Vilkas glared at her.

Her breath puffed out, tickling the hairs on his abdomen. He counted ten breaths, feeling almost anxious as her sparkling eyes stayed focused, centered upon him.
No. No fucking way. He was good, but not this good.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she lowered her head down his belly. Those eyes were liquid bright with mischief as she lightly traced her lips down the trail of dark hair, lowered her head until her face was slowly obscured by the wavy mass of hair. A pearl, disappearing beneath a red tide.

He felt her delicately lick her lips. Then, with a hot breath her mouth enveloped his cock, root to tip.

Lying there, all loose and languid, Vilkas closed his eyes against the dragging sensations as her tongue swirled around him, flattening in rapid smooth strokes. Allowing himself to enjoy this, at least, he stretched in his bindings. Wet sounds filled the comfortable silence, as Sigrid sucked and licked him at a seemingly unhurried pace.

His cock twitched again, and his moment of relaxation was broken as he realized with a prickling wonder (and some shock) that once more, he was getting hard.

Sigrid's hand joined her mouth, and he bit his lower lip in exasperation as the pace suddenly quickened. Friction increased as her head bobbed up and down, like it was a fucking race, gods, and then -

- pleasure that was almost pain swelled, as that deep vibrating thrum started once more. Trying to get away from the unbearable sensation, Vilkas writhed against the bed, leather cords creaking as he pulled tight, the tendons in his arms standing out like ropes.

Fuck, but it was over, over before he realized he could hold out no longer. He could feel her mouth uttering words, whispering alien consonants blunted by the saliva slickness of her tongue as her fist compressed him. Pumping his hips shamelessly, Vilkas cried out as her mouth milked him, lingering there as sweat ran down his forehead and trickled into the furs.

He lay there in a hazy stupor, as the blood roared in his ears. Tasting blood, his tongue darted over his teeth. Damn, he had bitten his lip. Thoughts ran in leaping circles, his mind pleasantly blank.

She was a fucking wizard. Why had she never shown him this before?

He felt her leave the bed once more. Heard the snap of a bottle being opened, swallowing sounds as the woman took a drink.

Eventually, he would regain the use of his thoughts. Once his head stopped spinning with delirious pleasure. And he would pay her back for this. With interest.

Again, he felt her weight on the bed as she approached him, her legs sliding along the furs as she sat upright next to him.

"You win. No more. Gods, no more." His head fell back limply, a heavy lassitude overtaking his limbs. He was finished. Pride gone, all hopes of retaining any shred of manhood disappeared. She had done the impossible. Vilkas was completely, totally devoid of the desire to have sex.
Somewhere up above him, he heard Sigrid laugh fondly. "As you wish."

Another pop of a container, opened. He smelled lavender, with a mellow aroma that reminded him of honey. "What's this, now."

"Nothing wild." A giggle. "Nothing like...heh heh, nothing like Hircine’s horny goat weed."

Vilkas chose to ignore...whatever that was about. He felt a sudden warmth and pressure as her hands pressed into his shoulders. Groaning in relief, he turned his head to blink sleepily at Sigrid. "It smells almost...sweet."

"Lavender oil, salve of dragons tongue and beeswax. Great for relaxing sore muscles." Kneading the taut stiffness of his arms, she paused at his tied wrists. "These are digging into your skin, love. Let me take them off now."

Too tired to fight, he sighed, stretching with a yawn as she untied the knots holding him down. "Luckily for you, my stamina is completely tapped out." She threw the leather cords to the side of the bed, forgotten. In the quiet of the night, he could hear insects chirp. The sound of brook water running somewhere outside, in the streets of Whiterun.

Turning his head slightly, Vilkas fixed a pale eye upon Sigrid. "Mark me, woman. For this...I'm going to do something unfortunate to you later."

The hands that were rubbing his neck so deliciously stopped. He held his breath; wondering if he had said something wrong.

"Hmm. You have enough energy to complain. Well, shit. That just won't do."

Opening his eyes to behold the face of what must surely be pure, unadulterated evil in female form, Vilkas felt his heart start hammering in his chest. Sigrid leaned over him, gold green eyes consuming his vision. The round irises shook, shrinking to slitted black slots as she opened her mouth.

Vilkas felt, more than heard, the trembling roar of her Thu’um as she spoke.

_Unahzaal genazand vaan!

...And whatever he had been thinking broke entirely out of his thoughts as suddenly he was aloft, borne on a tidal wave of rushing waters. Sensation, touch in triplicate, _gods it was too much_, too much for any man to feel without going mad.

“_Ful hi lorot wah rel zey?_” Sigrid crooned, her thighs lifting as she danced over him. “_Dii meyar, Zu'u fen genun hi vahzah suleyk._”

- And her eyes were dark, black as the void and burning as she spoke, her voice rattling the cupboards, shaking the very bed, but he was captured. Pinned beneath her as her thighs tightened in luscious strength. He couldn’t fear her, not even as he felt more throbbing heat _spiral_ through him at
her words, words he could only guess at that were now part of the woman he loved.

Bracing herself against him, Sigrid shuddered, her chest heaving in tight short gasps as she arched, glided against his cock with the slickness of her folds.

Too much, far too much on top of everything else, but he couldn’t help it. Thrusting against her, he dragged his cock against the wet heat of her, smiling unabashedly at the cry it tore out of her lips as he held her hips with his hands.

She seemed lost to impulse, her throaty purr echoing through her limbs, that dipped waist that flared into lush, womanly hips. He rode out the wild grind of her cunt with an unconscious buck of his own hips, driving up against her, hard. With a spark of pride, he saw her fling her head back, her breath a ragged pant as her hands scrabbled, clinging to anything she could hold on to.

Eventually Sigrid touched herself, her hands clutching her breasts, clawing at her nipples in a frenzy of passion. Her eyes landed on his as they locked together; a joined moment of shocked awe. “Zu’u nis... Zu’u didn’t mindok nii vust kos med daar...” she hissed, tightening her thighs around him as he gasped.

He reached up, his thumb brushing over the fullness of her lips as she suddenly bit down, nearly drawing blood. Her eyes fluttered closed as she continued rubbing, bucking against him. Taking away his hand, he grasped her hips and carefully angled the frenzyed rocking pace into... fuck...

Closer. She bent over, her tangled hair falling in her face as she sobbed, trying desperately to swallow the little noises she made as he finally entered her, taking her for his own. Pushing inside, he marveled at how soft, how wet and yet how hard she was inside. Her walls fluttered against his cock, bearing down with a pressure that rolled his eyes back in his head. Her breasts touched his chest as her strength gave out; the heaviness of her soothing, clearing his mind as he reasserted himself. He was now in charge.

Grimly biting back his mounting desires, Vilkas dug his hands into her hips until his knuckles turned white and guided her crazed bucking thrusts into something that might actually bear results. Seeking that angle that would drive her wild, would end this ecstasy that was a torment all its own.

Sigrid whined into his chest, muttering a string of words that may have been Dovahzul littered with obscenity that made him grin. He would risk it; risk the wrath of the woman to end this once and for all. The muscles of his arms bunched, as her eyes shot wide open as Vilkas flipped them; her shriek of anger swallowed by his mouth as he pushed her hands into the furs and took it. Took her mouth in his, eating all the whimpers, the sounds she made as he drove into her in earnest.

“Don’t you dare stop,” she cried out, when he gasped for breath. “I swear to God, I will Shout if I have to.”

His ragged laughter came in fits. “Don’t...do that.” Vilkas jerked, writhing as her legs suddenly wrapped tightly around his waist. Gods, her cunt was like silk, and he was...just a bit more...

The sound she made, as she came...a high broken cry he knew he’d fucking remember forever, as they met each other again and again, a dance he wished would never end. He nearly screamed himself, fighting to thrust back as she squeezed him inside of her, tight as a fist, his hips stuttering hard as everything became jagged and blank as he came, a hoarse roar torn out of his throat.

He could feel Sigrid trembling beneath him. Slowly, he relaxed his hold upon her. Lifting his weight
up onto his elbows, his darker hair mingled with the sun browned tangles of the woman’s unruly mane. She was panting hard, eyes closed tight as he smiled, feeling her throb slowly, repeatedly, against him still.

Rolling off of her, he tucked her back into his arms as she shivered with the sudden loss of his heat. Moments blurred past as their breathing synchronized, slowing as the lantern burned out.

“Vilkas?”
“Hmm?”
“...Think I won that challenge.”

“Mmph.” Cracking a yawn, Vilkas pulled a fur over them both. "You may have started the battle, woman, but I won the war.”

Resting his chin upon her head, he felt her body press against his as they lay there, limbs tangling in exhausted repose. “That was...something else.”

He felt, rather than heard her snicker. Suddenly, he saw a flash of light reflected from her eyes as she shoved herself up in bed, came face to face with him.

Vilkas blinked, feeling exhaustion creep over him as he struggled to stay awake, to be alert enough to remember this. Her lips descended slowly, carefully upon his.

“Zu’u lokaal hi, Vilkas.” She whispered tenderly. Her fingers traced patterns upon his brow. He swallowed. “You too, Sigrid.” Pulling her closer against him, he closed his eyes against the night.

“Always will.”

Wrapped in each other, sleep took them until dawn.

Chapter End Notes

I make no claims to accuracy in this work. I used a few different translating websites for Dovahzul (who’s nerdier? The nerds writing the language, teaching it, or the nerd writing smexy fanfic with dragonspeech? You decide) but I highly doubt it would make sense to anyone who bothers to hunt down all the meanings. So don’t. Just read. And comment. Thanks!

Reference websites:
https://www.thuum.org/
https://www.thuum.org/learn/practice/phrases.php

Sahlos tolaan slen: Lust Desire Flesh
Unahzaal genazand vaan: Eternal pleasure soar

Ful hi lorot wah rel zey? Dii meyar, Zu'u ñen genun hi vahzah suleyk: So you think to rule me? My own, I will show you true power.

Zu'u nis. .. Zu'u didn't mindok nii vust kos med daar: I can’t...I didn’t know it could be like this.

Zu’u lokaal hi: I love you
Ignoring the threats of the undead, Sigrid hacked her way through the temple of Skuldafn, the compelling urge to see the sun once more giving her feet even greater speed as she rushed past the draugr, ignoring some of them entirely in favor of seeking the light.

She felt dirty, unclean, as she had killed the two dragons who stood sentinel near where Odahviing had dropped her off. Such a waste. And an incredible downer from the adrenaline rush that was dragonflight.

It had been a thrill; god, almost similar to a rollercoaster, with the swooping drops and high soaring leaps among the clouds. She had screamed in joy; Odahviing roaring his approval of her response as he wheeled and banked against mountain crags hidden in fog and cloud.

“This is as far as I can take you. Kriof voth ahrkin. I will look for your return, or Alduin's.” Steadying herself against the sudden dizziness of landing on solid ground, she merely nodded. She was surprised when the massive red dragon shoved his nose against her chest. “Mindoraan, pah ok miodovahhe lavraan til. I surely do not need to warn you that all his remaining strength is marshalled there.”

“Either way, this will all be over soon, Odahviing.” With a surge of daring, she placed her hand upon his muzzle, feeling the tight interlocked scales heat as his nostrils flared. It felt almost snake-like, the delicate skin around his lips and nose. Sigrid marveled at the texture; she had never touched a dragon’s face with the skin still attached. The strange power that dissolved flesh into bone instantaneously after death did not allow for it.

“Lok, Thu’um.” His breath warmed her as his wings beat against the thin mountain air. She watched as he became a red pinpoint blurred against the far eastern mountains.

The entire day had passed by in a blur. When she hadn’t been sneaking carefully around traps, draugr or solving the lock puzzles (meant to keep the unquiet dead in, she imagined, because they were far too simple to solve) Sigrid had been hacking and slashing her way through deathlords, skeletons and the more rank and file of the draugr soldiers.

There had only been once, where she had hidden gasping in a dusty alcove, badly injured from a massive spike of ice that protruded fully through her thigh. That had been a bad moment; the deathlord hunted the halls for her, coughing threats in that dead, dry voice as she fumbled with the healing and stamina potions. Trying to be as quiet as a warrior who had barely trained in stealth could be. Damn, she really had to bone up on sneaking at some point. If just to stay alive in situations like this.

Potions helped. Making a face as the tang of juniper, blisterwort and giant’s toe went down none too smoothly, she felt renewed strength course through her limbs as she stood, breathing shallowly the dust of ages.
That had been hours ago. Now, as she burst into the light from the final flight of stairs, she could see the swirling otherworldly portal, in all shades of blue and violet. It threw the cadaverous outline of the dragon priest into full relief. *Nahkriin*.

*I'm coming for your mask, bro.* Sigrid thought, eyes narrowed as she summoned whatever dregs of energy she had left. The brews she had brought would only push exhausted muscles so far. It was rather like a bandage for a gaping wound; it held the edges together and stopped blood loss, but to heal fully would require rest and stitches.

Dodging a blast of sparking lightning, Sigrid rolled out of the way as he summoned a Storm Atronach. She swallowed as the stones bound together with ozone and electricity hummed, growing tree tall as she looked furiously for an opening, anything.

Panting as the withered body of the priest disappeared with a nicely timed thrust of her sword, she wearily leaned over to pick up the dragon mask. Feeling the thrum of magicka zap her as she touched it, she sighed in frustration as she remembered - Nahkiin’s mask was enchanted to fortify magic. *Well that’s no bloody good.* Stuffing it in her pack with a sigh, she edged closer to the vortex that dipped, like a well with no end, into Sovngarde.

*Like a galaxy full of stars,* she thought, fascinated. If only she had a camera. She wished Vilkas could see the crazy she had endured, just to get to the pit of doom.

A pang of longing ripped through her, harsh and needy... *No!*

She pulled in a deep breath and breathed out. Slowly.

He was fine. She was still alive, despite the odds. Purposefully blanking her mind against the panic, she took a running leap -

-and went down into the rabbit hole.

**********

The mist swirled, grey and foreboding.

Sigrid held fast to the memory of her purpose, trying to fight the mind-fogging properties of the darkness that sapped her strength. There was something, something she could do. Had to do. She wandered, tripping on rocks and bushes. Not even the pulsing galaxy above was visible, now.

Oh. Duh. “*Lok Vah Koor!*”

The skies cleared. The Dragonborn blinked, as suddenly colors exploded against her vision. Blue-green, iced purples, reds and molten orange, all swirled in a somehow harmonious aurora above and beyond.

Sovngarde.
Scores of the spirits of the dead wandered here, in the vast endless fields and mountains. She could see them stumbling, falling as they strove to reach the tall, distant towers of what must be Shor’s Hall.

Vilkas had spoken reverently of the whale-bone bridge, of the golden halls, where the valorous and brave rested from their mortal sorrows. Seeing the black form of Alduin swooping, far off, her mouth tightened into a grim line as she realized the spiky bastard was eating them. Consuming the souls of the dead Nords who sought their heaven. She felt a rush of fear as the beautiful flowers, the sky and grassy fields around her suddenly held a shadow of dread.

Had to move. Move faster, past the idyllic feeling of peace that had snaked itself around her heart. It was a trap. She didn’t belong here. Forcing her legs to take one step, and then another, Sigrid made her way down the path towards Shor’s great Hall.

She was forced to Shout twice again to clear the skies of that mind numbing fog, when suddenly she realized she saw none other than Kodlak Whitemane, wandering fruitlessly near a sparkling stream. “Harbinger!” Sigrid called out gladly.

“...Sigrid, child is that you?” He replied plaintively, his eyes looked around her, above her. With a stab of sorrow, she realized that the Harbinger was still lost, lost mentally in the fog that had ensnared the brave souls who stumbled, helpless before the World Eater here. “When I woke from cold death, my doom was lifted - there was Shor’s Hall, my heart’s desire.” He spoke as if speaking to himself, his arms raised slightly to the left of where she could see the great building gleaming off in the distance.

“But now I wander, weary and lost. Alduin hunts me as we once hunted our prey - a bitter payment for many bloody deeds.” Kodlak sighed, a forlorn sound.

Against her better judgement, Sigrid approached Kodlak and hugged him. Solid, yet somehow insubstantial, the Harbinger’s spirit felt fragile. Like the hollow bones of a bird. Slowly, the old man’s arms reached around her, holding her in turn.

“I feel...can hear your heartbeat like the Harbingers of old. Sigrid…” she smiled, feeling a tear trickle down her cheek as he patted her back. “Your glories in Skyrim are seen and honored.”

Hugging him tightly for the space of a moment more, the Dragonborn released him. As soon as she did, the clarity left Kodlak’s eyes. He began to look around, taking slow unsteady steps once more.

She watched in sadness, suddenly realizing that there was no end to this torment. Not until Alduin was taken care of.

Easier said than done. She shivered, watching as the World Eater snapped up a Stormcloak soldier in his jaws. Steeling her heart, she kept her focus on the stark white arch of the whale bone bridge.

Just as she was about to cross it, a giant suddenly appeared. Blinking up at him, her mouth fell open in shock. He must have been ten feet tall, easy. He wore a barbarian’s garb of hide loincloth, wrapped leather boots and armored gauntlets, with his torso cinched in what looked suspiciously like a WWF wrestler’s champion belt.

If he wanted to wear a macho, over-the-top corset like that, no one would be able to stop him. The dude was huge.

Tsun. Nordic God of Trials. She remembered Vilkas reading about him, about the struggle every warrior faced, to ascend with honor into the hallowed halls.
God damn it.

“What brings you, wayfarer grim, to wander here in Sovngarde; souls-end, Shor’s gift to the honored dead?” Tsun’s voice echoed strangely in the open plain.

She cleared her throat. As the mouse said to the elephant, she thought with dark humor. “I pursue Alduin, the World Eater.”

“A fateful errand. No few have chafed to face the Worm since he first set his soul-snare here at Sovngarde’s threshold.” She could see those massive hands grip tightly the warhammer that was taller than she was. “But Shor restrained our wrathful onslaught - perhaps, deep counselled, your doom he foresaw.”

“Perhaps. But I must face him anyways.”

“Hmm...no shade are you, as usually here passes, but living you dare the land of the dead. By what right do you request entry?”

She thought about it. Claiming she should enter simply by being Dragonborn felt a bit like a cop-out. It wasn’t something she had much control over.

No. But there was something else. Someone she owed.

“I request entry by right of glory. I lead the Companions of Jorrvaskr.” And as she spoke the words, she felt a warmth burning in her heart. The words felt truer than they ever had, back home in Whiterun as she had attended to the warriors in their hall. Feeling a deep abiding love, she smiled, grateful for all she have been given.

Tsun’s rocky face shifted into a small smile. “I welcome the chance to challenge the blade of Ysgramor’s heir, honored shield sister to Kodlak Whitemane...whom I have watched for in vain.”

“Yes.” Craning her neck to look up at him, she noticed he wore a twisted torque around that neck. God, his neck was thicker than her thighs. “Can I enter the Hall of Valor?”

He raised his hammer. “Living or dead, by decree of Shor, none may pass this perilous bridge ‘till I judge them worthy by the warrior’s test.”

Shit on a cracker.

And it was on. Rolling immediately out of the crashing weight of the giant’s swing, she struggled to parry the hammer that struck.

Fast. So much faster than anyone that big should have been. Darting around him, Sigrid tried a few Shouts, which the goliath dodged easily. When a downward swing connected with his axe, she felt her teeth grind as the rebound from their weapons shook like an earthquake. Once, twice more, she attacked bravely but futilely, mentally mapping out the distance to the whale bone bridge...then -

- Withdrawing, Tsun took a step back, then nodded. “You fought well. I find you worthy.” Her breath heaved out of her with a sigh.

“It is long since one of the living has entered here. May Shor’s favor follow you and your errand.” Turning the broad bulk of his body, Tsun gestured towards Shor’s Hall.
Sigrid stared. This was it. Quelling her anxiety, she began walking past the giant (seriously, her head came up to maybe that ridiculous belt) and continued on.

The whalebone bridge was terrifying. She had to jump the gaps rib to rib, with huge spaces between the rib bones and vertebrae. Gods, she thought, finally making it over. Any soul could fall through. Where was the justice in that, after trying to beat that behemoth?

If she ever designed an afterlife, it would be a tropical paradise. Full bar and all, swimsuits optional.

Looking up as she reached the monstrous, polished doors, she pushed hesitantly. They felt like stone. One of them slowly, soundlessly opened.

She entered.

Blinking at the sudden barrage of light, smells and sound, Sigrid felt vaguely overwhelmed after the peaceful barrenness of Sovngarde’s valleys. Massive roast spits took up the majority of the hall before her, with entire oxen and cows turning upon the flames. Tables and chairs occupied nearly every extra space, gleaming gold and quicksilver white. She could see nearly every variety of food; sweetrolls, breads and crostatas piled up next to cheese and fruit. Meat, fish and vegetables, in a stunning array of options that dragged her eyes from the people that were walking around.

Most were Nords. Not much of a surprise. She saw several mage robes, which piqued her interest, as well as the blend between the more highborn and the poor. Everyone mingled freely, some feasting and singing, others engaged in fistfights further down. If she squinted, she could see a training area not too far, with weapons and shields of every kind…

“Welcome, Dragonborn!”

A heavy hand clapped upon her shoulder, startling Sigrid from her reverie. Looking up at yet another huge man, she raised her eyebrows. This one was actually pretty hot. Long, cornsilk blonde hair fell in a pale waterfall across his shoulders. His armor was gleaming and ornate, in a style Sigrid had never seen before, but felt familiar somehow. If possible, his accent was heavier than Tsun’s. “Our door has stood empty since Alduin first set his soul snare here.”

Taking a step back to appraise the Dragonborn, the giant smiled slightly. “Newest of the Harbingers of the Companions, aye?” The grin left his face as his eyes became hollowed, serious. “Do not fail Kodlak. He’s earned his place here, and does not deserve to fall prey to Alduin’s insatiable hunger.”

“I won’t fail him.” Sigrid nodded her head, keeping her eyes upon him. “If I may ask...what is your name, hero?”

His laughter enveloped her, crashing like waves in her ears. “I am Ysgramor, Harbinger. Bringer of Words, First Harbinger, late refugee of my homeland of Atmora.” He bowed slightly, eyes fixed upon hers. “Welcome to Shor’s Hall. By Shor’s command, we sheathed our blades and ventured not into the vale’s dark mist. But three await your word to loose their fury upon the perilous foe.” He gestured further into the hall, where Sigrid could clearly see the three ancient Tongues waiting patiently. “Gormlaith the Fearless, glad-hearted in battle; Hakon the Valiant, heavy-handed warrior; Felldir the Old; far-seeing and grim. They await your word.”

“I, ah, will definitely be over there soon.” Sigrid stammered. Damn, but she was having a hard time reconciling the stories and songs with this jolly handsome giant.

Nodding her farewells, Sigrid made to get away, then stopped. Turning to Ysgramor once again, she
cleared her throat. He tilted his head, seemingly curious. “I have a question, if I may?”

His blue eyes were warm and clear. “Speak, Harbinger.”

She took a deep breath. “The Companions...they are meant to be impartial, right? Never choosing sides in a conflict. More like judges, or arbiters of truth.”

His flaxen majesty nodded. “Aye, that’s the idea.”

Oh no. “Then, have I failed the Companions by taking an interest in current affairs?” She felt her throat bob in fear as his eyes squinted in thought. “I haven’t involved the Companions beyond using the clout of their name to receive audiences with Jarls. But, I have meddled with politics. More than I’d have liked, honestly.”

Ysgramor scratched his chin pensively. “I see nothing wrong with personal valor. As long as the Companions themselves are not forced to fight against their conscience, it will be well.”

“Go.” He ushered her away, a smile wreathing his face once more. “There are many who are eager to speak with you, now!”

And boy, were there. Olaf One-Eye, Hunroor, Ulfgar the Unending all briefly chatted with her as she walked, looking around in awe like a country yokel visiting the county fair. Jurgen Windcaller, solemn and dour, drank a cup of mead with her as she sat, fascinated by his recountings of the Battle at Red Mountain.

Another war leader, humbled by loss and grief to turn power to a force for good, she mused. Jurgen had taken the time to warn her, quietly, about time spent in Sovngarde. Particularly as a living soul. That time in Shor’s Hall did not pass as time would in a different plane.

“There are many different realms of the afterlife, Dragonborn.” His fingers picked at a grey thread on his robes. He wore the same garb as the Greybeards - ornate, navy blue and silver grey embroidered layers that reminded her somehow of Gandalf the Grey.

If Gandalf had been about forty years old and oozed sex appeal. She bit back a smile, imagining what glorious destruction a joined cult of Greybeards and Dibella could do. It bore further thought, certainly.

No more of that, or she would accomplish nothing here. She finished the mead; pure ambrosia. The best mead she had ever tasted, hands down. “Jurgen, where do those souls go that do not qualify for this Hall of Valor?”

The Greybeard creased his brow in thought. “There are many daedric realms. If one devoted a portion of their time and energy in life to a daedra, it is likely they could end up there. Many planes of existence span Mundus, Dragonborn. Realities and worlds we cannot even dream about. Who is to say until presented with the truth that this is all there is?”

Sigrid cracked a smile. “That makes sense.” Looking away as a sudden round of singing broke out, she placed her empty mug back on the table. “Do you have any advice for me?”

Dragonborn and Greybeard looked at each other, as song and battle continued, echoing in the vastness of Shor’s domain. “You are not from here. From this world.”

“No.” Restless, she scratched beneath her dragonscale armor, under her neck where sweat and blood had dried, tacky against her skin.
His eyes were calm, respectful. “Do you realize how you came to be here, in Tamriel?”

“Do you know anything about that? I’ve looked everywhere to find the truth.”

Continuing to study her, Jurgen pulled a volume from somewhere in his robes. “No doubt you have already visited the Time Wound that sits atop the Throat of the World.” After she nodded, he began flipping through pages, searching for something. “Ah. Here. Tiid kreh.”

“A tiid kreh, or time bend is similar to what the Time Wound is, yet altogether separate. You saw, did you, the strange ripple, the unnaturalness of the air? Even Kynareth herself shies at the wrongness of a tiid kreh. You...emerged from one, in your entrance to this world. More than that, I cannot say. That more than one exists at all is an aberration, an affront to the fabric of aetherius.” Snapping the book shut, Jurgen peered at Sigrid. “I can sense much of the unreal around you. You bend reality by merely existing here.”

“So,” her throat was dry again, damn her fears. “I was never meant to come? There is no giant Daedric plan that scooped me and...and my family from all we knew and landed us here?” Feeling a curl of anger unravel in her heart, she sucked in a breath.

“They all died for nothing.” She spat, looking away. Her chest hurt, aching as though a icicle had speared her heart.

“Dragonborn.” She felt suddenly, his hand upon hers. His deep lake blue eyes radiated compassion. “We may not know why the trials we endure are called for us to bear. But we can overcome.” Patting her hand as she sat there, tongue-tied, he stood.

“There are more here in the this hall who are eager to greet you.”

“Farewell, Jurgen the Calm. And thank you.” She clasped shoulders with the man, who smiled for the first time as she did so. “Fate drives you, Dragonborn. But you follow your own path. Choose wisely, lest you wander into evil.” She released him, already looking toward the doors, steeling herself for what was to come, when his hand grabbed her gauntlet.

“Yes?” Sigrid turned, her eyebrows raised in surprise. Were the goodbyes more elaborate here in the afterlife than a simple salute?

“Dragonborn.” Jurgen seemed to be swallowing back something; his lips pressed tightly together. Finally, he fixed his gaze on hers. “Do not give up. Not even when it seems all may be lost. Time is a great spiral, Dragonborn, and what is will ever be. It cannot be remade or undone. Only added to.” He finished with a wry twist to his smile, as she blinked in confusion.

“Uh, thanks? Is there something else to go with that? Like any actual information? Battle advice?”

Actually chuckling, he gestured for her to move along.

“Go. They’ve been waiting for you.”

Expecting to see perhaps Ragnar the Red, or maybe the three Tongues of old waiting impatiently for her to quit chit-chatting, Sigrid was completely unprepared for the group currently running towards her.

“Mom! Mommy, you made it!”
Her mind went completely blank. Heedless of her sword rattling in its sheath, or her knapsack bouncing crazily upon her back, Sigrid sprinted to meet the crowd of children, being herded by a group of adults she recognized, knew with all her heart.

“Oh my god ...Bryce! Mom and Dad! Sweethearts, what are you doing here?!?”
Warmth. She was surrounded, held tightly by arms large and small, chubby and wrinkled. Faces she never thought she see in the flesh again, smiling before her.

“Sarah! Oh Sarah girl, you look like something the cat dragged in, darling!”

“None of that. She made it here. She’s with us, now.”

“Mommy! Mommy I can see you!”

It was hard to cry with a smile, but she managed it. Swimming through a sea of arms, she pulled out the darkest hand, which clasped her fingers in his. “Bryce!”

And suddenly, she was enveloped in a tight embrace that smelled like gun oil and Hugo Boss cologne. “Sarah, mi corazón, I thought we’d never see you again.”

Choking on her sobs, she hugged him tightly. So familiar, those arms. She rested her head against his chest as her face crumpled. Damn, ugly cry face again. But she didn’t care. God, she didn’t care at all.

“Mom, don’t be sad.” A plump little hand tugged on the furs that lined her dragonscale armor. Moving away from Bryce, who smiled sadly at her, she tore her eyes away to see Adam. The toddler’s eyes were huge and round, as he chewed on his fist. “Mommy, you’re all poky.”

She laughed, leaning over to kiss his cheeks, pecking them until the little boy giggled. “Yes, I suppose I am, in this getup.” She could see the other older boys stare at her, as they took in her barbaric apparel. Terrence took a step forward, bravely. “You look kind of badass, Mom.”

Her parents chuckled, holding hands tightly. Turning to them, she ran into their arms with a happy cry. “I’m so proud of you, my chickadee,” her father murmured softly, stroking the matted braids in her hair. She could see her mother start as she noticed her scars, the whiskey brown eyes widening as she took in all the other changes to her daughter’s appearance. “The robed gentleman was kind enough to explain how we managed to visit you, dear. But I have to say, this is all a bit of a shock.”

Sean swallowed, holding hands with Peter and Robbie as they cringed away from the Nord warriors slowly pacing the hall. “Is it true, that we’re really dead? I...don’t remember much of anything, before we went to Fiji with Abuela Ramirez.”

Raising an eyebrow at Bryce, she was rewarded with a chuckle. “Heaven,” he softly responded, his dark eyes twinkling as her jaw literally dropped.

“Seems like I’m in the wrong afterlife,” she managed to rasp out, eyes still absorbing his appearance, unharmed. She tried very hard not to remember the last time she had seen Bryce, back in the lair of the necromancer. This, this was how she wanted to remember him. Warm and alive, always surrounded by at least three boys at any given time.
“Nope, I’ve been told this is where you’re meant to be.” Her dead husband sighed. “I’ve argued plenty of times with your old friend Ysgramor over there, who is currently standing in for Shor. He pulled some strings to get us here in time, to see you.”

Pulling Lewis and Dave closer in a careful hug, the kids buried their faces in her neck as Bryce shook his head, frustrated. “I don’t know what the hell you’ve been up to, here, but it seems as though you’ve been busy. They want to keep you. Something about fending off the apocalypse, or something.”

“The world takes a stab at ending every spring. Something in the air sets it off,” she tried for jocular, a bit of Buffy, just to see him laugh. He just stared at her, grief clouding those beautiful eyes.

“Pues si, pero ni modo. I miss you so much,” he spoke quietly.

Feeling hot tears squeeze from her eyes, she turned away, clenching her jaw.

Some favor. This was some kind of reward? God, how sadistic were the heroes that brought them here...to show her her loved ones, seemingly alive and well only to rip them away?

“I’m so glad heaven is a tropical beach, at least.” She managed to say, laughing as the rest of her boys overcame their shyness and hugged what they could reach of her, carefully avoiding the spikes and sharp edges of her armor.

They sat there for a time, talking quietly. Jurgen Windcaller was right - time passed differently in the realms of the afterlife. Neither Bryce nor her parents could tell her just how long they had been ‘on vacation’. And while the adults remembered more or less clearly how they had passed on, the children seemed oblivious to the details. For which Sigrid was grateful, though she briefly pulled her teenager Sean aside to talk when he started shivering at the sight of a staff-wielding Nord mage.

Sigrid clutched each and every boy to herself, finally managing to take off her armor (with some amazed scoffs at how difficult real armor was to unlatch and unfasten) until she was clad solely in a soft tunic belted in furs. Hugging them all for real this time, she kissed them all on their cheeks. The older boys blushed and dodged her attempts to smooch them. She settled for hugging them close instead, desperately trying to hold it together, to just enjoy the moment.

Little Adam clung to Bryce, her husband picking the boy up and walking around, introducing him to the random warriors who stopped, amused to see a child in the Halls of Valor. Her parents sat close as well, her mother tentatively asking her about her scars.

She told them all. All of the ridiculous, unbelievable tale, from the beginning. And watched as her father grew silent and grim, her mother crying into her sleeve as she related her own Tale of the Dragonborn. Cast adrift, thrown into death and confusion and pain. Buoyed by friendship, first, then camaraderie as she learned how to wield Shout and blade. Love, once thought lost, then found again in sudden surprise and burgeoning trust.

At the end, they all sat together, silence punctuating questions and stories. Some of the boys had fallen asleep, so peacefully on the steps or dangling from benches. Did the dead really sleep, Sigrid wondered? Or did they pass on the habits of their lives into the afterlife? They seemed to eat for enjoyment, but Bryce told her that what felt like a week had passed without any need to take the kids
to the bathroom; he laughed that he was enjoying the reprieve from cleaning a boy's toilet while he could.

“Are you Sigrid Farstrider? Harbinger and Dragonborn?”

She lifted her eyes, hefting the weight of a sleeping Dave who had fallen against her shoulder. A Nord couple stood before her, clad in simple homespun and fur cloaks.

The man was tall, even for a Nord, his dark hair bound in a shaved wolfstail. Blue woad streaked across his eyes, which were a dark, gleaming brown...like polished oak. The woman was beautiful in a predatory way. She reminded Sigrid suddenly of Aela, as the Nord woman shifted on her feet, edgy. A scar bisected her lower lip, her blonde hair falling artfully in a mass of beaded braids. Those eyes-

With a snap of shock, she realized she knew exactly who they were.

“I see you have noticed the resemblance.” The man chuckled, kneeling down to have a better look at her. “I am Thadrig, late of Windfell Farm. And this is my wife, Gydda.”

Gydda’s cold, silvery grey eyes focused on Sigrids. She had seen frozen lakes that looked warmer. “I have been told you know my twin boys. Farkas and Vilkas. Are they well?”

She swallowed, very aware of Bryce waiting patiently behind her, still holding Adam against his hip. “Yes….Wow. It’s wonderful to meet you. You should be proud of your sons. They have brought the Companions great honor with their deeds.”

Wondering if she dare voice a long unanswered question, Sigrid turned to Thadrig. He resembled Farkas more, she thought on further scrutiny. He had the bulk, the size and the warmth in his appraisal of her. Gydda, on the other hand was a dead ringer for the sterner son.

“May I ask something, as a favor to your boys?” Seeing them nod, she hurriedly continued before they could change their minds. “They...don’t remember much about their lives before being brought to Jorrvaskr. Farkas says they were rescued, by a Companion named Jergen.” Licking her lips, she fastened her eyes bravely on Gydda.

“What were they rescued from? Were you there, as well?”

Thadrig sighed heavily. “Our farm was on the outskirts of Falkreath, deep in the woods. We were taken by surprise at night by a clan of necromancers. Much like you, Harbinger,” his thick eyebrows lifted, a grin pulling at his mouth. She responded with a quirk of her own, reluctantly grinning at the irony.

“They practiced their foul magics on us first. We protected the twins, barely out of breechclouts, first with our fists and then with our bodies.” Gydda snarled, her brow furrowed as she remembered painful things. “...Only to find ourselves here, in Shor’s Hall for our bravery in defending our children. It doesn’t make up for it! Not for leaving them, just bairns... all alone in that cave.”

“Aye.” Sighing, he pulled his wife towards him. She rested against his arm, those ice grey eyes focused on Sigrid. “But Gydda, they are well. Grown and blooded men. We will see them, when their years are ended. We will, won’t we?” He added, almost as an afterthought.
Feeling more confident, she nodded. “They cured themselves of the beast blood. I have no doubt
they will make their way to these halls of valor, Thadrig and Gydda.”

“Then, it is well.” Breaking into a smile, Sigrid noticed he was missing an eyetooth. “Many thanks,
Dragonborn.”

“The three await you at your convenience. Shouldn’t keep the Tongues waiting,” Gydda added, as
they walked away.

Sigrid and her family watched the Nords wander among the tables, greeting old friends. Carefully
placing the toddler he held into her mother’s arms, Bryce motioned for her to sit further away, at an
almost entirely separate table.

She swallowed. Damn. And here it was. She was about to argue with her dead husband in a
Valhallan afterlife about her sexual escapades in a fantasy medieval world with a werewolf barbarian
warrior.

Shit just got real.

Holding up a hand, he shook his head as she opened her mouth to speak. Smiling, his voice was dry
as he began. “So, which one did you end up with?”

She stared at him, blank. “Wait. What?”

Bryce grabbed a sweet roll and inspected it. “Huh, that actually looks more appetizing than it did in
the game. Yeah. Which of the two brothers did you end up with in Jorrvaskr?” Taking a big bite, he
chewed, obviously enjoying her red faced misery if the mischief in his eyes was any indication.

“How do you…”

“Oh please Sarah. I’ve listened to all your rants about marriageable followers, even the ones about
the lack of Altmer options. Which from what I’ve gathered is no longer an issue, thanks to those
Thalmor bastards.” Swallowing the sticky treat with some effort, he reached for the ambrosia mead
to wash it down. “Frankly I’m just glad you ended the Dark Brotherhood instead of joining them.
I’ve heard enough Cicero-isms to last another lifetime. Let’s just ignore the craziness that all this even
exists for real, in any dimension or reality or whatever. Which one?”

She held her breath, feeling anxiety clamp like a vise over her chest. “Hey, breathe.” Bryce
cautioned, and she obeyed, feeling a small zap of familiarity, with a pang of sadness, as breathing
helped ease the pain. He knew her so well.

“Er…Vilkas. We’re actually engaged to be married. Shit, that was awkward as hell to say to you.
Um. That is, if I survive any of this.” She held out her amulet of Mara for him to see. Carefully
studying the intricate emblem, Bryce suddenly grinned. His face lit up like the sun.

“Hah!” He crowed. “I was totally right! Ysgramor owes me a hundred septims.”

“Wait.” Oh, he was totally playing her. “You and Ysgramor have been betting on…what? My
fucking love life?”
“Oh, sweetheart,” those dark eyes crinkled at the edges. He took her hand, contemplating the new scars, the bumpy knuckles that had healed poorly from being broken. “I’m dead. No!” he barked suddenly as she shifted shakily away from the table, panic making her movements jerky and uncoordinated. “I know it. You know it. I remember it all, babe.”

He reached out for her hand. She took it reluctantly, grimacing at the feather light feeling of holding hands with a spirit. Looking up, she could see his patient face was flooded with warmth, grief and...huh. Anger.

“I - I am so sorry I could not save you, or the boys from that fucking dick of a mage.” He spat darkly. “That was...quite a sore spot for me, for a long time. Sean remembers the most, with Terence and Lewis also remembering flashes of that necromancy shit before they ‘went to the light’” he used the bunny fingers expression, making her crack a grin.

“He was using a paralysis spell.” She responded quietly, her thumb rubbing gently over a sticky spot left by the sweet roll. “I actually looked into it, when I had the chance. There was nothing either of us could have done to stop him. I was...” breathing out heavily, she remembered how panicked, how confused she had been. The red ruin of the mage’s face when she had stabbed him, over and over. Her first violence in a violent world. “...lucky. So lucky Aela and Vilkas were there, to gut him. To save me.”

“Thank god they did.” A smile suddenly appeared on his face again, quick as a flash. “So why not Farkas, huh? I thought you said he was a sweetheart,” Bryce drawled that last bit, enjoying how she squirmed.

“Yeah. He is. He’s also marrying Carlotta - you remember that fruit seller, the one with the daughter? Yes. The one Mikael was always trying to get into her pants. Apparently Farkas beat me to the punch, literally. Just another weird thing about...remembering the game. Some of the quests aren’t necessarily done by the Dragonborn.”

“And thank God for that, if I remember correctly,” Bryce sighed. Sipping at the mead, he made a face. “Ack. This stuff is thicker than Guinness.”

“You get used to it.” Seeing his grin widen as she fidgeted nervously, Sigrid decided to just get it over with. “Alright, fine. Fine! You want to know, you’re gonna know! I went months, months without a handshake, or a real hug or any kind of human contact. And then, after always being so tired after training (you were right, basic training is a bitch) and those dreams …” She hung her head.

“Whoa, whoa. Enlightened though I may be, I’m not sure I want to hear all the gory details.” Bryce laughed fondly. She managed to return a small chuckle of her own, slumping in relief. “Just...he had better treat you right. Or else, voy a liberar la mamá grande sobre él!”

She laughed. “We get along just fine. It was...weird for a while, but now it’s mostly straightened out.”

“Glad to hear it.” As he looked suddenly away, Sigrid could see the warriors of the hall gathering near the front doors. She could make out the tow-headed form of Ysgarmor towering over most of the bodies there. “It looks as though they are waiting for you. Dragonborn.” He rolled his eyes with a smile.

“That’s me. Kicking ass and taking names.” Standing, she sighed. Damn, she was going to have to put her armor on again. “Think you can help me with my bits and pieces? It goes much faster with some helping hands.”
He was amazed by the dragonscale armor, exclaiming over the texture, the workmanship as she showed him how to buckle and tighten the straps so that it lay snug and secure against her. Checking her remaining potions, odds and ends, Sigrid examined her sword. Seeing his interest, she handed it to him.

“One handed, huh?” Carefully, he swung her blade in an arc, the celtic scrollwork catching the light. “I would have pegged you for an archer, all sneaky.”

“Turns out I’m better at hacking things to pieces than shooting holes through them.” Sigrid laughed, scratching her scalp. God, her hair was a total mess with her braids all loose and askew. She knew she probably stank of the dusty grave and sweat.

But it didn’t seem to affect the way Bryce looked at her. His sunny expression held a trace of sadness. “You look so different now. And it’s not just the scars on the outside, mi corazón.” He gave her back her sword. She sheathed it with a metallic hiss.

“I...I am different. Consuming dragon souls...it’s not simple, as it was in the game. It affected me, in more ways than one.” Scratching at the peeling blood on her cheeks, she looked away. “I’m so angry, all the time now.”

“Ah. Then you and my madre would have finally gotten along, instead of that meek ‘don’t look at me’ thing you had going!” She smiled ruefully as he chuckled, shifting as the weight of her armor settled, heavy, on her shoulders.

“You can do this.” He told her, as she walked back to the family group. Nearly every boy was asleep now, and she ached to wake them up, just to hold them again. Her father was muttering something to her mother, who was staring around the hall in fascination. “You’ve always done whatever you set your mind to. Remember the garden? You turned that piece of shit graveyard for boulders into a full on vegetable garden, with just the boys for help. You can do anything.”

She laughed a little wildly. “You know, I’m not even sure I can kill Alduin. Remember how he just...dissolved? The Greybeards think that he’ll just come back, for the Nord’s version of Ragnarok. That, that this world is supposed to end and that I’m only delaying the inevitable.”

“Maybe.” His dark eyes looked right into her. “We all die someday. But you’ve still gotta try.” Walking closer to her, Bryce leaned in, close. She shivered in guilty want, turning her face away as he hugged her tightly, carefully against the scaled armor. He breathed into her ear. “...I just want you to be happy. Let yourself be happy, with him. You deserve it so much, mi amor. I will miss you, always.”

Releasing her, Bryce smiled one last time, then walked off to rejoin the kids and her parents.

Waving her last goodbye, Sigrid stopped and stared at them, fixing them in her memory one last time. They looked...happy. Paradise was treating them right. She could picture it in her mind’s eye; the boys squishing pearly white sand into castles and moats, Bryce chasing them into the crashing ocean waves as they shrieked with joy. Her parents, drowsing in beach chairs with absurdly huge sun hats and glasses of wine.

It was a good afterlife. Fair. She’d mentally question all the ins and outs of godly punishment and Catholic liturgy later, when she had the headspace for it.

“Thank you, First of Harbingers,” she called out as she approached Ysgamor in the crowd of
heroes. The giant smiled back at her. “You are welcome. Your husband would be most welcome in our halls, but he elected to remain with the children.”

“Makes sense.” Straightening her spine, she cleared her throat. “I’m ready, as I’ll ever be.”

“Good luck, Harbinger.” Ysgramor guided her to where Gormlaith, Felldir and Hakon waited impatiently by the massive doors.

She didn’t look back.

***********

“Ven Mul Riik!”

“Again! Shout again, once more, and his might will be broken!” Gormlaith cried out, her voice echoing sepulchrally in the vast plains of Sovngarde.

The old mage nearest to Sigrid frowned, peering out at the slowly dissipating mist. “His power crumbles...do not pause for breath!”

“Stand fast!” Hakon roared, as the World Eater glided, descending and growing larger with every beat of wings as he approached them.

It was the hairiest fight she had ever been in. Sigrid dodged and ducked gouts of dragonfire, almost freezing in panic as Alduin called down flaming boulders to rain upon the plains. The other tongues were busy dodging as well. Gormlaith slashed wildly, eagerly rushing in to strike at the joints, the underbelly of the massive dovah.

Hakon and Felldir hung back further, more cautious in their approach. Sigrid could see the hate spark in their eyes as Joor Zah Frul was shouted repeatedly, often missing Alduin as he circled the four fighters. Like the black horizon of a storm, more than anything living. He blotted out the stars.

This is what you are here for. This is what you must do! Poisoning her blade, Sigrid leapt into the fray, joining Gormlaith as the approached a downed Alduin. The massive head rumbled in fury, blue cords of light holding him pinned to the earth as his tail whipped around, nearly clipping Sigrid in the head as she lurched to the right.

“Die, foul worm!” The Nord woman laughed fearlessly, stabbing deep into the open maw. Thick blood gushed wetly, slicking their blades. Spattering them in acidic, steaming blackness.

Sigrid hacked grimly, relentlessly at whatever opening Alduin gave. Her arms were sore, she could feel the lactic acid burn in her arms and legs as she pressed on, leaving no opportunity wasted.

Each swing was torture. It was like lifting a block of cement that swung on a rope, over and over. But she persevered, mentally grateful for all those months of running laps. Lifting logs. Hauling water. Doing pushups and flutter kicks and squats, over and over. She was fit, in the prime of her life; yet still she tired.

Popping open a stamina potion, she drank quickly and almost threw up at the gamey taste, the liquid
sloshing as she was forced to drop the remainder in favor of leaping away as Alduin’s wings flapped, free of the Dragonrend shout. His voice crackled in the air, rolling towards her like doom. “I have already defeated your friends once. Beyne! I do not fear them!”

“Arrogant mortal…” She grit her teeth, eyes watering as Alduin’s pumping wings blasted screaming gusts of wind towards her and the Tongues. She could see Felldir slipping back, held on his feet only by Hakon, who grabbed a fistful of his robes. Sigrid covered her eyes as the wind kicked up dust, bits of bush and zaps of electricity. She saw Gormlaith shield her eyes as well, against the storm.

“…Your pride will be humbled. Dragonborn. Those you love will be brought to ruin... dez motmahus. Inevitable.”

“Kren sosaal!” She shouted back, defiant, as Alduin gained altitude, slowly shrinking. She watched, gasping out of breath and in horror, as a rippling portal seemed to tear through the stars. Widening a black hole that seemed suck light in, rather than lead anywhere.

Felldir screamed at them to shout, only shout Dragonrend once more. But she could not. Her throat had given out minutes ago, and she knew from past experience that it would take more than a few minutes to refresh her ability to Shout.

As the warriors hovered, panicking on the ground, Alduin ascended into the portal. Like some nightmare made real, the blackness swallowed him whole.

The rip in reality closed.

“Nooo…” Hakon moaned, dropping his great axe to the grass in despair.

“What...where did he go?!?” Gormlaith cried, her eyes darting back and forth across the skies, furiously trying to detect any movement.

Tired. She was so tired. Sigrid flopped to the ground, also unable to tear her eyes away from the swirling nebulae of starry sky. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Shouldn’t happen.

She had no blasted idea where he’d gone.

...So much for foresight.

“Dragonborn!” Tsun called, as if from a great distance. She turned her head, feeling the muscles in her shoulders protest. The God of Trials loped towards them, stopping as Felldir approached him. “You must return to the mortal world. These three cannot assist you there.”

“Go, then.” Gormlaith turned to Sigrid, eyes alight with battle fury. “Avenge us all! And end the life of that foul creature!”

She could barely manage to speak, her throat was so dry. “Do you know where he went?”
Tsun’s eyes were bottomless pools, dark with grief. “I will send you to the Throat of the World. Paarthurnax, brother dovah, he awaits you there.”

“No! That’s not what I asked, damn it! Do you even know where he went?” Sigrid demanded, forcing her screaming muscles to help her stand. Her hips cracked, a burn on her hand throbbing as she tried to focus.

“He flies for Whiterun, Dragonborn. Harbinger. The World Eater -doom driven- flies to the Sky Forge, the Hofkahsejun, Dragonsreach.”

No.

Oh gods, no.

“Send me!” Fear electrified her, propelling her to walk jerkily over to where Tsun stood, impassive and eternal. “Shout me back! I have to stop him! Please!”

“He is far too mighty a foe for you, Dragonborn. You cannot go alone!” Felldir cautioned, concerned.

No time. No chance.

“Please, Tsun.” She begged him, panic shortening her breaths into a harsh pant. “Send me back. I have to try! Oh god, please!”

Seconds passed, but it felt like an eon as Tsun looked at her, silently. “Return then, to Nirn. Fight your foe. But know that I send you to your doom, Dragonborn.”

Hopping from foot to foot, Sigrid ignored the burns and aches as she waited, eyes wide, for Tsun as he slowly approached her. She could see his chest ripple as he drew in a deep breath, then…

“Nahl Daal Vus!”

Oh, it burned. A shivering ache enveloped her, as the Shout rocked her from her feet and she saw stars, as the shivering became electricity snapping, sparking through her, lighting every nerve until it burned. Burned and cooled, till there was only numbness. Was this what it was like to die? Or be born? Even her thoughts were sucked away, as her senses left her.

Pretty stars, swirling in a night that suddenly became white as midday.

Nothing but white.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:

‘Pues sí, pero ni modo’": yeah, but what can we do.

voy a liberar la mamá grande sobre él: I will release the big momma on him. Charming Mexican slang for I’m going to beat him up with my fists.

Beyne: scorn

Dez motmahus: Fate is slippery
Brand brinnande ljus (Fire Burning Bright)

Chapter Notes

I've included a vocabulary list of Dovahzul at the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sigrid woke up almost completely numb from her shoulders down, laying on the snow of the summit. Dimly, she could hear a dovah’s labored breathing, and she shifted her eyes to see Paarthurnax, waiting for her to awaken and rise.

Everything hurt. Her neck hurt, where she lifted her head, slowly ripping away strands of hair that had become frozen against the snow. Her shoulders throbbed in agony. Biceps, triceps, all those labeled parts of her anatomy felt bruised somehow. A sharp stab ripped through her as she curled up to a seated position. Wincing, Sigrid shoved her numb fingers through the gaps in her armor.

Well, shit. It felt like she had a couple of broken ribs. On top of that, the burn on her hand was leaking a clear, reddish liquid. No time to attend to that.

Wobbling, Sigrid leaned forward and executed the most painful rising squat of her life. “Aaargghh!” She yelled, tears springing from her eyes as she clenched her teeth against the prickling, insistent waves of pain, pounding over and over through her head, her limbs as she stood there struggling to breathe through it.

“Aaz Hah So, Dovahkiin. Alduin soars towards Whiterun, now. You will not catch him in time.”

She looked up, blinking against the stark whiteness of snow at Paarthurnax. “How the hell do you know that? What makes you think I can’t stop him?!?!”

“Ro laan. You have cleared Alduin’s nest at Skuldafn. Vomindok. He must have returned another way. I can sense him…” the dovah’s neck lifted, rheumy eyes searching the distant horizon. “...Vahzah. He flies south, from what you joore call the settlement of Dawnstar.”

“You cannot hope to stop him in time, Dovahkiin.”

“Fuck that! Faaz nah, there must be a way to reach Alduin! You must know a way! I will end him! It is the only fucking reason I’m even here!”

She knew she was stomping and swearing like a teenager, but...but after all of this. All this hell, to be confronted by the reality of travel. It was weeks by foot to reach Whiterun, especially through the new fallen snow.

She wouldn’t make it. Her friends, her family were going to die.
With despair, she remembered Helgen. What was left of it anyway, smoking orange and reeking of death as she had stolen away Hadvar and Ralof with Aela’s help. Bodies crouched, sprawled and burned to ash. It seemed an eternity ago.

Was that Whiterun’s fate? Was all the labor, the studying and the fighting useless here, at the end? No. No!

There had to be a way.

“Paarthurnax, fly me.” She begged, turning to her master, her mentor. She ignored the ragged holes in his wings, weeping pus oozed from the scarring marks where Alduin’s teeth had gnashed his past brother in arms. “Take me there on your back! Please!”

Turning away as the dovah remained silent, she inhaled deeply and bellowed, “Odahviing!”

“Odahviing! Fen hi aak, Odahviing?!”

“...Ni tiid, Dovahkiin. Your friend cannot hear you. He has traveled far, to Lok Vild, High Rock.”

The aged dragon tilted his head. She could sense the compassion wafting from him. Fuck that.

“Paarthurnax, if I don’t stop him now, I will regret it forever!” She cried out, using all the power, all the influence her untrained, weak mortal voice wielded. God, let this work, let him help me, I can’t see Whiterun become Helgen, no no no…” There must be something you can do!”

Minutes passed by, with only Paarthurnax’s heavy breathing for Sigrid to focus on. The wind keened, high and shrill against the craggy peak. It whipped her hair into her face, as she blinked against the sudden flurry of snowflakes that now coated her eyelashes and brows.

“There is...one way.” The words seemed to drag, as though forced from the dovah’s throat.

“Anything!” Hope flared brightly in her heart.

Paarthurnax sighed, a hot gust of brimstone scented air engulfing her as she crept ever closer to him. “Krosis. There is a Thu’um, lost to the past that is still known to me. It would place you in grave danger, Dovahkiin.”

Like she wasn’t already knee deep in that. “How can it help me?”

Stretching, Paarthurnax opened his wings, fully spreading them into a crescent arc. He looked massive, dangerous, and suddenly Sigrid remembered how Delphine had told her; told her long ago about all the deaths on the old dragon’s head. The blood sacrifices, massacres of innocents. Burial mounds wreathed in bones. Shivering, but not with cold, she took a step back.
“You have the *dovah sos*, the dragon blood. I can turn your *joor buld*, your mortal form into that of a dovah. But it takes its price, Dovahkiin.”

“Do it, then!” She spat, defiantly lifting her chin as Paarthurnax narrowed his eyes at her, fangs revealed as his scaly lip curled.

Don’t think about it, definitely don’t think about it, just kick Alduin’s ass, don’t think about it... she mentally chanted, rigid with fear as Paarthurnax growled deep, a bass grumble that shook the bones of the mountain beneath her.

“You *are* doom driven. *Mal briinah*, your temper exceeds your wisdom. But I will heed your request.”

Unable to shut her eyes, she stared bravely at her old mentor as the growling rumble reached a terrifying crescendo of sound.

"*SIF RIN NOK!*"

His Thu’um echoed against the mountain peak, crashing like thunder in her ears as suddenly her entire body seized.

And god, she was burning.

...*burningburnburned on fire* with a pain she had never before experienced. Never.

Sanyon, and his Altmer torturers? It was a soothing bath in gentle rainwater, compared to this.

Only the burning, as she was broken, screams ripping from her throat as the flesh of her fingers split, dragonscale armor burst and shedding to reveal new, brighter scales coated in the slop of violent birth.

Her voice grew raw, rougher and rasping as her very vocal chords changed, lengthening as her neck stretched. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope as her vision shifted, cracking as the viscous jelly of her eye burst, regrowing in a scalding rush. She could feel the diamond points of talons burst from her fingers and toes, the ache in her gums as needle sharp teeth sprouted from the spaces that blunted human molars had occupied, pattering into the snow, humanity lost.

Lost. Lost and found. Writhing in her new armored hide, Sigrid coughed, choked on a roar that could have been a Thu’um, that could have ripped the mountain down around them.

Everything was so beautiful. She paused, the afterpains and aches almost forgotten as she looked around, stunned.

Snowflakes. Each one was a perfect crystalline web, delicate and pure and perfect. Every snow covered rock in Kynareth’s realm, the grey veined skies rumbling in thundering storms, all of it.
So beautiful, and she could suddenly see, in a way her mortal form never could, the fragile chain of cause and effect, as the mountain snows melted in her mind to form gushing streams. Streams that cascaded into waterfalls that wore away the rock, forming rivers. Rivers that fed the trees, the towns, washed away villages. Snow turned to water, turned to ice in a glorious never ending spiral of life that -

-It was too much, and she cough-roared in agony, as the acid-sting of dovah thoughts slowly flamed out the dimming embers of her human mind. Forgotten.

“And so you are reborn, truly. Sonahsod. You must fly, fly to face Alduin, mal briinah. Remember the cause for your sacrifice.” The Elder Brother flapped his wings, taking flight as she tasted the air with a newly sensitive tongue. Following his lead, she gave her wings an experimental flap. The raw, ripping power almost bowled her over, and she staggered clumsily in the snow.

Righting herself, she looked up again to see Paarthurnax waiting patiently for her. She tried again.

Oh, and it was glorious, the soaring flight of freedom. The muscles and tendons that fueled her flight were strange, the feel of pulling and pumping wings foreign to her, and a niggling feeling in the back of her hindbrain howled that no, this was wrong, this was all wrong but how could it be, when she was heading out to do right?

She followed Paarthurnax to the grey horizon, chased by the golden fingers of dawn behind her.

*********

They saw Alduin, a black blot in the distance, flying over a giant’s camp north of Dragonsreach at sunrise.

Paarthurnax bellowed a challenge. She (motmahus, was she Sigrid anymore? Or was she reborn as what...Paarthurnax had called her. Sonahsod?) trumpeted along with her teacher, feeling the wind dry her fangs as she hissed her fury.

Alduin was twice her size. Light seemed to soak into his scaly body, instead of reflecting properly off the hardened skin. The ruby eyes widened in shock, and opening a maw filled with bloodstained teeth, the Firstborn laughed, long and hard.

“Dovahkiin! Hin yun buld genun hin miizun do dovah!” That horrible laugh resounded, bouncing from air currents as she tilted, flying around the evil echo of his Thu’um as she screamed, too angry for words.

“Alduin! Vonmindoraan. This is not the way!” Paarthurnax dipped, wings flapping to hold him steady as the old one breathed heavily, pain clear in his dulled eyes.

“Nid, zeymah. It is the only way.” She could see the minute expressions of scorn and rage stamped on Alduin’s features, so obvious. Had she ever had trouble discerning the expressions of the dov, before?

-painpainpain as Alduin roared a torrent of flames, fire that burned, singing her tender belly and clawpads. She wheeled, dipping out of range as Alduin heaved with rapid pulls of those night black
wings away, further and closer south. To the place of the Hofkahsejun, Whiterun, her joore self reminded her.

She followed, beating against the twisting, pulling air currents to gain all speed. She was swift and newborn, her giant heart pounding like a drum. Sonahsod would overtake him and end him, by claw or shout. Paarthurnax followed, farther behind, as she pursued the World Eater. Her teeth to his neck, for all the pain and wailing fury she felt, with both her souls.

Dovah, Dovahkiin. Dragon, mortal.

Sonahsod was Sigrid who had been Sarah.

With every flap of her wings, she soared closer to the end of it all.

Dinok bo fah hi, Lein Naakin. Alduin!

*****

Farkas was drilling the newbloods when the two dragons suddenly appeared, fighting over Dragonsreach.

Squinting against the rising light of midday, he shielded his eyes. Whispers, moans and shrieks surrounded him, as the whelps nervously milled around, waving their practice weapons in futile posturing.

No one, not even an archer could reach whatever was going on up there. They were way too damn high. He could barely make out their movements as they fought, thunder claps of Shouting reaching his ears as they wheeled and dove, clawing and biting in the air.

The big fucker was black, pitch black and monstrous. Black spines stood straight up all along the humped ridge of its back, sticking out of its wings. He was slowly, steadily wearing the other down by sheer strength.

But the smaller, golden one was holding its own for now; matching in fury and speed what it couldn’t make up for in size. Piercing screams punctuated the battle; the metallic gold snout ran red with blood from bleeding slashes and successful hits.

It was only a matter of time, though, before the little one tired. And, Farkas decided, as he watched the golden dragon snap and spin, herding the black one away from the gates of Whiterun, that she would need some help. Why a dragon would protect a town, he had no idea. Didn’t seem typical. But he wouldn’t question any help that brought the dark thing down.

“Companions! Follow me!” He roared, dragging the sniveling whelps that hadn’t wet themselves into Jorrvaskr. He found Njada, Athis and Vilkas eating their lunch spread. They stopped speaking as he rushed in, followed closely by the newbloods who poured into the hall, babbling nervously amongst themselves.

Clearer heads would prevail. He turned to his brother. “Dragons, overhead. One of them needs our help.”
“One of wh-?” His brother bit off the question, shaking his head. “Never mind. Archers! Do we have any who are training to be archers?”

Three hands were raised timidly in the air.

The arms master nodded, harshness stamping his features. “Good, because I’m shitty with a bow. Follow me, newbloods. Athis! Njada! Come on, we’ll need backup.” They grabbed extra quivers of arrows and every type of bow Jorrvaskr supplied, on the way out.

As they ran to the stairs that led to Dragonsreach, Vilkas turned to Farkas. “Is the dragon you saw, the one we are helping...is he old with torn wings and missing scales? I’ve met him before. Don’t want any friendly fire.”

“No.” Huffing as they rapidly mounted the steps, Farkas peered up at the sky. The dragons were no longer visible, but the thunderous booming of their voices still echoed around them. “Looks like the big black one is trying hard to reach Whiterun. I don’t want to know what he’s gonna do if he gets past the golden dragon, so we should help her.”

“Her?”

“...May not be able to see much, but the differences were fairly obvious, brother.”

They hurried past the townsfolk who were also struggling to see, to reach the shelter of Dragonsreach, to gawk at the dragons who suddenly reappeared. Farkas winced as the black one roared, sinking his claws into the golden dovah and hurling her bodily at the castle.

*Thwwoomm!* The impact shuddered the stairs as open mouthed, the Companions saw pieces of Dragonsreach crumble, shedding pieces of stone and wood off of the small drake as she managed to free herself, trumpeting shrilly and screaming in that raspy dragon speech.

Times like this, Farkas wished Sigrid was here, to tell him what the hell was going on. She always had such good explanations for weird shit.

“No time to stop and stare! Come on!”

Farkas felt himself being pulled as Vilkas grabbed his elbow and tore into the keep. It was even more smoky and crowded inside; children crying in fear as mothers shushed them. Faces turned as the Companions pushed their way towards the porch, expressions of relief and indignation trailing behind their passage.

“Hurry! You can reach them if you get to the balcony!”

“For Ysgramor! For the glory of the five hundred!”

“What took you so long? They’re going to destroy the castle!”

That last remark was fired off by Dagny, Jarl Balgruuf’s spoiled spawn as her uncle Hrongar lifted her bodily, shrieking away as the ruling family was ushered into the safehouse deep in the bowels of the keep. “Come on!” One of the soldiers cried out, fear safely hidden behind the anonymity of his helmet. “We can take you there!”

And in the space of a few breaths the sky opened above them, as they ran along the wide deep porch that had housed that red dragon, Odahviing. The one that had taken Sigrid far away.
“To arms!” Farkas called, reminding the whelps of their duty as they started, shaking themselves from their shock and starting to knock arrows to bows. He took a bow for himself as well. Though it felt light and clumsy in his hands, he had undertaken basic training in this. He would help.

Another crash. The Companions stumbled, as the castle shook beneath the impact of unseen bodies. Then suddenly, there they were. A giant cracking groan came from the ceiling, as black spikes suddenly thudded straight through the roof, ripping all the way down in a blur of black and gold as the dovah reappeared on the porch, fighting tooth and claw for the upper hand.

“Aim for the underbelly! Straight for the heart!” Vilkas yelled, as the assembled fighters pulled back on their bowstrings. Taking careful aim himself, Farkas waited for a good opening.

It was hard. They were almost indistinguishable from one another, the two grappling drakes. A black plated tail pounded against one of the supporting stone pillars, causing an ominous crack. “Watch out!” Athis cried, as a shower of dust rained upon their heads.

It was no good. The ceiling popped and groaned, leaning, as the pillar that had taken a hit slowly crumbled. Whiterun soldiers dodged the falling rocks, one screaming as a stone the size of a wagon crushed the unfortunate man. With a high yelp, the golden dragon was flung off the porch, the black one rolling to its claws, shaking the massive muzzle as blood spattered the stone floor.

Farkas had never seen such evil, blazing out of those red eyes. Dropping the bow, he unsheathed his warblade in a swift firm stroke, and noticed that the others had done the same. “If it yells anything like ‘Yol’, get out of the way!” His brother screamed, readying himself in a fighting stance as the beast purred, slowly edging his way closer. Stalking them.

That jagged black mouth seemed to curl in a wicked facsimile of a grin. Smoke billowed from its nostrils as teeth suddenly flashed, the red gullet open and waiting. With a yell, the new blood archers released their arrows, twanging hopelessly against the scaled hide. One arrow stuck in the pinkish flesh of the drake’s inner cheek, as it coughed out a gusting blast of wind that rocked the keep, blowing everyone off their feet. Some soldiers were not so lucky, and Farkas heard screams as three soldiers overbalanced, falling off the jagged edges of the porch to their deaths.

He could feel the tightly coiled tension in his Shield brothers and sister, as they cautiously approached the evil beast. What a glorious battle to talk about in their hall, if any of them lived, Farkas thought in bloodthirsty merriment, until the black neck snapped forward with blinding speed, striking at his brother…

...who had already raised his sword in a crossbar defense move, which probably saved his life. Daggered teeth snapped, crushing against Vilkas’s arms, bending the steel of his sword as Vilkas fought for his life, slowly bending lower, his knee smashing against the ground as he strained against the head of the dragon striving to eat him.

Superheated breath jetted from the monster’s nose and mouth, smelling of carrion and decay. It blew back Farkas’s hair from his face as he snarled angrily, raising his sword and with one fluid stroke, he sliced off one of the curved horns and an ear. “Take that, you fucking worm!”

The distraction worked. Red eyes rolled in pain as the dragon bellowed, dragging its head away from Farkas’s blade as Vilkas stumbled backwards, a hand clamping down upon his left shoulder which was spurring blood.

“Fall back!” Farkas shot at him, taking point among the remaining warriors as a rumbling snarl announced what was probably going to be another attack, when -
-damn, she was fast. More like a wind shear crafted in gold than an animal, the golden dovah bore down on the black one, her talons sinking into its spine as she shrieked shrilly, triumphant. Teeth snapped, as the black head snaked back, trying to reach the one currently ripping chunks of flesh and scale off of its back.

And amidst all the chaos, screams and dust, Farkas could just make out what the golden one was shouting…” *Brit gah, Alduin. The only end here is your own! My teeth to your neck!”*

...and it made good on its threat, as shining white fangs sank, tearing into the shadowed length of throat. Blood poured out, drenching her golden scales in sticky spurts as the she-dragon worried a large mouthful of meat from the hide of her prey. Tearing it off, she spit it out against the wall, where it bounced to land near Athis’s feet in a viscous splat. “Eww,” Njada crept behind Athis, pulling him away as the gold one continued her attack, mindless of her observers.

“ *Kren sosaal, Dovahkiin!”* The words gusting from that bloody black maw were almost palpable with rage. Farkas shivered, retreating as he ushered the quaking new bloods further into the keep. His brother’s grey eyes were so wide, he could see the white all around the edges. “Get inside, fool!” he muttered harshly, dragging Vilkas further to safety, as he seemed frozen in place, staring at the golden dovah.

Black scales rattled, as the black dragon opened its jaws, jerking against his attacker. “You believe you have won, Dovahkiin. But I know best! *Tiid bo amativ... you think this is our first battle? Nid. I will come for you and all you treasure!”*

And with a roll of flashing eye and claw, the black one turned on her, turned and screamed words that tore light itself apart, as they both shimmered, the keep shuddering and rocking deep in its foundations at the strength of the Thu’um.

“*TIID...LUN...WUUULD...”*

The rest of the pillars holding up the porch of Dragonsreach finally toppled with the stress, quaking as massive stones crumbled and dropped, tearing holes in the floor. Farkas heard screaming behind him, as he bodily heaved his brother and the other Companions through the door, yelling at the panicking bodies to *give way* as they escaped the collapse.

The rumbling, groaning fall seemed to last an eon, as smoke and dust made him cough. He curled protectively around his brother, who was pale from loss of blood, still shocked at something he had seen, out there in the battle. Though what was more surprising than a dragon duel, Farkas couldn’t guess. “You alright?” He hollered over the screams and wails of the people crammed against them.

“No,” he could see Vilkas’s mouth move, rather than hear him. Bloody fuck, he needed potions and healing, now. Wrapping his brother’s good arm around his shoulders, Farkas was pushing his way through the mass of unwashed bodies as suddenly the rumbling ended.

Athis, always so curious, walked through the hastily opened gap in the bodies as he made his way to what remained of the porch. Peering into the dusty air, he turned back with a cough. “Nothing is here! They’re gone!”

“Gone?” Njada wiped at her red-rimmed eyes, smearing dust against her face. “Beasts that big don’t just disappear. They should be there, underneath the stone. No way they could have escaped.”
“Could have flown off. Or fallen off.” Farkas tried to see past the haze that hung in the air. His brother groaned, falling to the floor as Farkas tried to catch him, calling out for Danica Pure-Spring, or Farengar. Any healer, really, he yelled over and over as his brother went into a dead faint. Blood was still pumping sluggishly from the deep wound in his arm, and Farkas realized with horror that there were similar, dagger like strikes all over his brother’s torso and left leg.

Oh fuck, those were tooth marks, from where the black beast had nearly bitten him through. Blood dripped from his brother’s armor, even trickled slowly from his left ear as his eyes became unfocused, blank and unseeing as Farkas waved a hand in front of his face. Damn this was bad.

“Oh! I need a healer for a downed Companion, now!”

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Vocabulary

Aaz hah so - mercy mind sorrow (you have my sympathy)
Ro laan - A balanced request
Vomindok - I don’t know
Vahzah - True, truth
Joore - mortal
Fen hi aak - Will you guide/help me?
Faaz nah - pain, fury
Ni tiid - not now
Krosis - sorrow
Mal brinah - little sister
Sif Rin Nok - Soul Hot Lie
Son Ah Sod - Sorrow Fury Deed
Motmahus - slippery/elusive
Hin yun buld genun hin miizun do dovah! Your new form reveals your envy of the dragons!
Vonmindoraan - Incomprehension
Nid - no
Zeymah - brother
Dinok bo fah hi, Lein Naakin: Death comes for you World Eater
Brut gah - a good or worthy fight
Tiid bo amativ - Time flows onward
Tiid Lun Wuld - Time Leech Whirlwind

Also, the bit about the water in an eternal cycle is a tribute to Norse Mythology. I will post a brief summary for you from good old Wikipedia. There. You learned something new today.

"In Norse mythology, Ragnarök is a series of future events, including a great battle, foretold to ultimately result in the death of a number of major figures (including the gods Odin, Thor, Týr, Freyr, Heimdallr, and Loki), the occurrence of various natural disasters, and the subsequent submersion of the world in water. Afterward, the world will resurface anew and fertile, the surviving and returning gods will meet, and the world will be repopulated by two human survivors. Ragnarök is an important event in Norse mythology, and has been the subject of scholarly discourse and theory throughout
the history of Germanic studies.

The event is attested primarily in the Poetic Edda, compiled in the 13th century from earlier traditional sources, and the Prose Edda, written in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson. In the Prose Edda, and in a single poem in the Poetic Edda, the event is referred to as Ragnarök or Ragnarókkrr (Old Norse "Fate of the Gods" and "Twilight of the Gods"
The phone rang, an insistent brriiiiiinggg, brriiiiiinggg.

Almost tossing it to ground in his effort to answer, Bryce yawned wearily as he punched in his passcode and croaked, “Hello?”

The clock gleamed a cold digital red. 4:32 am.

“Bryce? You there?”

“M’here,” Scratching his hair, Bryce mentally swore as he heard light footfalls padding down the hallway. God damn it, he had just gotten Adam to sleep again. The boy had been waking at regular intervals, crying for Sarah. She had left earlier that night on a call. Some kids had been lost while on a hunting trip in Wyoming, and she was on duty for the next couple of weeks, to free up her schedule for their planned trip to Yellowstone.

“Oh good, you’re up. Listen, I wanted you to hear it from us first.”

Sarah had kissed him goodbye, leaving in the spare pickup truck to meet up with her team at the firestation. That was hours ago, and he was on kid-watching duty. Balancing the babysitting between himself and the older boys was always rough; but her service in the Pennington County Search and Rescue was infrequent enough that he didn’t mind. She loved the outdoors, and being able to use what skills she had to break the monotony of chores and childcare made her happy.

When she was happy, the entire household benefited. Especially Bryce.

Except when calls related to her volunteer work came at inconvenient hours. Very, very inconvenient hours. “What’s up?” He recognized the voice as that of Spud, Sarah’s supervisor. He was from Idaho, and Bryce thought his real name was something like Aaron...Alex? After the long rant he gave extolling the virtues of potatoes during a fourth of July barbecue, everyone just called him Spud.

“Uh, do you have the kids with you?”

“Yes, of course.” Bryce felt something crawl on the bed, and lifted the blankets to let Adam cuddle in close next to him. “Great. Can you bring them to St. John’s in Jackson?”

“Jackson, as in Jackson Hole, Wyoming?” That woke him up. “Why?”

“She’s being treated there.”

“What the fu-” Swallowing his shock, Bryce looked at Adam, who was staring back innocently, thumb in mouth. Clearing his throat, he got out of bed, switching the cell phone to his other ear.

“That is eight and a half hours from our place, Spud. You know that. ¡Mira qué cabrón!”

Even over the line, Spud’s voice sounded sad. “It would be better to show you, buddy.”
Bryce was glad he had kept the kids in the waiting room as he stared in frozen shock at what they told him was his wife, lying there on the hospital bed.

“She’s been on a steady drip of Thorazine ever since we found her. No idea how she got all the way this far in the park, especially since her team members swear she was with them, all the way. Until she wasn’t. Then they freaked out and called it in.”

His feet moved, almost without thought as he stepped closer to the bed. Scars criss-crossed her arms, face and what he could see of her neck and legs. Some looked more like burns, or welts. Others had that sliced look that Bryce was familiar with, after close quarters combat training. Some guys got macho, and tried training with live steel. That never ended well. Though what *those* scars, well healed and definitely not present yesterday were doing on his wife, he didn’t know.

What the hell had happened, he thought with a creeping, sick feeling as he looked Sarah over. Her hair had grown about a foot, and he thought he could see some braids snarled in the thick matted mess, beneath the oxygen mask. Not like Sarah at all. She was almost prissy about her hair.

And her skin; it had been sunburned, then tanned, then burned again judging by the millions of freckles that had suddenly popped out. And she had lost weight, almost too much weight. The roundness of new muscle in her legs and arms couldn’t make up for the fact that she looked sick. On top of all that, the bleeding gashes and tears in her arms and neck had been bandaged. She looked like the Michelin man, all white and puffed in gauze.

Taking in an unsteady breath, Bryce turned to Spud, who had waited respectfully by the door. “What the hell happened, man? Why was she so far away? And who found her?”

Spud looked at Sarah with obvious discomfort. “I don’t know any more than what the rangers told us. Some of their guys were driving down the road that leads to Fairy Falls, preparing to clear the path for all the spring park goers, when they saw her bolt out in front of the car like a fucking deer.”

“...Naked.” Spud added, as Bryce looked at him incredulously. “Oh, and screaming the weirdest shit. Something about dragons and the end of the world.”

Pinching his nose between his fingers, Bryce sighed. “This...doesn’t sound like Sarah.”

“Nope.” Spud popped the ‘p’, still checking her out as the heart monitor beeped quietly in the background. “They had to dope her up good just to get her in here. She was fighting like she was hopped up on meth or something. Bitting and shit. She almost clawed out one of the ranger’s eyes. Hell, they weren’t happy when they checked fingerprints and found she was one of ours.”

“This is fucking crazy.” Bryce rubbed his eyes. Maybe if he rubbed harder, this...thing would go away and the woman he had married, the mother of his sons, would return.

He knew. He *knew* those scars, that skin hadn’t been there yesterday. They had made love, hidden in the bathroom from the kids just after lunch. She had balanced sitting on the sink, giggling as he tried not to topple backwards as they did their damndest to make each other come. Her skin had been pale and unblemished, her face unmarked.

What the hell was going on?!!

************

In, out. In, out.

She breathed. Slowly, she awakened.

Slowly, she became aware.

_Beebeepbeepbeep..._ that stupid beeping sound became faster, more shrill as she gasped, couldn’t
breath as she tore off the thing keeping her from taking a proper breath.

Her limbs felt sluggish, her head stupid and slow as she looked around, not really believing what she
saw.

A hospital room. Sterile, bland pale curtains with cheap plywood furniture. A television had been
turned on the news, and she stared in numb shock, as a perky coiffed woman announced that it was
going to be a high of sixty eight degrees, and wasn’t it nice, to have a sunny spring day?

She had left a place that was easing into the cold sleep of winter.

What in Shor’s name was going on, here?

As workers dressed in scrubs rushed towards her, Sigrid slowly shed the tubes, the plastic and wires
that had been taped to her chest, her limbs. Blood spurted as she dug out the I.V. that had been taped
to her arm with a grimace. Groaning as she got up out of the bed, she willed herself to fight the
lethargy that clogged her thoughts. It was important; she knew, important to remember what she had
been doing.

Dragonsreach. Alduin. _Vilkas_.

_Vilkas_, caught in the jaws of the World Eater, frantically trying to get free.

The damned beeping finally stopped as she shook free of her tethers with relish. Someone grabbed
her arms, and she idly shook them off, annoyed. She had to leave, had to get out of here.

Whatever it was that Alduin had shouted, it had taken her...them, to a black pit with a waterfall that
poured into a yawning chasm. It was so shrouded, her mind was muzzy with whatever they had
given her in that I.V., but she remembered.

Oh yes. They had both emerged naked from the rip in time, their tiny _joore_ bodies struggling with
soft fleshy limbs and clawless talons to kill, to shred as they had before. She remembered the wild
rage in his queer golden eyes, framed in harsh black brows, and had a moment to laugh at the fact
that Alduin, World Eater, looked quite a bit like a young Tommy Lee Jones. Before Alduin had
shuttled them from Nirn. Before…

“Another ten cc’s of benz, now!”

“I can’t...hold her down!”
Idly, she swiped them off once more, lurching around the room as her hospital gown came off, 
untied as it was. Sigrid had been liberally wrapped in bandage gauze like a mummy, and as she 
mindlessly tore off the constricting things her wounds began bleeding anew.

Yelling. Loud beeps, a crackling voice that sounded tinny, as though it came through something 
metal. Sigrid felt a prick in her neck that sent her blinking, falling into a grey numbness that stole the 
very power from her limbs.

As she fell, cushioned by the bodies of the nurses who had injected her, Sigrid could see sideways 
into the hallway, filled with harsh, fluorescent light. She smelled the stink of ammonia cleaner on the 
floor. How repugnant, to clean with something that smelled like piss in the first place.

She giggled, saliva oozing from the corner of her mouth as everything went blessedly dark.

******

“Mommy isn’t talking today.”

Sigrid rocked in her chair, holding Adam as he clutched his stuffed Hiccup dragon and sucked his 
thumb. He was too old for either; Bryce was talking about taking away the toy dragon if he couldn’t 
stop using his thumb as a pacifier, but she let him anyway. Treasured the moments, rare and 
peaceful, that she had left.

She couldn’t, didn’t dare to speak. She wasn’t sure if her dragon form had an expiration date, or if it 
was ripped from her bones by merely arriving in this world, but Shouting seemed like a bad idea. 
Her kids wouldn’t talk to her, even if she chanced it. Dave, Peter and Terence kept their distance at 
all times after that night she had screamed awake, running naked into the front yard with a meat 
cleaver until Bryce had caught her. Had talked her into coming inside, making soothing sounds as 
she stood shaking, the cold spring air hardly registering as cold.

They feared her. And Bryce…

She shivered, tucking the blanket more snugly around them both. The little boy made a soft noise, his 
eyes fixed upon his Hiccup toy.

Bryce was like a stranger.

To be fair, she was a stranger too. All that she had gone through, had endured, just to end up in the 
past. In a present than no longer was real, to her.

All that she was, all that she had been was focused upon finding him.

Finding Alduin.

The World Eater had been set loose in her world. She had seen him, briefly, before he had broken 
free and run off, out of the cave.

The rough stones had been cold, but she ignored it as she sprinted across the trail, into the steaming 
fissured hills and plains that looked like Eastmarch, yet decidedly were not. He was in there, 
somewhere hiding in the trees, naked as she was.

Until he wasn’t. Sigrid bared her teeth, holding Adam even tighter until the toddler whimpered. She 
loosed him, patting the baby-fine down of his hair.
She had enjoyed it, enjoying clawing Alduin’s human face with her weak human fingers. He was missing an ear, the stump oozing blood still as he fought with her. Wearing a hastily buttoned park ranger uniform, no less.

She hoped they had found the body he had stolen it from, for the family’s sake.

“Well, if Mommy won’t talk, maybe she will listen.”

Sigrid startled as Bryce sat down across from her on the porch. Deep furrows creased his forehead, between his brows. New wrinkles, all thanks to her, she thought viciously. Fine silver hairs ghosted the sides of his head, standing out against the darkness of his hair. Were those there before?

So much had changed.

Better, if she had never returned. Better if her last memories had been of him in Sovngarde, speaking of his trust in her, of heaven.

She was in hell, now.

“We’re still heading out to Yellowstone, tomorrow.” Her husband was carefully calm, watching her for sudden movements. He treated her like a threat, ever since the midnight screaming incident. And the coffee (she had drunk two pots of joe and he had found her at one am, sitting outside watching the moon rise). And the destruction of the Xbox One.

Now, that had been a mind bender. After a few weeks of her wandering aimlessly around the house, touching all the modern things, Bryce had led her to the family room and sat her on the stuffed armchair. “Here, honey. Why don’t you play something to get your mind off...whatever it is you don’t want to talk about? Maybe we can talk later.”

-and had stared blankly, stunned as the diamond shaped dragon logo (Imperial, something whispered inside) flared up on the big screen, followed by the gutteral chanting music that sang praises to the Dovahkiin.

When the flat graphics of Jorrvaskr had appeared after a lengthy wait cycle, with Farkas and Vilkas and Aela standing around (so stiffly, they never just stood there like that) she had thrown it. Thrown the controller at the television screen hard enough to break it, to the deafening shouts of all the traumatized children present. She had buried her head in her hands as Bryce stood frozen in shock, the boys screaming about the loss of their shows.

Bryce no longer tried to engage her. Never touched her, if he could help it. Now their interactions were cautious, practical. He silently assisted her as she robotically cleaned, cooked, and made sure the boys had fresh clothing and homework and school lunches. She had been smearing peanut butter onto slices of bland bread one day, not really thinking about anything, when Bryce had grabbed her left hand. Had grabbed it and held it closer, to better see the missing fingernails that had been torn off and healed, long ago.

He had escaped to the garage, where he had taken an axe to the busted remains of the TV. Over and over, until there were only plastic splinters. She had silently doctored his blistered, shaking hands with bactaid and Snoopy bandages, hardly daring to look him in the eye.

No. She couldn’t tell him. He already thought she was crazy; that something awful...well, more awful had happened to her somewhere between the time she had left on her search and rescue call and the national park.

Something had happened. But, it had happened in a cave in a another place. When a necromancer...
had calmly, clinically slitted the throats of eight boys and one man with his knife, saving her for last.

Saving her to watch.

That was pretty fucking traumatizing all in itself, but she couldn’t talk to him about it.

She slept fitfully; always rolled into her blankets away from him. That way, she had to unwind herself from the blankets as she awakened, shaking, from the nightmares. It stopped her from bolting mindlessly, waking up the kids and scaring her husband. She wouldn’t scare her family like that again.

The worst was the drugs.

Gently, but firmly, Bryce gave her a shot every single morning. Five milliliters of thorazine. An antipsychotic, hah. She thought of Cicero and his eerie giggle every day, wondering what prescription the sweet-faced psychiatrist would have prescribed him as Bryce rolled up her sleeve and clenched his jaw, administering the crazy-juice to his nutjob wife.

It blunted her thoughts with a sort of filmy blanket, until she couldn’t properly feel or think. She wandered her own home like a mindless drone, forgetful and numb. It helped to do simple tasks, to hold Adam (who had warmed up to her the fastest out of all the kids, and insisted on tracing the scars of her arms with pudgy fingers) as she rocked, absently looking out on the porch. Taking in the view.

Their old rambler was nestled in the Black Hills, in a community not big enough to justify a name. Just a few folk lived out here, far enough away that it was inconvenient to get gas but peacefully quiet. So quiet at night, that she could hear the wind groaning against the grass. Creeping past the eaves, into the chimney. She could almost imagine it was the whisper of wind against a carved timber wall, a wall that became the upturned hull of an ancient boat...

If only she could float away. Like the downy cattail fluff Peter had strewn all over the kitchen floor one day, claiming he was making a soft carpet for her to step on.

A week before the trip to Yellowstone was scheduled, Bryce had taken her to the doctor’s office one last time. What a good girl, she thought sardonically, as the doctor approved her to take pills instead of intravenous shots and asked her - yet again - if she didn’t remember how she had ended up naked, in Fairy Falls.

Oh, she knew. And yet there was that shining silver lining, gleaming just ahead of her cloudy day.

Yellowstone. Yellowstone was a National Park. Parks had rangers.

Alduin was posing as a park ranger.

Sigrid seriously doubted the dragon overlord was savvy enough to disappear in her world. Her world was scary. She had spent an hour, flicking the light switch on and off, almost gasping each time at the 

**ease**, the luxury of light whenever she wanted it. They were so spoiled here. The supermarket had been an awkward experience, as Sean had almost pulled her along by the hand, blushing at the stares other shoppers fixed on her, with her scarred body and manky hair as she 

**gaped** at the aisles of food. Mountains of it. More food than anyone could eat, all for the taking with a swipe of plastic.
All those computers, the blaring music, lights and cars…

The Firstborn of Akatosh would be lucky to not be admitted to a mental asylum, himself.

Unless he was as clever as he had proven himself to be.

When Bryce gave her a cup of water and her pill, he always stayed to watch her swallow, to ensure the pill had been taken. She swallowed the water, but hid the pill beneath her tongue. She spit it out later, hid it in the flush of her waste (another miraculous modern invention).

Soon. She would need all the mental faculty she possessed, to find and slay Alduin. She had secretly packed a to-go bag, filled with beef jerky, matches, bottled water, dried fruit and a machete the length of her arm. Had hidden it, in the crawlspace of the attic, buried behind boxes of clothing. Her Shouts still worked...she had uttered *Feim Zii Gron* one night, as she watched Bryce twitch in a nightmare. Fucking messed up, it was, that she felt more *real* as a ghost in this world than as a part of it.

“I’d like for you to come with us, Sarah. It’s been...god, mi amor, this has been a *clusterfuck*, and I know you don’t want to talk about it. Just come with us. Enjoy some nature. We won’t even have to go near the falls, if you don’t want to.”

Lifting her head from Adam’s little head, where she was mindlessly smoothing his hair, Sarah fixed her eyes on Bryce. Her voice was a rusty rasp, but her smile…

Her smile made Bryce sit back in his chair. Almost as if he was afraid, as she swallowed, clearing her throat to speak aloud for the first time since she arrived.

“...I’d like that. Let’s go.”
Ragnarök

Chapter Notes

Excerpt from the Poetic Edda:

Old Norse:

Fylliz fiðrvi
feigra manna,
ryðr ragna siòt
rauðom dreyra.
Svört verða sólskin
of sumor eptir,
veðr qill válynd
Vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?

English:

It sates itself on the life-blood
of fated men,
paints red the powers’ homes
with crimson gore.
Black become the sun's beams
in the summers that follow,
weathers all treacherous.
Do you still seek to know? And what?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They were waiting for Old Faithful to go off, when she saw him.

He had tried, unsuccessfully, to blend into the crowd. A green ballcap perched on his head, he walked through the sea of humans like he was ten feet tall.

Sigrid fixed her eyes on him, tracking that cap as it parted the mass of tourists standing around, counting the minutes until they could depart. Just another checkmark taking off the famous geyser on their list of things to do, here.

Cracking a smile, she inwardly rolled her eyes at the things her people got up to. For fun.

She had sat with Vilkas on that trek to Riften in the hot springs, as geysers bubbled and burst all around them, sending up clouds of steaming sulphurous mist. They were careful about which ones to bathe in, as some were known to suddenly reach a boiling point and had charming names, such as ‘Giant’s Cauldron’, or the eponymously named ‘Surprise Pot’. But they had never lingered for hours simply to watch a geyser, for the sake of it.
There were better uses for their time.

It would have to be swift, and secret, she decided as a burbling sputter announced Old Faithful’s imminent eruption. The crowd erupted in clapping and cheers, the geyser spouting as her family was shoved around by tourists determined to take their selfie and push onward, to check off further boxes of Things to Do at Yellowstone.

Things to do: Get her family to a safe space. Slip away unseen, with her weapons and her survival bag. Kill that sonofabitch who lurked in human guise. He didn’t belong here any more than she did.

She had gritted her teeth audibly when the news station that serviced Yellowstone had announced a rash of deaths in the past month. Innocuous deaths, the kind that happened every year. Someone fell into a geyser and dissolved in the superheated mineral waters. Someone fell down a cliff or ravine off trail, body not yet found. Drownings in the lake. Bodies found torn apart, half eaten by wolves or bear. Trampled by bison or elk.

Sigrid knew better. Predator that she was now, she saw the signs, the pattern of a hunter. One death had been in Biscuit Basin, the next two in the area directly nearby amidst the dying trees that clung to life in the marshy ground. Both had been labeled as animal deaths, with slashed wounds that had bites taken out of them. She shivered in disgust.

Did a dragon really need a reason to kill? Not Alduin, World Eater. She would bet the remaining fingernails of her left hand that he killed for fun. For pleasure alone.

She had to get him out of here.

Her opportunity came as she and Bryce herded the children to the massive visitor’s center. Leaning close to Bryce, she whispered with a grimace that she really, really had to go to the bathroom, and would he mind?

Lulled by her recent good behavior, Bryce had agreed, sitting down on the padded benches with the pamphlets. He had begun explaining the flora and fauna to the boys as they huddled close, pointing out the caldera rim of Yellowstone, and how they were all sitting on a massive volcano…

Her last glimpse of them. She lingered in the open door, drinking in the sight of healthy boys and a content Bryce.

Yes. They would be fine...more than fine without her.

When they were sufficiently distracted, she took off for the trails.

*********

Five hours later, the light was slowly leaving Yellowstone, darkening the trees as her boots crunched along the gravel of Fountain Freight road.

Fairy Falls was the last place she could think of, to search for him. The Tiid Kreh would surely still be there, a passageway back to Skyrim. She could feel it from here; a pressing, pulling feeling. Almost like the feeling being watched, knowing no one was there. Creepy.

She had passed numerous tourists who hadn’t given her a second glance. She had chopped off the tangled, knotted mess of her hair. Her clean, blunt cut hung just below her chin. Sigrid wore a long wool hunters shirt, with wool pants, a backpack with a compass and sturdy hiking boots.
The machete hid behind the backpack, strapped along her spine. All she had to do was tilt her head and carefully draw the sharpened knife if she was threatened. The walking stick she had picked up at the visitor’s center would do in a pinch as a distraction for her best weapon; her voice.

She would avoid using the Thu’um, unsure of its effect in this world, unless she had no other option.

“N-no, please! Please stop! Someone help!”

Dropping the walking stick, Sigrid tilted her head, then carefully wound her way through the soft crumbling dirt and piles of dried needles to the source of the sound. Placing her footsteps carefully, she crouched down, the better to observe and hear, unseen.

In a small clearing far off the main trail, in clear sight of the majestic Fairy Falls, Alduin was currently tying up a woman. She looked Indian, with a long black braid that shook as she struggled, her rich coffee colored skin blanched with fright as he continued to wrap her in rope and duct tape.

Damn. Duct tape was a bitch to get out of. Easing her way towards the clearing, Sigrid slowly drew the machete from its sheath, praying the slight sound would be covered by the ripping of tape as he tore a new strip from the roll.

Holding her knife angled down, so she didn’t flash him and give away her position, she waited.

“I have a family! They’ll be looking for me, oh, you can’t do this. It’s not fair.” The woman sobbed, eyes frantically darting around the area, looking for someone. Anyone to save her.

Sigrid grimaced, retreating further into the leaf loam. It wouldn’t do, to be spotted and set the woman off, shrieking.

It would sort of ruin the surprise of cleaving Alduin in half.

“Grik los lein. So the world is, woman. So unfair.” His veiled chuckle was a shadow of the bass roar that had rolled forth from him as a dovah. But Sigrid wouldn’t underestimate him. Not again.

Satisfied that she was tightly bound, Alduin stepped back to scrutinize his prize. Clearly he had been here a while, judging by the torn backpacks, clothing and empty water bottles that littered the area. Delicately testing her Thu’um, Sigrid could feel a barrier surrounding this little field.

Almost a ‘don’t look here’ echo of a shout. Interesting. It would explain how he had survived for so long, without being detained by an official, or turned in by a tourist. He simply killed them all and took their stuff.

With a wrinkle of her nose, she tried to inhale shallowly as the stench of rotting bodies wafted her way. He definitely had killed someone. Or several someones. There were lumpy piles of dirt and pine leaf litter, four neat piles in the corner of his clearing.

He had not been careful enough.

As she tensed, preparing to spring at him, she stopped with a graceless lurch as Alduin spun around, neatly decapitating the woman with one blow of a summoned sword. It gleamed transparently, wet with a thin layer of blood as the head with its long braid bounced once, then rolled out of sight.

She froze, praying he had not seen her, as he stood silently, sword extended. Blood dripped off the tip of the blade, the only sound as she held her breath.

Just as she was about to see how quietly she could gulp a lungful of fresh air, he opened his hands,
allowing the blade to evaporate back into...whatever magicka did when it was released.

“You may come out of there, Dovahkin.”

Oh, shit.

*********

“So, Sonahsod, is it? A fitting name, for a rather pathetic dovah.”

Standing, she held her blade at the ready as she walked carefully, closer to the man that wasn’t a man. “Better than some.”

He laughed, a deep rich rumble of joy. “Ah, it has been long since any of my kind have been such a challenge to me. I would let you live, if you had not been such a thorn in my side.” He turned to face her, the curtain of black hair shifting, loose against his back.

Alduin still wore a park ranger’s uniform, but it had been neatly buttoned up. His face was hard planed and craggy; handsome in the way that some men who fought professionally were. The eyes that roamed over her thoughtfully were a bright clear gold, slitted with black pupils. He went barefoot, his toes grasping the soft grassy earth. A new blood spatter decorated the front of the uniform, and as she took in the changes in his form, he raised a finger coated in blood and sucked it dry.

Bleugh.

“This world of yours is a fascinating place, Dragonborn.” Almost carelessly, he began to circle her.

She returned the favor, matching him step for step. “Although I cannot say much for the state of your civilization. Perhaps a dragon cult could actually improve the quality of the populace? So many are grossly plump, elderly and sick.”

"Yes. I have given it much thought, these last few weeks.”

Noting the torn clothing and empty bags of chips scattering his humble lair, Sigrid curled her lip. “I see you haven’t taken any strides in implementing this glorious plan. Don't you know? You are what you eat.”

That chuckle again. It wasn’t fair, for such a sadistic evil bastard to have such a honeyed voice.

Like a news radio announcer. This is KJZZ, brought to you by Skyrim’s finest, Black Briar Mead. Drink it or Else!

“Almost, you amuse me.”

“Glad to hear one of us is having a good time.”

Continuing the careful dance, the two dovah circled, eyes locked as they waited. Waited for any opportunity.

She spoke first. “The Tiid Kreh.”

“So you can speak some of our words.”
“Some. What did you do?”

He grinned, eyes lighting up in an almost friendly way. If one ignored their past history of mutual death threats and destruction, she might have thought he liked her. Perish the thought.

“Oh, very little, Dragonborn. We’ve been here before, have we not?”

A frisson of panic seared through her at those words. No, she didn’t remember that.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Must we revert to obscenities?” He examined his yellowed fingernails, which were grossly long and curved. Licked the underside of one.

“That voice. “Not sure we’ll make it to that part.” Sigrid managed to speak. “Since I’m planning on killing you, and such.”

There was nothing warm about his laughter, this time. It chilled her as the mocking tones almost sank beneath her skin, prickling her spine.

“So little you know. Father Akatosh made me, and what a god makes cannot be undone.”

Suddenly he stepped closer, pausing with an amused smile as she raised the machete with shaking hands. “Did they tell you? Those Greybeards? My brother,” he practically spat the last word.

“Did they inform you of my role? Of yours? The never ending spiral of creation and destruction, doomed to repeat for all eternity? Do you not know that I cannot be killed?”

This laugh jarred the sword right out of her hands, as she clapped scarred fingers over her ears to block out the cacophony, the wound that was his laugh.

Walking even closer, all she could see was those eyes, filling her vision. Black on gold, burned into her retinas as his mouth bared teeth, saliva dripping in strings from his fangs as they grew.

She screamed as those eyes pulled her in, as he reached out a blood soaked hand and touched her shaking finger, a finger missing a nail.

NO OH MY GOD WHAT ARE YOU DOING!? Stay away, no oh no Bryce! STOP

Sounds of screams.

They never drew breath, but continued screaming, shrieking, until vocal chords gave out and the sound was only in her head.

So much screaming, a symphony of it, ever circling as she was lost, cut adrift in a pool of black rimmed in gold.

She saw him sitting by her hospital bed in scrubs, his missing ear bleeding as he smiled politely at her.

He was there in the waiting room of her psychiatrist’s office, thumbing through a reader’s digest.

Checking the kickstand of his motorcycle as she strolled past him, his long black hair in a
loose ponytail.

There she was, sitting at his side in the primitive finery of the Merethic Nords, peering out across the obeisant backs of thousands of slaves as they paid homage to their gods...

Snapshots. Pictures of Alduin, frozen in time, over and over, an eternal progression of memories frozen like insects in amber, oh god make it stop -

They had done this before. Somewhere, sometime.

“I always win, Dragonborn.” His voice was friendly, matter of fact. “How do you destroy death? You might as well try to break time. I sense that you’ve tried.”

Numbly, she realized she was gasping for air, her hands clasped tightly around his as they stood there, alone in the clearing.

She blinked. Awareness. Be aware of your surroundings, one of the first rules of combat drilled into the whelps at Jorrvaskr.

The decapitated head lay not five feet away. The eyes were half closed, the tongue protruding. A fly walked along the bluish lips, disappearing inside.

Suddenly, the hand she was holding grasped hers. Crushing, fingers stretched around her wrists. She leaned back in agony as her bones snapped, popped with the strength of his grip, as she tried with all her might to get away, get away from the thing that had gotten ahold of her…

Whimpering, as she shrank in fear, she could see him lean ever so slowly over her, those pupils swallowing the gold, until there was nothing, nothing but her death she saw in those night black eyes -

Dead in the woods, throat slit, never found or buried as the bodies of children and men decomposed, dancing on puppet’s strings.

Dead in Dustman’s Cairn, the orc’s swing had connected, had slashed her throat and she was gasping for air that would not come. Her lifeblood pumped out of her, as she crashed to the floor.

Dead in the dragon’s belly...Mirmulnir had had the courtesy to break her neck, so that she was immobile, helpless as she slid slowly down the acidic sandpaper gullet to the waiting darkness -

Dead in the lair of the Hagravens, bound and immobile as they opened her ribcage and lifted her heart, still beating out of her chest as a witch raised a pulsing briarheart in its place -

Dead as the werewolf fell upon her, the pain a distant dream as wolf tore chunks of hot flesh from her wounded body. She was aware, so horribly awakened from her mind-dream as steam hissed from blood painted fangs and she had only enough breath left in her remaining lung to whisper a scream...

Dead by the hand of Astrid, as the assassin stabbed her in the heart. A clean kill. The tightness in her chest eased as she fell over, so slowly...the assassin’s blue eyes so lovely in victory.

Dead and undead, walking an eternal round as Babette taught her, raised her to seek for the blood, hot red blood under the moon tasted so sweet as she served, served the Night Mother who she could
"I have seen all your deaths and lives, Dragonborn. Whatever your name, Sarah, Sigrid or Sonahsod, I have seen them all."

"It begins and ends with the Tiid Kreh. The Time Rift. Ever beginning, never ending. All these cycles of time that we have fought, you and I. I could...kill you now.” Impossibly, his grip tightened further and Sigrid cried with the pain of it, struggled to escape. He did not let her. “We would end up right back here. Or, you could join me. Be my right hand."

"Wouldn’t it be better, more pleasant to avoid the pain, Dragonborn?"

Still holding her hands so tightly, he leaned forward and placed his forehead on hers, breathing out a sigh. Shuddering, she smelled the blood on his breath. She would fight. She could fight this, this yearning draw towards him that wasn't real...just the coercive powers of a god.

_Sure she could._

“I can ease your pain. Make it so that you never have to feel such useless emotion.”

A rumble grew in his throat, and she could feel, could see the vocal chords vibrate as he purred against her.

_No._

_No, it can’t be. He wouldn’t -_

And as he spoke the words, the Thu’um she had studied in secret so bashfully, she cried out in disbelief and humiliated rage as pleasure, violent orgasming pleasure crashed into her.

Wave after wave, unrelenting. She wished he had broken her arms, instead.

What she had done with Vilkas that night, in the bonds of love and trust...that had been but a shadow of a breath of a song.

Alduin poured an orchestra of power into her, strumming each nerve with pricks of light as she writhed helplessly, hanging from his grip.

_Pleasure to the point of pain._

The kind that men would sell their souls for, lose all that they had, to slake their lust.

It could have been hours. It could have been seconds. She didn’t care...only noticing finally as the sweet aching of her cunt ceased that he was through.

_Dimly, she realized the death god was speaking to her, quietly. Telling tales of the dovah, the glory of their past civilization. How the humans had worshipped them, honored the rightful rulers of Nirn with great cities and temples, sacrifices and feasts._

_As they would be honored again._

_He promised._

_A feeling of calm entered her as he spoke, drained her resistance._
He was like her. Dovah. He knew her.

“Dragonborn….Sonahsod. Come with me. Follow me. You will never suffer again.”

He waited patiently, his forehead pressed against hers as gradually she grew limp, compliant, as the rightness, the words of the Thu’um of the Firstborn penetrated her mind.

It would be better, wouldn’t it? So much more kind, to feel nothing at all.

She had nearly died, so many times. He had revealed the truth. She couldn’t do it alone. Not without him.

He could end her. Or she could be his. His to command. She wouldn’t have to think so damn hard about everything, her life hanging in the balance.

As she opened her lips to speak, watching those slotted golden eyes widen in expectation, she remembered.

“There are rules, you know, for living life as a Companion. Glory in battle. Honor in life.”

His hands reached up to cup the fullness of her breasts. She pressed herself into those hands.

“Deal with problems head on.”

As she arched her neck, eyes tightly shut, Vilkas held her tightly against him, fingers working, rolling the softness of her in his palms as she bit back another sob.

“Love...” Vilkas rested his chin on her shoulder, his lips barely brushing her ear. Her cheeks were puffy and swollen. She must look like a wreck. Inhaling a rattling, soggy breath as she closed her eyes, Sigrid listened to what her lover had to say.

“You should live such a life that your shield siblings would proudly say that they fought at your side.” Their legs entwined as her breath hitched shakily. She could feel his lips move, smiling against her shoulder.

“Cowards die a thousand deaths, but the brave die only once.” Her hand reached up to cover his, over her chest. She could feel the hammered pounding of her heart slow as she calmed.

“Family and honor, Sigrid.” Vilkas whispered, holding her tightly as she swallowed her fears and leaned against him, safe for now. “Family and honor.”

“Never.”

Alduin pulled away, startled. “What?”

She felt liquid drip down her thigh and shook, shook with the fear of it.

*He had me in the palm of his hand. He could have done anything….I would have done anything and I would have begged him, begged him for the pleasure.*

Evil.

Another voice, old and wise, overlaid itself atop the whisper of her true love.
"What is better – to be born good, or to overcome your evil nature through great effort?"

“Dragonborn, you-” Alduin seemed surprised.

- And seemingly unaffected by his own shout, she noticed. Perhaps instead of a dick, he had a spiked mace because damn, that had worked for her. Mentally scoffing at herself for her weakness, she steeled herself for what was to come.

Perhaps it was easier to give up. God knows, coming back to this time and this place had almost broken her.

But, Sigrid reflected, she would rather feel genuine pain and joy, rather than some simulation born of a Thu’um. Life sucked balls, sometimes. It didn't mean she was going to roll over and die.

Lying there, dangling from broken wrists still held in his hands, she looked up the immortal asswipe who was currently lost for words.

Fuck it all. No going back from this crazy train. Feeling the delicate unseen fabric of the Tiid Kreh waver in the face of her intent, she drew a deep breath.

“TIID LUN WULD!”

Chapter End Notes

So, Alduin is a god of destruction. I'm always reminded, when reading or writing about evil characters, of Terry Goodkind's classic, the Sword of Truth. In it, there is a quote that perfectly sums up Alduin, at least for me.

"There is no such thing as pure good or pure evil, least of all in people. In the best of us there are thoughts or deeds that are wicked, and in the worst of us, at least some virtue. An adversary is not one who does loathsome acts for their own sake. He always has a reason that to him is justification. My cat eats mice. Does that make him bad? I don't think so, and the cat doesn't think so, but I would bet the mice have a different opinion."

But yeah. Still totally evil.
I just wanted to thank everyone who has commented and followed along on this adventure. I have truly enjoyed writing this, and as we near the last bundle of chapters I sort of wish it would just keep going. These characters have stolen my heart.

Also, check out this sweet cover of an iconic song. I almost don't hate this version. ;)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLcoT5yZjX8&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&index=1

Staccato snapshots of her life blew through Sigrid’s mind...faster than she could take in.

Flash.

"Give me the strength to...to learn how to protect others, in order to keep what happened to me from ever happening to anyone else."

Flash.

The man was built like a brickhouse. It felt like she had walked smack into a cement wall. Rubbing her cheek sheepishly, she wondered how heavy all that padded steel was to wear around all the time. She felt, rather than just heard, his breath sigh above her and looked up. "Dawdle on your own time, whelp." He snapped, his cold grey eyes furious. She looked down and nodded.

Flash.

"Woman." His almost inaudible query barely penetrated Sigrids mental fog, and she inhaled sharply as something long and velvety hard glided across her lower lips."Yes..." she whispered as a hand tangled itself in her hair, the other one lifting her leg as she bore down on his cock, imploding with pressure and knife edged grief and surprised joy as fuck-

Flash.

...Alduin snapped forward with blinding speed, striking at Vilkas, who had already raised his sword in a crossbar defense move. Daggered teeth snapped, teeth digging deeply into the Companion’s arms, biting, bending the steel of his sword as Vilkas fought for his life. As she watched in horror, desperately climbing with hooked claws up, up the wall, she saw him slowly bending lower...his knee smashing against the ground as he strained against the head of the World Eater, trying to consume him whole -

Flash.
They were tangled in a vicious pretzel of tooth and claw, only they had...changed. She could see nothing in the darkness, but locked in battle, she felt it with every kick, every swipe of suddenly clawless hands. Instead of encountering black scales, Sonahsod’s fingers ripped across flesh. His teeth tore into tender neck, tearing her hair out by the roots. Joore, mortal humans once more, but no matter, she would end him, destroy the World Eater who killed without thought, kill kill kill -

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Floating, she drifted aimlessly. There was nothing of substance here. She (she was a she, wasn’t she) was trapped. Spinning forever in a whirlwind of time. Done it to herself, other spirits whispered, when she bothered to remember to ask. Dovahkiin. Doom driven.

Forward, backwards, it all circled together. The neverending spiral, monstrous in its immensity. Minute in its perfection to detail.

All life danced within its ever turning, ever reaching arms.

Lost, she wandered, bodiless, as pinpricks of light caught her attention.

As her mind touched each flare of light, a memory played.

Martin Septim, leading the survivors of Kvatch out of the ruined chapel, trusting in the Champion, believing. Last of the bloodline, the dragons long dead.

Talos, Tiber Septim. Ysmir of the North, bending over a map as he plotted where best to move his armies next. Vilified, glorified - both equally true.

A bard, reciting verse before a burning effigy. “No shouting match between dragon and man, no fire or fury did this battle entail. Olaf was Numinex in human form, on moonless nights he would spread wings and sail.”

Was she a dragon? Or perhaps a woman? Could one be both?

A voice speaks, echoing hollowly as if from far away -

-”Some would say that all things must end, so that the next can come to pass. Perhaps this world is simply the Egg of the next kalpa? Lein vokiin? Would you stop the next world from being born?”
Was she stopping the world from ending? She liked this world. She didn’t want it to end.

It would end someday. But that day seemed very far away, with life and death chasing each other as they did in the eternal spin of stars, suns and moons.

Time simply had no meaning in the Aetherius, the Immortal Plane.

Forgetting, she drifted once more.

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There was something. Something she (for she had agreed that she was, in fact, a she) had to do.

Something important.

If her thoughts would only remain, still and solid, instead of being driven to distraction. So much knowledge, an eternal bookcase to sift through. All the jokes and stories, tales of ages long past and forgotten, at her fingertips. Drawing her off course, away from something she once held dear.

Someone needed her. Forcing herself to focus, she looked down and saw...nothing. The faintest glimmer of matter so fine, so pure it shimmered transparently. So pretty...but so useless, if she were to return to Mundus.

*Where was her body?*

If she had a body, she would feel. It would hurt. *I don’t want to hurt anymore.*

But with no body, she could not feel. And the not feeling hurt, as well.

Decisions, decisions. She floated above the varied planes, basking in the Lost Shores. Dipping insubstantial fingers into the Sands Behind the Stars. Warmth, peace without end.

But that bothersome thought remained, a sharp hot reminder of what she had yet to do.

Someone needed her.

God. gods. Goddess?

Perhaps they would know.
Too many gods.

Give a being some power, and they all grew mighty aspirations of being worshipped, apparently.

After traipsing through countless daedric realms and planes, she floated silently through Sovngarde (sad, she was sad for some reason. Why was that? No one bothered to talk to her) and ended up in the land of ‘shrooms.

The Shivering Isles had been like some surreal vacation that melded with a horror funhouse. Seuss...Why do the words Seuss and Wonderland come to mind? She floated over Mania, relishing the brilliant, blood tinged autumn hues as she skimmed the waters, searching for amber on the shore. The mad god Sheogorath had welcomed her warmly, at least, telling her jokes. Capering and offering cheese and intestine when everyone else simply ignored or passed right by.

She wasn’t really there, of course. Was she?

Can one be present without a body to be present in? She knew her thoughts made more sense than this, somehow. A body would solve that.

Where had she placed it?

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This one seemed familiar.

Many named. Akatosh. Auri-El. Allfather. His presence was warm as he embraced her. Couldn’t really see him, or anything else here. Wherever here was. But it was so comforting. She basked in it.

A vision...no, a memory played in a loop. Over and over.

She stood in fields of lavender, wildflowers and tundra cotton. Wind blew the grass of the tundra gently, waving it in patterns that reminded her of the sea, in neverending ripples of green gold. Clouds scudded across a robin’s egg sky, framed by snowcapped mountains that cradled the bowl of the valley. Butterflies flitted around her head as she walked, not a worry in the world. Working slowly, she cut and picked stems of lavender. Over and over.

Lean, grasp, cut, store. Her basket never seemed to fill, but she did not empty it either.

A deep sense of peace filled her soul. He was here, too.

What do you wish, dìi mon, my daughter? Why do you seek me so urgently?

Someone...needs me. I don’t know who.
You do not remember it?

Perhaps if I had my body back, I might remember, Allfather.  

Krosis. It would not be the same as before. 

That’s alright. If I could just remember, then I can make it better. Can’t rest until I do.

Hey. *(hands cutting lavender, so sweet and fragrant. It would make a beautiful wreath)* Are you God? Like, ‘God’? The one I learned about in catholic school?

All gods are one.

...Ever have I watched over you, no matter what name you may call me.

Go, then. Remember. Return to your time and place. *(Warm hands, stopping her as she reached for more. Taking her hands in his, she blinked as the field disappeared. What-)*

Be satisfied with the path you have chosen.

And as a heaviness suddenly caught hold of her and dragged her, down, down into the mortal plane she wished for fields of lavender. Or the safety of his arms. Cradled, like a child. She remembered, so long ago, being held like that. Safe and secure, like nothing could hurt her...

It hurt now. She didn’t like it, hated it even...but if the Allfather sent her, it couldn’t be too bad.

She hoped.

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“Fall back! Fall back!”

Farkas shot an arrow at the black dragon, taking charge among the remaining warriors as a rumbling snarl announced what was *probably* going to be another attack, when -

-suddenly, a shock of light. Almost a flash. He wouldn’t have seen it, it had happened so damn fast, but he was watching. The big black fucker blinked, seemingly disoriented as he hesitated. Farkas took the opportunity to push Vilkas even further behind him. He couldn’t see how badly he was wounded, yet, but even without a wolf’s nose he could *smell* the rusted tang of blood. It had him worried.

Out of nowhere, the golden dragon descended onto the monster; her talons sinking into its spine as she shrieked shrilly, triumphant. Teeth snapped, as the black head snaked back, trying to reach the one ripping chunks of flesh and scale off of its back.

Amidst all the chaos, screams and dust, Farkas could just make out the golden dragon hissing in dovahzul. “ *Tiid bo amativ, Alduin! Grik los lein...*”
“JOOR ZAH FRUL!”

The impact of her voice shook Dragonsreach. Stones fell from the cracked ceiling, as the far end of the porch crumbled away completely. Both dragons shuddered in the twisting, ethereal arms of the Shout. It wrapped the dark one tightly, ensnared in ribbons of blue light. Shaking her head rapidly, as if to ward off shock the golden one struck...her shining white fangs sank, tearing into the shadowed length of throat. Blood poured out, drenching her golden scales in sticky spurts. Oblivious, the she-dragon focused her might into destroying the black one’s throat.

Farkas watched in amazement as that bastard’s black jaws opened, but no words emerged. He could see white bone, glistening wetly in the red flesh of the monster’s throat. The vocal cords almost invisible in the gushing black blood twitched, yet made no sound.

Gurgling, the beast turned, looking at the she-dragon with an eerily human expression of shock. The beast did not delay. Grasping her foe firmly by the head, she shook her jaws from side to side, like a dog with a skeever.

 Burning red eyes opened impossibly wide before dulling, the head and neck severing entirely as the golden one gave a great heaving pull.

“By the gods...” One of the guards whispered. They were all transfixed as the great one’s body began shaking. Patches of blue light emerged from solid flesh, flaking as a howling wind erupted from the thing, roaring through the open porch.

Screaming incomprehensibly, the dragon dissolved into filaments of ash and darkness.

This one left no bones behind. Odd.

Farkas shivered as he watched the the golden dovah spit out a chunk of neck meat, hissing as it too dissipated into the wind. Warily, she limped forward on wounded front limbs, closer to him and his brother. She didn’t seem to be attacking, now that the threat had been removed. But there were hundreds of lives here, hiding inside Dragonsreach. He couldn’t take that chance.

Raising his blade with one hand, Farkas prepared to attack... until Vilkas stopped him with a hand on his arm, his other still grasping tightly the wound in his shoulder. His brother’s grey eyes were so wide, he could see the white all around the edges. “Get inside, fool, and stay there!” Farkas muttered harshly, dragging Vilkas further behind him to safety, as he seemed frozen in place, staring at the golden dovah.

Ignoring him, the idiot wobbled away, moving forward even closer to the creature. It...she...was panting, those black eyes dull as it lapped at an open wound with an absurdly long tongue, licking blood away from a scaled elbow.

“...Sigrid?”

“Ni tiid, Vilkas.”

And that was apparently the last straw, as his brother groaned, falling to the floor as Farkas tried to catch him, calling out for Danica Pure-Spring, or Farengar. Any healer, really, he yelled over and over as his brother sagged heavily in his arms.

He would worry about what his brother had said later. (Sigrid!!? You’re shitting me.) Blood was still pumping sluggishly from the deep wound in Vilkas’s arm, and as Njada raced off to find help, Farkas realized with horror that there were similar, dagger like strikes all over his brother’s torso and left leg.
Oh fuck, those were *tooth* marks, from where the black beast had nearly bitten him through. Blood dripped from his brother’s armor, even trickled slowly from his left ear as his eyes became unfocused, blank and unseeing as Farkas waved a hand in front of his face.

*Damn* this was bad. This was *very* bad.

“Hold on, brother…” He muttered, trying to remember what helped in these types of situations. Hopefully the she-dragon would wait its turn. Farkas had to be there for his twin.

Body flat on the floor? Check.

Pressure on the wound? He grasped the shoulder that his brother had let go of, when he fell. Covered. Check. The others he could do nothing about, but Athis saw, and began applying pressure to the chest, the legs.

Blood welled up between their fingers, and Athis and Farkas shared a look of deep concern.

He wasn’t going to make it.

“*Slen Ahraan Vahraan*…”

“What is it doing?” Athis looked completely unnerved, as the golden dragon crawled painfully forward. Resting her wedge shaped head on the floor before them, Farkas held himself tensely, ready for anything. The great black eyes blinked, then another gust of wind blew over them, smelling like smoked meat and ozone.

“*SLEN...AHRAAN...VAHRAAAN*…”

He could do nothing but sit there in dumb amazement as golden fingers of light soaked into his brother’s form. Blood ceased to pour from beneath his hands, and Athis lifted his own arms in wonderment. “She’s healing him!” The Dunmer exclaimed, whipped his head towards their erstwhile savior.

Farkas was so busy reassuring himself that his brother was, indeed, healing as he lay there so still that he didn’t see. Heard too late the groaning rasp of the she-dragon as she fell, dragged by her own body weight, off of the porch of Dragonsreach.

A long fall, then a crunch of impact.

*Damn it.* “Athis, go see if she’s still alive. If that, er, beast is really our Sigrid we need to help her.”

Nodding wearily, the Dunmer took off, dodging through the gaping onlookers. The Priestess of Kynareth suddenly appeared, pushing Farkas aside as she began evaluating the damage done.

Farkas leaned back with a sigh. Dust still hung heavily in the air. Black ash drifted in the gusts of wind, wind no longer held at bay by the structure of the porch. The porch was now a skylight, it seemed, and the Companion chuckled as he saw the astonished faces of Jarl Balgruuf and his family peering out of what had been the safe room.

Yes, this would make a fine tale to tell around the fires of Jorrvaskr. Too bad it would probably be labeled a tall tale, when they had all passed on.

Farkas looked over at his brother, reassured as Danica Pure-Spring gave him a firm nod. He watched as she spread a poultice upon the gashed skin, still healing from whatever the golden she-dragon - his Harbinger - had done.
No one would believe this had *really* happened. The best tales were always like that.

Not a bad day. Not at all.

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Vocabulary:

Krosis - Sorrow
Tiid bo amativ - Time flies onward
Griik los lein - such is the world/the way of things
Joor Zah Frul - Mortal Finite Temporary (Dragonrend)
Ni tiid - Not now, not yet.
Slen Ahraan Vahraan - Flesh Wound Heal
She slept.

Sometimes, she would wake, her eyelids heavy as stones as she took in the tiny *joore* who surrounded her, now and again. None seemed intent on harming her, and the land her broken body lay in was so *warm*, cozy compared to the chill of winter that surrounded her nest, that it was not long until she fell asleep again.

*Joor Zah Frul*. Her mind rebelled against it, crying out in horror and incomprehension. The mind of the dov could not grasp its meaning. Sonahsod shrank from it, preferring to sleep and ignore hunger and thirst, in favor of avoidance of this...puzzle she had uttered.

Sigrid, however, lingered. Trapped in her own mind, in the body of a dovah.

*Wake up! God dammit, wake up, you lazy beast!*  

Was it really fair to yell at herself? Did she expect her dragon-self to actually talk to her mortal, fragile human self? If they shared the same body, was she mortal or immortal?

Cicero snickered, somewhere in the shadows that always lay thickly in her unconsciousness.

*You, crazy? Heh heh heh, that's madness...*  

Sometimes when she awoke, she was herself. She, Sigrid, was in control. She could speak, roughly and with difficulty in Nordic, stretching the front limbs and claws that had healed, bones and tendons knitting slowly together as days passed by. She had injured her long tongue against the needle-sharp teeth once, when she struggled to tell Farkas what had happened to her. Dovahzul came to her dragon tongue with much more ease, but her shield brother...he needed to know.

Sigrid didn’t get very far. The blood had splattered wetly on the Companion’s face, but she could not resist laughing *hoh ho hoh* at the *look* her shield brother gave her. An exasperated fondness she was used to seeing on the training field. Not in her bed of rock and rubble, with her friend looking so small and delicate against her shining bulk.
She had landed somewhere behind the tall monolith that formed the base of Dragonsreach. There was only blackness, after she had Shouted the healing Thu’um. No memory existed, save those brief wakeful periods where Sonahsod dithered with the choice of whether to waken and eat something, or to sleep off the exhaustion. Sleep often won out, as she was still healing from the soul crushing pain that had come from enduring Dragonrend.

Even if she had been the one to shout it. Which didn’t make any sense, as far as Sigrid could tell. Wouldn’t it just have affected Alduin?

Incomprehensible to a dovah, Paarthurnax had said. No wonder she had been so weak, that she had fainted from her tumble through time and space. To be fair, just the queer out-of-body experience she might have really gone through was batshit enough.

But Sigrid was still here. Still a human mind, the mind of a woman. The dov could not possess her...her body (mine, dammit! MY body!) for the rest of her life.

Or could it? Was she now only Sonahsod?

Sacrifice. Paarthurnax had called it a sacrifice. The change that had been the only way to prevent what would have been the total destruction of Whiterun.

She hoped against hope that this was not forever.

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“She’s not very responsive today, you adorable fetcher.”

“That’s okay! We brought all her favorite foods! She has to wake up and try them!” Lucia chirped, shifting the heavy baskets on her arms.

Vilkas sighed, sharing a look of commiseration with Athis. They had visited nearly every day since the day of the battle, trying unsuccessfully to communicate with the gleaming golden dragon that was, somehow, Sigrid. Their Harbinger.

Farkas had spoken with her. Not for long, he had said. The dragon seemed content to sleep, days and nights meaningless in her slumber. Snow fell, creating mounds and hills upon the spiky tail and curved back, only to melt with an aggrieved huff of ‘yol’ when the dovah noticed.

She had spoken to him. Called him by name, once. He would hold onto the hope that...that this was not the end. That she would come back, be cured of this...this curse that she had willingly undertaken. To protect them all.

Could she just for once be a bit more selfish, he ruminated on days when dark thoughts clouded his moods. Think more about what she wanted, instead of what was best for Skyrim. All the agonizing deliberation he had watched her undergo, had spoken at length with her about, seemed so pointless now. The political struggle of attempting to patch together the warring factions, to provide some measure of peace while dragons hunted and elves bided their time...what good did that do for her, as she slept lost and dreaming in the snow?

This whole victory seemed utterly hollow to Vilkas, at the moment.
Paarthurnax had arrived not long after the death of Alduin. It had not been a promising conversation.

The old one lingered around the female dovah, prodding her with wingclaw and snout. After examining her thoroughly and breathing the same Shout of Healing that had been used upon him, Paarthurnax informed the waiting Companions that though Sigrid was still in there, unresponsive, the dragon was in control.

It was...unlikely that she would ever recover. Be as she was. He had left with a great flap of his leathery, ragged wings, promising to meet up with allies. To seek out an answer, he informed the astonished group of warriors. An unplundered dragon temple; far to the west that might hold the ancient knowledge; key to her return to self.

It had been almost two months without any word.

But they had not given up. Not yet.

“Hello, Harbinger! Look how hot your scales are! Look, Vilkas, she melted the icicles that were over her head!”

“Yes, I see that.” Helping the girl unwrap the supplies they had carried out of Jorrvaskr, Athis and Vilkas sat on a nearby rock and ate quietly, as Lucia danced restlessly. Gesturing with a piece of braided bread, Lucia brandished it like a sword, talking all the while to Sigrid about her training. How she was up to ten laps run without pausing. How unfair it was, that boys were stronger than girls, and did Sigrid learn to Shout to make up the difference?

A rumble rolled through the great form of the dovah, forming sound as the great muzzle yawned widely. A curl of smoke escaped, as Lucia oohed and aahed at all the pointy teeth.

Athis chuckled, tearing apart a piece of bread as he listened to the nonstop chatter. “Asleep again. Another day passes by.”

“So it would seem.”

*******

It was a cold Loredas in Evening Star when the Greybeards arrived.

No one in Whiterun could remember a time when they had even heard of the Masters leaving their perch in High Hrothgar. But when the letter had been delivered by courier to the hands of Jarl Balgruuf’s steward, informing them of their imminent arrival, the entire city had been thrown into a flurry of activity. Huge barrels of spiced mead were rolled out and tapped, huge hanks of mammoth and elk put into smoking sheds to thaw. All talk revolved around hasty preparation for the feasting and dancing that surely would celebrate such an occasion.

Midwinter was not far off, and the old streets of Whiterun fairly sparkled with freshly fallen snow. Snowberry wreaths and garlands of elves ear and pine adorned every lamp post and lintel, threaded around the grand pillars of Dragonsreach that had been painstakingly repaired. The porch was still ragged and unfinished, workmen claiming that nothing could be done until the dragon was removed and spring had arrived to ease their way.

The weather did not seem to impede the Greybeards, as they followed the well trod path that led to Sonahsod’s place of rest. Many of the townsfolk came out to catch a glimpse of the elusive Masters of the Voice, some following at a distance in awe.
The Companions had no such qualms. They followed directly behind the trail of grey robed men, Njada and Athis taking the lead, an honor guard for the Greybeards. Lucia, Tilma and the twins walked behind. Wearing fur stoles and carrying staves to assist their journey, they looked more like a band of mages than monks, Vilkas thought in amusement. It was so cold that Lucia, who had insisted upon being included, had almost turned blue until Farkas took off his bear pelt cloak and dropped it over her, drowning the girl in fur. She had popped her head out, like a rabbit out of its burrow, to the broad guffaws of the Companions present. Even Arngeir had chuckled; the rumbling of his amusement shaking icicles from the stable eaves, causing them to crash to the ground and scare the horses.

Arngeir had explained the purpose of their visit. They had been pleasantly surprised one day by a message, passed along by Odahviing. The great red drake had informed the Greybeards of Paarthurnax and his success in retrieving a shout.

“...A Shout that will break the hold the dov has on the Dragonborn’s form. It is unclear whether she was blessed with this body by Akatosh, or merely meant to possess it for a time. We may never know the circumstance. Unless…”

“- she could tell us herself.” Vilkas interrupted impatiently. They had reached Sonahsod, who was entirely covered by snow at this point. Little puffs of heated air and smoke floated out of the wintery mound, almost like a chimney. If the chimney came from a beast that spanned the length of Jorrvaskr, not including the tail. “When will you be able to test this Thu’um?”

“At once, Faadvurdein. Drem.” Chilled gusts of wind enveloped the group as two dragons descended from the grey clouded skies, wings displacing flurries of snow as they landed with a heaving thump upon the frozen ground.

Vilkas nodded solemnly. “Paarthurnax.” He didn’t bother greeting Odahviing, who looked entirely too smug as it was.

“Drem yol lok, warrior. At last we meet.” The younger dovah tilted his great head with an almost mischievous expression. “I’ve heard….hmm…much about you. Lost rek in hii el pruzah?"

“Boh na gut, Odahviing. Your humor is unappreciated, here.” Paarthurnax shook his wings, ice cracking from the webbed leathery skin as he stretched. “Nii los tiid. It is time, Arngeir.”

Surrounding the sleeping dov in a semicircle, the Greybeards gave Odahviing and Paarthurnax ample space. Fanning out even further away, the Companions watched as the the robed masters extended their arms, palm up and began whispering in a measured, toneless chant.

Small wonder they never spoke, Vilkas thought in awe as the very earth shook at the rumbling of the combined might of the Greybeards. Only just a whisper, the waiting dragons still silent, and he could feel the strength of their voices shake the sword within his scabbard, chatter the teeth in his jaw with the power of it.

Spreading their wings, Paarthurnax and Odahviing stood on hind limbs, rising to a great height. Lucia peeped in fear, hiding beneath her furs and against Tilma as the two dragons began a recitation that sounded like blades clashing, steel against steel, in a battle of words.

Leaning closer, the Greybeard’s muttering chant became a triumphant shout. A roar of sound that blew an unseen tidal force of power away from them, rippling the snowy plains with its force.

Vilkas blinked back against the dryness of the rushing winds, as they stole his breath away. Farkas had crouched protectively over Tilma and Lucia, who had bent almost double from the blowing gale force winds that keened, whipping up a froth of icy powder. Athis and Njada shielded their eyes, as they all continued their vigil.

It had to work, Vilkas thought desperately.

“Vopraan ahrk kos ulaan. DREM...VITH...KREN!”

With a sudden thunderclap of sound that echoed over the tundra, they fell silent. The dovah folded their wings, delicately placing forelimbs upon the ground and drawing closer. Vilkas could see nothing, nothing but snow.

No smoke or heat issued from the snowy mound. Did she not make it?

Without conscious thought, his feet were suddenly moving as he raced past the Greybeards rumbling in surprise. Heedless of Farkas’s call, he approached the mountain of snow.

It had collapsed in on itself. Grateful for his leather lined gauntlets, Vilkas began to dig furiously, throwing handfuls of snow as his breath clouded the air in quick bursts. There was something, had to be something under all this snow. Don’t you dare leave me, now...

“Bo ireid, joor sahlo!” With a rough shove that knocked Vilkas to the ground, Odahviing took his place. Inhaling deeply, the red scaled dovah began a slow, heated breath of fire. Picking himself up, Vilkas could see the snow melt, steaming in the wavering heat of the air, as-

-There she was.

Naked and pale and completely inert. Her perfect, full breasts rose and fell, blue tinged, fingers twitching and restless as she slept. She looked like a drowning victim, vampire pale, her hair like dark seaweed tangled against her shoulders, stark against the snow.

She lived.

Almost stumbling in his relief, Vilkas reached out to grasp her, to finally touch her once more, then stopped. “A cloak. I need a cloak or blanket, anyone?”

He felt the softness of fur brush his hand, and looked down to see Lucia, her wind-chapped lips smiling as she offered Farkas’s cloak. Vilkas returned the smile, realizing he was grinning like a fool as the Greybeards standing around him shared a look of warm triumph.

Safe. Carefully wrapping her in the warm furs, Vilkas lifted the woman and slowly walked back to the waiting Companions, who cheered loudly. Even the dragons seemed moved by the
accomplishment. Odahviing rumbled a querulous trill, nudging at Sigrid’s hand that protruded from the furs. At the sour look he received from Vilkas, the dovh sighed. “Zu'u koraav vahzen do nii, warrior. Do not misplace her again.”

“I have no idea what that...first part was, but I do seem to remember it was you who flew her far from home.” Vilkas retorted, feeling the woman slip as the furs slid wetly against his gauntlets. Readjusting his precious burden, he almost spoke to deny how tired he was when Farkas approached. Until his twin arched an eyebrow and extended his arms, as if to say, really? Vilkas had taken weeks to regain his former strength after being nearly bitten in half by the World Eater. Even now, he felt the burn of maintaining his grip.

“Very well,” Vilkas sighed, allowing Farkas to take her. She looked so small and pale, nestled in his brother’s arms.

“When will she awaken?” Athis peered at her, a frown stretching his thin lips.

Arngeir pulled at the folds of his grey robes, his stave planted firmly in the permafrost. “That will be up to the Dragonborn, I fear. That she has resumed her mortal form is a marked improvement. Time will tell.”

As the dragons rumbled their farewells and took to the air, the Companions retraced their steps on the path to Whiterun. Now, they were joined by the Greybeards, who had accepted the offer of feasting and celebration with grave dignity. And one slumbering Dragonborn, wrapped in furs, dead to the world as she dreamed.

Vilkas hovered near Farkas until his brother rolled his eyes. He then contented himself with following behind, scanning the area for any threats as his heart beat wildly with elation.

She was herself, once more. Out of it, but the woman couldn’t sleep all the time.

Sigrid would awaken. Soon.

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Vocabulary

Faadvurdein - Warmth Valor Guard
Lost rek in hii el pruzah? - Has she mastered you as well?
Boh Nah Gut - Fly Fury Far (Get out of here)
Drem Vith Kren - Peace Serpent Break)
Bo ireid, joor sahlo - Move aside, mortal weakling
Zu'u koraav vahzen do nii - I see the truth of it
Winter had fallen, silent and cold. The long sleep.

She dreamed of a blizzard; the ice riming her lips, frosting her eyelashes and hair with lacy flakes of snow as she stumbled, hip deep in the drifts. The drifts became waves, clear and brilliantly blue as their white capped peaks towered over her.

She stood at the brink of the abyss, looking into the deep as the waves crashed over her. The sun seemed so far away as she drifted down, down to the dark deep that glittered with stars -

“Wake up. Please. Wake up, woman.”

Black waters rushed into her mouth as she opened her mouth to take a breath. She couldn’t breathe, could do nothing but panic as she sank, struggled, fought to reach the surface. Where there was air, light, warmth. Limbs tore against the heavy press of darkness, seeking…

- Suddenly there was air. Gasping, she shook in relief. Inhaled deep. Then another breath.

There were lips, warm and real against hers.

“...Sigrid?”

The feasting of the Masters of the Voice went on the entire week before the Dark Day of Midwinter.

Arngeir and his fellows were given an honored place at table, directly seated near the Jarl and his most trusted advisors. Dragonsreach bursted with life amidst the silent snows; juggling, dancing, singing all filled the hall as the feast wended on. No mug went unfilled, no mouth unfed. The bounty had been prepared for all to enjoy.

Vilkas took pleasure in none of it. Sigrid lay as one dead, still, carefully watched in the Temple of Kynareth as they all celebrated without her. A week had passed, and Danica Pure-Spring grew more and more grim faced the longer the woman went without substantial food or water. She had brushed a mixture of honey water and healing herbs upon Sigrid’s lips, and Vilkas had been gratified to see her idly lick it off. Slowly, and far between.

Not enough to sustain life.

Far from the feast he had hoped to share with her, with her fellow shield siblings.

Seated near the rest of the Companions, he picked at the honey nut treats Lucia had placed before him. “You have to eat something, mister. Hey! Try this!”

He huffed a sigh as the girl placed a bowl of pudding before him. Sweet spices had been sprinkled
atop the mush, and without enthusiasm he dug in a spoon at Lucia’s urging.

Teeth crunched against something hard. Spitting it out, he examined the offending object carefully.

“Oh, lucky! You found the bowl with the hidden nut! That means something good will happen to you!” Patting his back, Lucia spun away and ran off to Farkas to tell him the good news.

Vilkas sighed once more. He hated to break the young one’s hopes. Every day she had visited Sigrid, piling winter blooms and snacks near the Harbinger’s resting place. Talking to Sigrid in a running babble of childish enthusiasm and worry.

He didn’t have the heart to stop her. Every day Sigrid slept, the hole that ached inside him grew a bit wider.

Putting the spoon back on the table, Vilkas looked down the table at the assembled Companions. Aela had rejoined them three days ago, accompanied by Majni and his fellow werewolves from Solstheim.

They were all wearing pale, black tipped fur pelts atop raggedly cut leathers and looked fairly wild to the armsmasters view. Aela had joined them in their collective getup, the ruffled cowl somehow right as it rested against the Huntress’s leathers. She had reluctantly accepted the group hug the Companions had greeted her with, but Vilkas did not fail to note how tightly her fingers grasped as she hugged each of them in turn. She had been missed, as well. There was so much to tell, to catch up on amidst those who had been friends since they were whelps.

The Frostmoon pack had been gruff, but cordial. Farkas in particular was delighted to discover that Aela and Majni were together; Vilkas would not be surprised to see the Huntress surprised by some poor sod of a bard singing odes to love in the near future. He hoped the bard could run fast.

The werewolves were surprised, but thrilled to be invited to a feast. Though he rather thought they were poor company in a civilized setting, Vilkas thought wryly as Akar broke wind loudly, grunting at the glares he received in turn.

He didn’t miss it. Did not miss the speed, the wild strength coursing through him. When Majni had politely prodded him about his past with the beast blood, he was able to answer calmly. Without excessive emotion. And as the pack leader’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, Vilkas realized that the foul edge of his temper that had always simmered, waiting to explode was gone.

Oh, he was still brought to anger fairly easily. But it was manageable. He no longer felt like flaying every new blood who dropped a sword on his toe, or misfired an arrow, or wrecked a shield by standing upon it. It was reassuring to feel more fully human, relaxed and more in control than he ever had been, as a beast.

Was it like that, for Sigrid? He pondered as Athis refilled his mug with spiced mead, taking slow sips as the rush of noise and music seethed around him, like a stream parting around a rock. Had the dragon poisoned her ready smile, the happy optimism that had radiated from the woman as she performed the smallest of tasks?

Nothing for it. He could not linger, pretending to enjoy himself any further.

Standing, he carefully pushed the happy drunks who surrounded him aside, as he made his way to
the great double doors that led outside. He waved at Farkas, who had been trying to get his attention. His twin currently had his arm snugged tight against Carlotta, the other ruffling Mila’s hair as the child devoured a plate of sweet rolls and honey nut treats. Waving in response, Farkas gave him a sad smile as he returned to doting upon his future wife and child.

The cold bite of chilly air was pleasant, after the smoky heat of the hall. He walked in thoughtful silence to the Temple of Kynareth, nodding as passing villagers hailed him on their way up to Dragonsreach.

Snow had begun to fall once more, and he soaked in the still peace as he pushed open the door to the place of healing.

“Vilkas! Why aren’t you feasting with the others?” Danica stood from her chair near Sigrid’s bed. The Harbinger was the only patient that remained. Even the sick farmers and soldiers dragging broken limbs had been assisted by their fellows to the celebration.

He could see the marks of exhaustion, the lack of sleep that lay heavily upon the healer’s shoulders. “I’ll watch her, for a time. Go get some food and rest, Danica.”

“Just don’t stay up too late, this time. You’re no good to her, or to me if you don’t take care of yourself!” Giving him a fond look, the priestess rubbed the small of her back as she quietly left, shutting the door gently behind her.

Setting himself down in the chair with a yawn, Vilkas reached for the book he had been reading yesterday. Aela had brought back a knapsack fairly bursting with new books, as a wedding gift. He flipped through the Skaal tale of Aevar Stone-Singer, trying to remember where he had left off.

“...Speak to her!” Danica had urged him, the day she had been returned to her human form and the Companions had laid her to rest upon the bed in Kynareth’s temple. “It has been my experience that those who sleep can still hear. She will respond, eventually.”

And so he had. Each of the Companions had taken the time, one by one, to speak quietly to the woman who lay, restless and dreaming. When his turn came, Vilkas felt his throat close with damned emotion. The words...would not come.

So he read, instead.

“You have done well, Aevar. You, the least of the Skaal, have returned my gifts to them. The Greedy Man is gone for now, and should not trouble your people again in your lifetime. Your All-Maker is pleased. Go now, and live according to your Nature. And Aevar started back to the Skaal village.”

A finger twitched. He looked over, scanning her form anxiously for any signs of life. Her breathing was shallow, steady. Shaking his head at himself, he continued to read aloud.

“And then what happened, Grandfather?”

“What do you mean, Child? He went home.”

“No. When he returned to the village,” the Child continued. “Was he made a warrior?”

Or taught the ways of the shaman? Did he lead the Skaal in battle?

“I do not know. That is where the story ends,” said the Grandfather.
There. Her hand had definitely moved.

Marking the page, he placed the book on the table that held the healing mixtures and honey water. He could see small changes; fingers restless as she struggled in her sleep. Her eyes moved, rolling behind closed eyelids. Warmth bloomed inside him as he saw her pale lips tremble.

She was fighting, fighting to escape her slumber. To awaken.

“Oh, Sigrid.” Sitting next to her on the stone bed, he tucked the furs that covered her more tightly around her form.

The woman had lost weight in her long rest. He could see the fine tracery of blue veins webbing over the ivory pallor of her skin. The Shout had returned her to her human form, which Vilkas was grateful for, but it was not until he had the luxury of time to examine her that he realized just how deep the changes went.

The freckles were gone. Back again was that moon-pale skin, soft and unmarked by scars, sunspots or time. Her left hand bore all five fingernails, neatly trimmed by Danica, as they had been almost talon-like in their length and sharpness at first. The sun-ripened burnt brown hair he had grown accustomed to seeing in their tangle of braids was dark once more, spreading in a waterfall across her shoulders, trailing over the bed. Aela had spent some time brushing it, sorting out the knots until it fairly gleamed in the lantern light.

Suddenly, Vilkas realized she more closely resembled herself as he had first seen her, so long ago when they had rescued her from the necromancer’s cave. Youthful. Unreal. More like an elf tale of a wood spirit than a living woman.

No one escaped from life so unmarked. Her marks now remained only on the inside.

Still, it was Sigrid. That same nose, the stubborn chin, those expressive eyes still shut tight against reality.

Those lips, so full and slightly parted as she breathed. He could feel the passage of breath, proof that she was alive as he bent over her. Curled his arms protectively around her, as his bearded cheek lay against the smoothness of her skin.

“Wake up. Please. Wake up, woman.”

Filled with yearning, he turned his neck to press his lips against hers. Tasted the sweetness of honey, with the bitter burn of elves ear and blisterwort.

Her mouth parted beneath him, drawing the very breath from his lungs.

Hardly daring to move, he held himself still above her, as her breathy gasps came closer together. Faster.

“...Sigrid?”

Suddenly, she began coughing. Choking.

Hurriedly he sat up and lifted her to a seated position as she continued those hacking coughs, her frail
frame shaking. His hands held her upright, and in his wild joy he barely registered the bumpy ribs, the knobs of her spine that he could feel through the soft white nightgown she wore.

She was awake! She was alive!

A cold hand touched the skin of his neck. Trailed through his hair, hair he had not cut in months that now lay almost to his shoulders. “...V-Vilkas?”

With a cry that was almost a sob, he hugged close to him once more. Tucking her head in the crook of his chin and shoulder, he managed barely to control his relief as he laughed, all the tension and fear flooding away with the tremulous movements of the woman, touching his hair, his neck, his lips.

“Vilkas. Mmm. I need - oh, shit.”

“What?” He broke away from her, looking over her anxiously. “What do you need?”

She bit her lip. Her hazel eyes (still the same!) were bloodshot, but calm in their gaze.

“...I think I need a chamberpot. Like, right now. Sorry.”

Giggling as he carefully released her from his shaking grasp, Vilkas shook his head, a smile pulled unwillingly from his lips as he stood up to fetch the woman a damn chamberpot.

She was here. She was back.

And as he was shooed outside of the temple as the woman wriggled in her desperate efforts to keep from pissing herself, he couldn’t help the deep laugh that broke, happy and gods so relieved as he waited patiently for his woman to care for herself. Another daily task that meant she was alive.

Alive, well, and his.

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The Midwinter Festival was as fantastic as Sigrid dreamed it would be.

After Danica Pure-Spring had arrived back at the temple to see Sigrid very much alive and well, she had put her on bed rest for three days. Slowly, the news circulated that the Harbinger had awakened from her long rest, and Companions eventually trickled in, bringing delicacies from the feast along with wide smiles and hearty hugs.

After eating so little for so long, she couldn’t bear much more than a few sips or bites of anything. Lucia, in particular kept urging her to eat as much pudding and sweet rolls as the girl could sneak out. She broke off pieces instead, smiling as the girl devoured the rest.

Aela hovered nearby, and when the rush of visitors ebbed in their frequency it was she who sat with Vilkas, bringing boiled eggs and spiced mead to her as they chatted, catching up on all the news. The woman had been frank in her disbelief as Sigrid cautiously related the entire tale of the death of Alduin. But Vilkas backed her up, relating his side of the story, and eventually Aela deigned to at
least accept the fact that Sigrid, helpless whelp and unworthy Harbinger, had slain the World Eater. As a fucking dragon. After venturing to Sovngarde, Hall of the Valorous Dead, only to be trapped in time, sent to another world and flung through Aetherius to return, once more.

So much of this was like a dream that Sigrid smiled in commiseration as Aela shook her head, struggling to take it all in. She knew the feeling, and every time Vilkas leaned in, taking her hand in his she squeezed his hands with all the feeble strength that remained in them. Grateful for what she had been given, for what had been returned.

Farkas came in, joined by Carlotta and Mila halfway through the tale, so she had to begin again from the beginning. As more of her friends and family interrupted, she had laughed, fairly swaddled in furs and covered in plates of food, and announced that she was not going to talk anymore until everyone showed up at the same time.

It took her the better part of a day and into the night of the Dark Day itself to speak of everything that had occurred. It was satisfying to let her shield siblings know about Kodlak Whitemane. Almost, Sigrid thought, she could see tears in Aela’s eyes. The woman had turned away as she spoke of Kodlak, of Ysgramor and the other heroes of Shor’s Hall. She especially relished the astonishment on the faces of her fiance and his brother as she related how she had met their mother and father in Sovngarde. How they looked, what they had said. It was almost worth all the highs and lows, the sheer exhaustion from too much too soon, to see them so lost for words.

“Well, damn. Seems that this is something else we have in common,” Vilkas finally choked out, as Sigrid explained the cause of their rescue, their induction into the Companions at such a young age.

“I wonder why Jergen never mentioned them at all,” Farkas mused, stroking his woman’s hair as she slept curled upon his lap.

“You were both so young. ‘Barely out of breechclouts,’ Gydda said. Maybe Jergen didn’t want to traumatize you any further?” Sigrid suggested, picking at her egg and bread. Behind her, Vilkas huffed a laugh. “It is enough to know they are well, in Sovngarde. We will see them again.”

On the last day of forced bed rest after Midwinter (the priestess insisted she was still an invalid, though her arms and legs finally seemed responsive and she itched to move) Sigrid cleared her throat, looking at Vilkas who had been folding furs and blankets, always close by. “What, woman?”

“Vilkas, I’m so sorry.” She touched her bare neck, grimacing. “I have...no idea what happened to my Amulet of Mara. I think it ended up on the Throat of the World, along with whatever happened to my armor and other stuff.”

His grey eyes softened at her words. “Don’t worry about it. I can always get you another one...unless, you have changed your mind?” His tone turned playful, as he nudged her over on the bed, sitting almost on top of her until she slid off entirely, laughing.

“Yes, you skeeever shit, I will still marry you. Though I don’t know why I put up with you. I’m the Dragonborn, remember? Slayer of the World Eater. Killer of the Glenmoril Coven. Destroyer of the Dark Brotherhood. You should be out there with all those men, begging me for my favors.”

Vilkas grinned. There had men (and women) who had petitioned to be allowed inside the Temple, just to speak with the acclaimed Dragonborn. A few had been bards, urging her to set her tale to song, so that her exploits could be sung far and wide. Others had wanted her to perform tasks for them, to talk to this Jarl or fetch that sword from some cursed tomb. A few had brought bunches of
flowers, amulets and rare fur pelts as gifts of courtship (he discreetly threw those away). One very adorable little boy had begged to see her Shout something, just to brag about it.

With a mischievous wink, she had complied. Her whisper of “Zul Mey Gut” had the boy looking around frantically for the source of her voice. Her disembodied voice giggled and sang silly songs that echoed in the temple, to his astonished pleasure. That had been fun.

“How? It’s not as though you can run away.” Grabbing a snow bear pelt, he threw it on the woman who laughed, muffled as she tried to crawl out from the heavy weight of fur. Leaning over, he bit back a laugh of his own as he rolled her in the pelt like a lump of dough until she was trapped.

Satisfied, he flopped to the floor. Her head, the only part of her that was visible, blinked in agitation. “Really? How old are we, four?”

“You tell me. Aren’t dragons supposed to be immortal?”

“And that explains why I killed so many of them.”

Watching as her face slowly became solemn, he sighed. Damn it, not again. She had these moments, less and less as time passed on, that she grew dark with inward grief, dwelling on recent memories.

On Bryce and her children. He knew she suffered over the means by which she had left them, alone, with no goodbyes as she stalked Alduin in her world.

It had sparked hours of conversation, as they discussed whether or not they would have eventually ended up in the same situation, trapped in the necromancer’s spell had Sigrid stayed to camp with her family. Had Alduin’s Shout taken her to an alternate timeline? Was their current time unchanged, really?

Metaphysics aside, it was impossible to tell, and as she wriggled trying to release herself from the wound up furs his thoughts became less introspective. More distracted, as he spied a pale shoulder emerge, the nightshift dragged down almost to the faint outline of her rosy nipple in her efforts to be free.

Very distracted.

He had been careful. So careful and cautious as he dared to touch her, this new Sigrid who was frail and soft and so new. Ages since they had shared that incredible night in the bed at Breezehome.

Vilkas had been understandably occupied since then, what with the attacks on Dragonsreach and his vigil over her as she slept. Watching as both times he waited for the dragon, the woman, to awaken.

She was awake, now. And so was he. All of him.

Danica wasn’t watching, busy with grinding herbs into salve for potions. He leaned over his woman, placing both arms on either side of her. Keeping her from unwinding any further.

Her breath puffed against his cheek. “Let me out.”

“Not yet.” Dropping his head, Vilkas breathed in her scent. Clean and cold, like the snowberries in the soap she had used that morning. He traced the sharp edge of her collarbone with his nose, as she slowly moved beneath him. He had kept his beard, at her shy insistence. It tickled her now, as she breathlessly laughed, squirming as he brushed his cheeks, his lips against Sigrid.

“Vilkas, get off.” She whispered against his hair, as he dared to dive further, drawing away the
nightgown as his mouth dipped into her cleavage. “We are not alone. Get off.”

He grimaced against her skin. And wasn’t that just the way it had been, lately. No one left her alone. Not even with him. She was too famed, too immensely popular to be unbothered.

Hearing her gasp as he quickly licked her breast, one quick swipe, he pulled his head free and started unwinding the snowy white fur. She was blushing, the skin of her chest pinking beautifully as he shot her a smug smile.

Soon. All this would go away, as the novelty of the Dragonborn and her victory wore off, and the Dark Day’s festivities wound down, sinking into the peaceful rhythm of winter chores.

Soon he would have her alone, again.

He couldn’t wait to make her scream his name.
It was nearing the end of Rain’s Hand when preparations began for a double wedding. The first that the people of Whiterun had ever seen, or could remember. Especially between two such well known and unique couples.

The snow had begun melting in earnest weeks ago, and an early spring heralded a warm summer.

And mud. Lots and lots of mud scraped off of boots. Smeared upon doorways and tracked into houses. The tightly curled buds of wildflowers and bulbs struggled to emerge from the soggy mess, and there was a definite green tinge to the trees and bushes of Whiterun. In a few days, leaves would uncurl in the life giving light, buds would bloom...the mud would dry and life would go on.

Sigrid would be happy to see the rain, the mud and the remains of winter go away for a good long while.

“Why couldn’t we just keep up appearances and sneak away when no one is looking?” She groused as she scrubbed at the floors of Jorrvaskr on her knees. Beside her, Carlotta chuckled quietly, also kept busy with scrub brush and buckets of water. The sharp smell of juniper hung in the air, shot through with wood smoke and the other, less pleasant scents of a melting spring. Something had died, somewhere in Jorrvaskr’s pantry and hall, and Tilma had turned the place inside and out to find the dead skeever decomposing beneath the floorboards.

Now, they had all been roped into a furious spring cleaning. Mucking out clogged privies. Clearing the ruined straw that had molded and stunk in the training yard. Njada was out back with Lucia, beating the furs and tapestries hung on lines of rope with brooms. The Harbinger could hear the thwok thwok thwok as they clapped out all the dirt and dust that had built up from being hung inside the smoky hall for months.

Taking the cake of juniper soap in her hands, Sigrid gritted her teeth as the sharp lye stung small cuts in her hands. “I mean, I know it’s tradition. Men and women are separated for a week before the wedding, to rest and purify, blah blah. It doesn’t mean I have to like it!”

“This is just the first part.” Picking at a blister on her palm, Carlotta stretched with a sigh. “Imperials have different traditions, but I helped with the last wedding here. You’ll see...it will all be worth it.”

Tilma entered, bearing new buckets of rags and hot, steaming water. “Of course it will. This is the first day, where you cleanse your home and hearth. This week, Harbinger, you will shed all remnants of your former life, to prepare you for your life as a wedded woman.”

“Symbolically, of course. You are still the Harbinger, Sigrid. And the Dragonborn.” The old woman added with a wrinkly smile, as Sigrid huffed as she scrubbed a particularly stubborn spot in the wooden floor. “But you must attend to your tasks, if only to give peace of mind and distract you from your worries. Your man will be busy, too.”

“Yes. Because hunting out on the plains is just as purifying as cleaning a house, top to bottom.” Looking at the Dragonborn’s sour expression, Carlotta snickered. “Really. Don’t you think you can wait a week? It’s not as though you’ve been apart all that long since midwinter, Sigrid.”

Actually, she had. Vilkas had been with her for the last few months, of course. Physically. His
presence stood behind her as Jarl Balgruuf gave her a public accolade in his hall, placing a finely crafted steel axe in her waiting palms as his court applauded.

Her fiance had lingered, frowning at the many who came to Jorrvaskr to solicit advice, to ask her to undertake quests or to (she blushed) consider their son or grandson as a possible future spouse. She had quickly remedied her lack of an amulet of Mara after the last, very elderly rich gentleman had not taken ‘no’ for an answer. The pervert was probably used to getting his way. His robes fairly dripped in gemstones and the rank scent of musky oils and perfumes. Such a turn-off; she preferred the smell of pine and good honest sweat any day over that.

Sigrid smiled wickedly. Freezing him in place with a gently whispered Thu’um had sent just the right message. And, it had kept her protective fiance from throttling the poor man.

Yes, he had certainly been there. But they had not been alone, in what felt like an achingly long time.

Stolen kisses and quick, hurried caresses only went so far. Every time they stole silently away from the piles of work, training and constant questions, it had ended up with someone bursting in them, calling for the Harbinger, for the Dragonborn or the Master at Arms for something that just couldn’t wait. They were both reaching a snapping point. The recent rains, which churned dirt into mud underfoot and brought biting flies and insects in the rare instances it did not rain, was not helping.

One evening, they had been desperate enough to sneak away to the rubble that still covered the back of Dragonsreach. Hiding in a crevice beneath a large slab of toppled stone, she had been pulled back against him as he divested her of any clothing he could reach. Helpless to resist as his fingers worked against her, inside her...she had moaned like a wanton, rubbing herself against him shamelessly, until a torch bearing guard approached.

Never had she fastened her bodice laces so fast.

At least she wasn’t the only one terribly frustrated by this entire situation, she thought in sympathy as she had watched him bully the new bloods with unnecessarily difficult tasks. Walking up all the steps to Dragonsreach, just to haul away rubble back down again. Fifty pushups, in full armor and weaponry. Sparring until they dropped from exhaustion. He pushed himself as well, running drills and laps until he nearly fell asleep face down in his evening meal, and she had to push and prod him down the stairs to his old bedroom. Where they would inevitably be interrupted by someone needing something again.

And now, he was gone hunting with the men of Whiterun. Off to find a mammoth for the wedding feast, with other manly rituals. Whatever a man did to prepare for a wedding here in Skyrim. She really hoped there was no Tamrielic equivalent of a stag night, complete with strippers or drugs. Although, she thought as she carefully removed a splinter from her thumb, a night like that would be fairly amusing to watch as a casual observer. She wondered what ‘sexy dancing’ looked like, here. Did the men throw septims at the dancers as they shimmied and swayed? Ouch.

And she was stuck here. Scrubbing.

So fucking frustrated she could scream with it.

She wasn’t sure she (or Carlotta) would last the week.

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After the first day of cleaning house and hearth (Breezehome had not escaped Tilma’s exacting treatment. She had nearly died when the woman discovered her stash of leather cords and pots of honey. Thankfully she asked no questions.) it was then time to weed out items that the bride would wear on her person.

Even after the years she had spent in Skyrim, Sigrid did not really own a hell of a lot. She opened the chest that contained her personal belongings with aplomb, relishing the surprised shock of Tilma, Carlotta and Njada as they beheld how little she really had.

“Damn. I think we actually need to buy you some shit before you get married, Harbinger.” Njada held up a stained, torn dress and wrinkled her nose.

“How’s this really all you’ve got? No chests of jewelry or armor hiding somewhere?” Tilma supplied hopefully.

Sigrid growled in irritation. “Everything I wear ends up getting destroyed, somehow.” Her amulet of Mara, her dresses...hell, even her dragonscale armor had not been salvageable. She owned a few volumes of books, stacked beneath a dried out old wreath and some spare potions that had long since passed their expiration. Oh, and some worn out underclothes and half a bar of soap.

“That’s it, then. Time to go shopping!” Carlotta shut the chest with glee.

One thing Sigrid did not lack for was septims, at least. Ever since she had cleaned out the Dark Brotherhood sanctuary, she had been in the black for funds. She had just never really gotten around to spending it on things that were not absolutely essential for survival.

The Harbinger found herself standing in nothing but smalls in Belethor’s back room as the Breton measured her with quick, snappy movements. Promising to have an entire wardrobe ready by the time of her wedding, she had left his store with two brand new gowns. One was a rich forest green, embroidered in golden yellow leaves along the wrists and neck. The other was a deep lake blue, simply cut with a square neck.

No frills, lace or fuss. She absolutely loved them, and as she turned this way and that in front of the mirror as Carlotta and Njada made approving sounds, she decided to wear the blue dress out. When had she last gone shopping with friends? Gods. Not since she was a young mother, going out on the town to visit the tiny antique slash consignment shops that popped up like mushrooms along the country highways.

Next was a visit to Fralia. Over lunch, a simple affair of spring vegetables in a chicken broth at the Bannered Mare, Njada informed Sigrid that a Nord woman wouldn’t be caught dead without some sign of wealth decorating her neck, arms and ears on her wedding day. Did she want Vilkas to look like he was marrying a beggar? No, of course not.

A silver necklace, earrings and rings set with deep sapphires joined the space in their rapidly dwindling bags, along with a gold and emerald collection that matched the green gown. As Njada haggled with Fralia over the cost of the goods, Tilma placed a crown upon Sigrid’s brow with a nostalgic sniff. “Nord brides always wear a crown. Whether it be a crown of flowers or of gems, my girl.”

She had put her foot down on the crown part, arguing that she couldn’t possibly spend thousands of septims on something she’d only use once. Grumbling, Tilma had relented, brightening only when the Harbinger promised to wear any crown of flowers that the woman provided on the wedding day.
Hours later, Sigrid was the proud owner of several hand-stitched quilts, hammered metal pans, a new cooking cauldron with tri-footed stand and ladle, a full set of bottled salts and spices, and more shoes and accessories than she had ever owned, even in her previous life. She was wealthy now, Njada had sniffed. Powerful. A hero in her own right. Why didn’t the Harbinger want to show pride in her appearance, her home?

As her friends helped her store the leather stitched house slippers and fur lined boots away in Breezehome, Sigrid marvelled at how much could be accomplished in a single day. “There, isn’t that better?” Carlotta smiled as they put away all the kitchen goods, stocking the shelves with more food and supplies. Stacking firewood in the corner of the living area, Njada returned Sigrid’s shaky smile with a fierce grin. Grabbing Sigrid’s shoulder, Tilma clucked her tongue. “When was the last time you groomed your head, girl? Sit down now.” Tilma began yanking at her (crazy long, she really had to cut it soon) hair with a bone carved comb, with Sigrid making exaggerated faces of pain as Carlotta giggled and Njada scoffed.

Surrounded by friends, she relaxed into her seat and listened with a smile as they continued talking. A quivering rush of anticipation filled her as they spoke of other wedding traditions, how the families of the bride and groom chased each other to the bonfires, where the losers would serve the victors their mead. Njada teased Sigrid and Carlotta both about the wedding night, offering suggestions and jabs at their men as Sigrid sat helpless in Tilma’s grasp. She retorted good naturedly, asking about the stamina of Dunmer men, which made the woman sputter. Thank Shor and Kyne she had put an end to that line of questioning.

Sisterhood. Something she had missed, for far too long.

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As the days passed, dragging by so slowly, their friends did their best to distract Sigrid and Carlotta from the upcoming nuptials.

They shopped almost every single day that week. Sigrid had never felt so pampered, or so poor. Unused to seeing the septims leave her pouch so easily, she dragged her feet as Njada forced her to purchase some new travel packs and purses, since hers had holes that could almost drop septims through them.

Aela the Huntress spent one quiet afternoon helping Sigrid hammer out a marriage band. She had been forced to explain to the Harbinger the significance of this little tradition, when Sigrid blinked in puzzlement and asked why there were even wedding bands or amulets of Mara, if they just exchanged arm bands during the ceremony. It had been almost...charming to see the woman splutter as she tried to impress upon the Harbinger the importance, the symbolism of the unbroken circle. Similar to the unbreakable nature of the marriage vow.

But his armband didn’t take very long at all to craft, and as it cooled she lingered by Warmaidens, gazing longingly at the gleaming daedric swords and elven axes. Carlotta had shown up to drag her bodily away to try on scents at the Khajiit caravan. Finally, they had just arrived with the spring thaw, and business was brisk.

Her old friends were welcoming, promised to stay for the wedding...and she left with three bags full of glistening sugar, a good-luck charm shaped like a crescent moon (to be hung over the marriage bed, Khayla had purred with a wink) and three full bottles of scent. After they had sampled all the
different smells, Sigrid came across something that smelled exactly like bergamot and sandalwood. It was perfect for her future husband, and she bought it, along with two other bottles of oils that leaked oil of gleamblossom (almost like freesia) and a very strong earthy patchouli-like smell that she was told came from the emperor parasol moss of Morrowind.

The day before the wedding, Arcadia gave her a kindly lecture on the uses of potions for birth control, explaining the efficacy of each. Taken with one spoonful a day, the one she had sold to Sigrid would prevent childbearing until the time of her choosing. Thinking about the IUD that remained still inside her, Sigrid listened along with Carlotta, wondering how to approach this particular can of worms.

In one of the rare moments they had (relatively) alone, Sigrid had stood with Vilkas in the training yard as they watched the new bloods undergo the morning exercise routine.

Twisting her dress in her fingers nervously, Sigrid made a split second decision to just blurt it out.

“Vilkas...do you want children?”

You’d think she had asked if he wanted to strap stilts to his legs and stumble about like a giant, the way he had looked at her. “Er...do you?”

Sigrid huffed. “I asked you first. Let’s not make this about me.”

Sucking in a breath, Vilkas turned to face her more fully. Sigrid shielded her face as the early morning sun reflected off of his armor, nearly blinding her. “I had thought...with what happened...you -”

Oh. So that was why he was struggling so damn hard. He was worried about her past, not necessarily avoiding the topic.

“I’m up for it, if you are.” Watching his pale grey eyes widen, she thought fondly of tiny baby fists, curled tightly around her finger. A toddler, face smeared in honey from a sweetroll, with Vilkas’s eyes and her nose.

“But only if you feel right about it. These decisions need to be made together. And where I’m from, we usually talk about it before the wedding.”

Vilkas had looked confused. “Woman, what has kept you from bearing my child until now?”

She had explained, much to their mutual embarrassment, about the tiny copper string a doctor had inserted inside her that kept her from becoming pregnant. “I could...take it out, if you like. It might take a while. To get pregnant, I mean. But...I’m willing, if you are.”

He had stood there, scrutinizing her for what felt like an eternity as she bore up bravely beneath that cool stare. “Aye. I’d like that.”

And that was the end of it. It had never come up in conversation again. But she felt a warmth burn within her, as she contemplated having another child. A tiny newborn, to feed and cuddle. His child.

“Oh dear. Carlotta and Sigrid shared a look of foreboding, as they followed Tilma and her shield sister further into the hall, down the stairs where the hot springs steamed.
Njada Stonearm was a horrible, wonderful tormentor.

At Tilma and Njada’s urging, Carlotta and Sigrid had stripped off all their clothing. Submitting themselves to the ‘ritual purification’, they had been soaped, scraped clean of all excess body hair and rubbed down with rough cloths. Their calluses had been rasped with pumice, the skin of their backs and limbs fairly sloughed off with the salt-oil mixture Njada gleefully sanded them with.

Eventually, Aela, Lucia and Mila joined the women as the brides to be had their hair washed in oil of frost mirriam. The girls were guided to stand upon their backs, and Sigrid squeaked as Lucia walked along the sides of her spine. “Eeek, Lucia, that hurts.”

“Hurts so good, you mean.” Carlotta winced. “Maybe a bit more to the left, Mila?”

“Wimp.” Njada carefully kneaded Carlotta’s shoulders, as the Imperial sighed in appreciation. “Your turn, Harbinger.”

Surprisingly, the combined effects of the exfoliation and massage felt...good. Her skin fairly tingled with all the stimulation, and afterwards she sat on the edge of the pool and compared her skin to Carlotta’s. They both practically glowed with all the scrubbing...Sigrid’s skin being a lighter shade of rose than the Imperial’s more olive hue.

 Damn, what do you know. The torture worked like a charm, she thought in admiration. This, she thought sinking into the hot springs with a sigh, was infinitely preferable to scrubbing floors.

“Almost, I forgive you Stonearm.”

“Aaah! Hot hot hot!” Carlotta yelped as she almost overbalanced, with Aela saving her from a plunge with a tug of her hand.

They all sat there, blissfully naked and not a care in the world. Drowsy from the heat, the younger girls were soon ushered off to bed. Tilma returned from taking them upstairs with towels and bottles of wine, which were gratefully accepted as they sat on the benches carved into the walls.

Sigrid blew bubbles in the hot springs, idly wondering where all the water went. It must recirculate somewhere, she thought, as she watched the water gurgling under the stone cracks that extended past the smoothed bathing area. Or else, she thought with a wince at her modern mind intruding in this stone age ritual, this would be really unhygienic.

“Hey, ‘Lotta?” She turned her head lazily to her friend, who looked half asleep herself.

At her nod, Sigrid continued, lifting a pruney foot from the water. “Since we’re going to be sisters soon, I have a big favor to ask.”

It had taken a whole bottle of wine to bolster Sigrid’s courage, but eventually she ended up sprawled, legs apart and nervous as, well, a virgin on her wedding night as Aela and Njada carefully pried out her IUD. Carlotta and Tilma stood to the side, trying not to watch. “Ouch, ouch ouch goddamn it, don’t ruin me!” Sigrid shrieked, trying to hold still as Aela’s questing fingers were shoved up inside of her.

“Don’t pretend to act all virginal, Harbinger. It’s unbecoming to lie. Now hold still.” Holding aloft
the copper wire triumphantly, Carlotta made a face as Aela waved it around in the air. “So what is this thing, anyway?”

Tilma clicked her tongue in disapproval as blood slowly oozed from Sigrid’s poor abused womanly parts. Sigrid glared, whispering the shout of healing under her breath, relaxing somewhat as she helped Tilma clean up the floor. “It is a type of birth control where I am from. I don’t want it in there anymore, but fuck Aela you nearly made it unnecessary the way you were yanking it around in there!”

“Why not just take a spoonful of potion every day?” Njada wondered aloud.

“Because I’d have to remember to take a spoonful of goddamn potion every day.”

Ignoring her Harbinger’s seething glances, Njada pursed her lips. “Can I have it? If Carlotta doesn’t want it, that is? Since you’re going to be sisters,” the Stonearm fluttered her eyelashes.

“I, er...I don’t need it.” Carlotta muttered, looking everywhere but at the women staring at her in surprise.

“Oh damn it.” Uncaring of her nakedness, Aela flopped down next to the Imperial. “How long?”

“A week, maybe.” Seeing how nervous she was, Sigrid slid over and put her arms around her friend. “It’s alright, isn’t it? Does Farkas know?”

Carlotta sniffed, her eyes welling with tears. “Nooo…” As the Imperial began to sob, Njada and Aela shared a look of baffled confusion. Always the caretaker, Tilma grabbed a clean towel and offered it to Carlotta, patting her back and murmuring kind nothings as the woman continued to cry her heart out.

As she took in the nonplussed stares of the women surrounding her, Sigrid was reminded of just how young her friend was. Carlotta had been no more than sixteen when she had given birth to Mila. Seven, almost eight years later and in her early twenties, the woman had endured so much for someone so young. But hormones and fright made for a bad combination, and the Dragonborn decided right then and there to be the big sister she always wished to have.

“Carlotta, this is wonderful news.” Offering the Imperial a fresh towel and discreetly taking away her wine, Sigrid smiled encouragingly. “Farkas already loves Mila so much...I know he will be over the moon to know you are both going to be parents again soon.”

“Oh, I know he’ll be a wonderful father. I just...thought I’d have more time. And it has all happened so fast…”

“Believe me. I’m with you there.” Her face was puffing out from all the tears. “Here. Let’s see if we can’t use some cooler water to blot out all the redness. Don’t want to undo Njada’s hard work.”

“Goddamn right.”

Shooting the woman a look, Sigrid sighed. “Look...you don’t have to tell him right away. But the longer you wait, the more a secret like this will weigh on you. For your sake, tell him soon. M’kay?”

Stealing a glance at the Imperial’s flat stomach, Sigrid thought it would be unlikely that anyone could tell she carried life inside her, at least for a while. Comparing her own belly to the younger woman, she realized with a bit of horror that even her stretch marks had been taken from her, in the strange weirding spell of the Shout that had turned her back to a human from a dovah.

But strange as it sounded, she wanted her stretch marks. She missed her stretch marks, even feeling a
thread of nostalgia for her old scars. They had been proof...proof that she had endured something so fucking awful, but had come out on top. Sigrid had cried, all alone in the bathing area that day in Kynareth’s temple, when she realized how altered she was. Like something had ripped the skin from her bones and had given her a replacement, without her permission. It was just another reminder of the slow disappearance of her previous life, the kids she had carried and born and raised. All gone with the spell. Poof.

Sometimes, she thought viciously, she hated magic. Thu’ums counted as magic, in her book.

Fucking apocalyptic death dragons and their meddling ways.

Carlotta smiled, still so beautiful even after bawling her eyes out, Sigrid thought with a bit of amazement. Not like her, with her ugly cry face. “I will. I’m so glad we’re going to be sisters, Harbinger.”

“Sigrid.” Patting her awkwardly on her naked back, she flopped back on the stone floor, suddenly exhausted. “Call me Sigrid.”

“Call me out of this sugar-sweet mess. Are you sure you’re actually a warrior, Harbinger? Shouldn’t you be strumming a lute in a tavern somewhere?”

A hand lifted, wagging a finger. “Don’t tempt me, Njada. Bards here could use some different music.”

And as the evening wound down with a heated argument about differing tastes in songs Sigrid began to tune out, idly combing her fingers through her wet hair. She felt a shiver of anticipation quiver deep in her belly for what tomorrow would bring. A double wedding, with dancing and presents and finally some alone time with the person who meant most to her in all the world.

She couldn’t wait.

Chapter End Notes

So, many of these traditions have been taken from what we know about Viking weddings (which is not very much, sadly). But the bridal crown, armbands, the purification and separation of husband and wife was a thing. Here is a fairly good website that relies upon historical sources for accuracy, if you want to know more.

Yeah. I messed with the Elder Scrolls universe again. I always thought they hinted at more complex, different traditions in game, like the Argonians with their tri-amethyst ring that symbolizes the Hist. So, why not have a mammoth hunt and some girly time? God knows Sigrid needs it.

http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/wedding.shtml
"You know, I bet the women are having a shitload more fun than we are right now." Farkas grumbled quietly, as he and his brother looked at the noisy, mouth-breathing rabble that had taken over their hunt.

Days later, they were still stalking the same damn bull mammoth far west of Whiterun. Anoriath had been beside himself when he had been asked to arrange the traditional hunt, and had gone into a frenzy of mapping out the likeliest spots to find the massive herbivores. Both Farkas and Vilkas had been consulted on known watering holes, whether the brothers preferred male or female prey, and did they know any wild mammoth game trails that did not also lead to a giant’s camp?

Vilkas almost wished he hadn't gone through so much trouble. The small getaway, which had originally only included himself, his brother, Athis, Anoriath and Majni of Solstheim had swelled to include the rest of the Frost moon pack and what seemed like half of Whiterun.

They had planned to camp out beneath the stars and the waxing light of Secunda with just bedrolls, until they were waylaid by an army of shouting, gesturing men. Now there was a paddock for horses, four firepits blazing and two wagons for carting off the bones, meat and pelt of the mammoth they were supposed to hunt. There were so many tents set up that from far away it could have passed as a soldiers camp; if the soldiers had forgone all vigilance and decided to slop down the mead like there was no tomorrow.

As the crowd of city men drank and sang, the twins were unable to escape the spotlight. Toasts and cheers were made in their honor, and Vilkas ended up hearing way more ribald jokes and lewd praise for his betrothed than was proper. Fixing the blankest of stony stares on his face, he gritted his teeth when Nazeem elbowed him and loudly joked about the chances of Sigrid shouting him to death, with the punchline involving a gag and restraints of some sort. The idea had sparked a burst of rough laughter, and Vilkas had broken several arrows in the stress of containing his anger until Anoriath snatched the quiver away with a roll of his eyes.

Farkas did not get off much easier. Even with Whiterun being the trading capital of Skyrim, a fair amount of prejudice still existed against Skyrim’s southern neighbor. And everyone knew that Carlotta Valentia was a war widow, which was a mark against her in this company.

"So, that's a fine Imp ya got there," one deadhead had slurred, stumbling towards Farkas. "Got your snowberries in a bind over some milk drinker, eh? Nord women not good enough for you?"

That comment had prompted an all out brawl. It had been by far the most interesting thing to happen so far, Vilkas thought dryly. He and his brother had emerged from the fray blooded, but victorious. Farkas was not even breathing heavily as he left a trail of groaning, injured men behind him.

Ah well. If they weren’t man enough to hold their drink and defend their words, it wasn’t Vilkas’s business to interfere. Much. He did accidentally ‘stumble’ over Nazeem as he passed him crumpled up near their other combatants. A shame, that. Trying to hold back his grins at their expense, Vilkas made a final decision the fifth night. Enough was enough.

"Let’s just go our own way", he muttered to Athis, Majni, Anoriath and his brother, when the drinking and storytelling continued without end. At this rate, there would be nothing for the wedding feast but a bunch of hung over Nords with sour moods.

Not at his wedding, he vowed.
Anoriath had agreed quickly, his face pinched in disgust as he gathered his quivers and bow. After the hundredth time being referred to as piss-face and tree-fucker, the Bosmer was also rethinking his role in this undertaking. Athis had been called names only once; the offender had swiftly found the Dunmer’s blades between his eyes, pressing into the skin until a flood of apologies followed.

Vilkas spit into the fire, disgusted. It was all well and good to hate the Thalmor and their Aldmeri Dominion. A war had been fought, with many thousands dead. In his past experience, he did not feel a shred of regret in the pleasure he had found killing the Altmer agents of the Thalmor. Faceless, nameless shadows of an oppression his homeland still fought against, still.

But Anoriath? Athis? Vilkas had known them since he was a boy. They were of Skyrim as much as he was. Teasing out of camaraderie was one thing. But the dark hatred diverted and focused so easily on men that were different - it was low hanging fruit. Despicable. A true Nord would never stoop so low, to take away the dignity of another with crass words.

Silently the five men slipped away in the dying light, in pursuit of their prey.

******

They tracked the mammoth to the head of a massive waterfall, west of Rorikstead.

It was ideal, Vilkas thought with no small amount of pride. It had been a difficult trek, in the rain soaked terraces of the tundra that was split with rocks and small waterfalls with the spring runoff. But with the high cliffs that rimmed the waterfall, and the far side closed with a high rocky ridge that blocked any escape...there was no place for the mammoth to run. Risky. But if they worked together, it would be a fine kill.

Majni tested the edges of the spears they had brought. "I still think bringing the beast down would be easier in my other form."

"Keep your voice down." Farkas calmly replied, eyes searching the horizon as they all stood ready, prepared. "Not all here are aware of your wild nature, Maj."

“Here they come,” cautioned Vilkas, as he felt the pounding earthshake of the thundering mammoth approach at a full gallop, driven closer by Anoriath and Athis running closely behind.

And by Shor, it was a fight! The mammoth was a fine, large male in his prime. Trumpeting furiously at the men who sought to take his life, he swiped his tusks in a heavy arc that sent Majni crashing against the rocks, spear fallen from nerveless fingers.

Athis had taken a mad leap of faith; landing squarely on the mammoths back. As the others jabbed at the beast with their spears and arrows, shouting to herd it ever closer to the rock wall, the Dunmer began stabbing the spine in quick, surgical movements.

Not to be outdone, Anoriath pulled back his bow in a full draw, squinting as he lined up the perfect shot. One that would take the mammoth down, straight to the head. He was interrupted by Farkas and Vilkas, who with unspoken agreement had pulled out their greatswords and with carefully timed swings managed to hamstring the mighty mammoth.

Collapsing, the beast bellowed in pain and rage, the sound echoing in the cold night air. It was the work of a moment to end its suffering. Offering his blade handle first to Farkas, his twin blinked at
the queer workmanship, then shrugged as he used Vilkas’s Falkniven knife to slash the mammoth’s throat.

As the lifeblood fountained out, the dying mammoth moved, jerked in thunderous twitches, then lay still.

*****

There were rituals to be done, in the old Nord way when a man hunted for his wedding feast.

Kneeling near the cooling carcass, Majni solemnly swiped blood stained fingers over the foreheads and cheeks of the brothers, smearing it onto their chests.

At their urging, he recited an old Skaal blessing, praising the fruits of the hunt...the leathers and furs that would create clothing and shelter, meat for sustenance for the wives and children waiting back home. Even the bones would not be wasted, Majni reassured the spirit of the animal, as he thanked it for giving its life to the hunters, in the name of the Allfather Spirit.

Vilkas felt a distant sadness as he thought of Kodlak. It should have been the old Harbinger's task, to do this.

While the blessing was spoken, the elven brethren had not been idle. Cracking the great ribcage open was the work of a moment, and Anoriath soon presented the heart to them. Ruby red, glistening with the hot fresh blood of the kill, they each accepted it and took a bite.

Chewing laboriously, Vilkas managed to swallow his gristly share manfully, without grimacing. He had had his fill of raw meat as a wolf, and preferred his meat well dead and roasted as a man. It was Sigrid, ironically enough, who preferred her steaks raw and bleeding, not him. Dragonborn indeed.

Seriousness over and done with, the Frostmoon leader was almost effusive in his praise, as they all joined together to hack and carve the great animal into more manageable steaks and rib roasts. “I had a wife, once.” Majni reminisced as he sliced the liver into equal portions.

“How did you trick her into marrying you?” Anoriath shot back, struggling with the looping intestines as he struggled not to perforate them. It was the damn hardest thing, the effort to take out the stomach and all the waste without breaking the tender membranes, spoiling the meat.

The men laughed as Majni sniffed, moving to skin the furred hide. “In my prime, I had my pick of the females. But Helgir was fast, her eyes sharp. She was a fine mate, a good hunter. I was sad to see her pass on.”

“And how does it go for you now, that you and Aela hunt together?” Vilkas asked pointedly as he salted the sliced remains of the heart. They had found some wild garlic and leek, which had been thrown into their travel pot to boil along with the meat. Wiping his hands on a tussock of grass, he caught his brother’s eye and grinned as he waited for the answer. Farkas pulled a face in response, occupied in removing the tusks from the weighty jaw.

“...It goes well enough. Ah, but she is a fierce thing.” Examining the brothers with a gimlet eye, the werewolf sat back on his haunches, blood dripping from his knife. “I wonder that neither of you saw her fit to wed, yourselves.”
Athis exploded in a flurry of poorly disguised laughter, the twins not far behind as they tried to contain their mirth. The very idea made Vilkas feel almost sick inside. The huntress was many things; friend, trickster, shield sister...but to bed?

Vilkas would rather crawl naked through hot coals than even think of Aela like that.

Keeping a straight face, Vilkas turned to the older man. “And that is why you are far braver than I, Majni. Remember...we grew up with Aela. Being tormented by Aela. Having oil poured on our sword handles by Aela...”

“...and he’ll be wedded to the Dragonborn tomorrow! Now who thinks the Huntress is terrifying?!?” Anoriath added gleefully.

The whole discussion devolved into an argument over how to choose a spouse, what the most important requirements were, and so on. Blocking the majority of what he heard from his mind, Vilkas focused instead on the raw beauty of the landscape. Secunda shone nearly full and round, hanging in the sky on a bed of woven light from the auroras. Insects chirped as the wind blew gently, ruffling the waves of grass that had sprung free of the spring mud. Wildflowers also dotted the plains here and there, a promise of further warmth and life.

As he stirred the heart-soup, adding more garlic and leek as he tested it with his tongue, the Nord thought about the woman. His woman, about to be wed to him tomorrow.

She certainly had the advantage of him there, having been previously married. Cleaning the edge of the knife she had given him, he examined the fine antler-wood handle that had been so smoothly polished. He would honor her dead husband’s memory...would strive to care for her in all the ways a man could for his wife. And, he reminded himself with a sudden flush of anxiety, for their future children. She had caught him by surprise with that one.

Though the vision of her, full bellied and round with his child, was an image that frequented his thoughts more often of late, Vilkas had held back. Had silenced his tongue. Not having been a father, he could only imagine the pain of losing a child, much less eight of them. It would be her choice, he had decided long ago. Her body that bore the fruit of love. But, he reminded himself, she had approached him. Demanded to know what he wanted.

A slow burn of warmth filled his heart as he recalled her face, strained and waiting for him to respond. Yes...he did want children with her. Would treasure them.

He was making a good start, he reassured himself. Vilkas could provide for her, had already made the hunt successfully. He had rescued her, and she had saved him time and time again. They were well matched.

As the night went on and the stars shifted in their eternal patterns, Vilkas wondered if Ysgramor looked down upon his Companions with pride. If Kodlak had joined him, searching for Shor’s Hall on those vast grassy plains. He took his tusk of the mammoth after supper had ended and set the tip of the Falkniven to trace, carefully, an edged repeating pattern in the ivory.

He would make something of beauty, for his Sigrid.

Smiling, he watched as Farkas nodded in approval and began carving his own tusk ivory as well.

The fire popped and snapped, the red meat marbled with fat heavy in their bellies and piled neatly against the great mammoth’s hide.
The trailing, inebriated group of townsfolk came by their camp the next day.

It was noon when the horse drawn wagons creaked slowly to a stop near the carcass. Seeing their sheepish looks, Farkas and Vilkas merely rolled their eyes and gestured for the men to help them cart away the remains of their kill.

When nothing but a few bones and the innards remained, food for the wolves, the men set onward back to Whiterun. It was a journey made far longer by the sickness and groaning of the men, who had drunk every last drop of the barrels that were meant to last the entire week.

Not averse to strong drink by any means, the twins shared another look of exasperation as one man leaned over on his horse to retch, vomiting on the grass that was quickly given a wide berth by the following walkers. It would have been nice, Vilkas thought longingly, to actually drink some of his own damn wedding mead by the fire.

It was the sixth day, the day before their wedding when they stopped by a steep ravine to camp for the night.

As the rabble set up their tents and prepared for the final push in the morning, Vilkas and Farkas stole away to the nearby streams, to begin the final ritual of purification. Women had theirs, secret and done in the solitude of sisterhood. The men kept their own traditions as well.

Never having done this before with any of his comrades (he felt a pang of sorrow for Skjor, dead this last year. The old veteran had deserved more.) Vilkas merely did what felt right. He and Farkas ducked their heads beneath the small waterfall that streamed glacially cold water into a shallow pool.

Stepping onto the gravel gingerly (damn mud crabs always popped out when you least expected them), they scrubbed themselves all over with fine silty gravel and sand, until they were red with the effort. Submerging themselves beneath the falls again, Vilkas sighed as water sluiced against his hair, down his back. Somewhere nearby, his brother did the same.

He closed his eyes and let it all go. Washing away all the doubts and fears of the past. His insecurities and petty vengeance, all poured into the spill of water that ran over and down him, into the ground.

Pulling themselves from the frigid water as they shook themselves dry, Farkas and Vilkas set up camp a bit further away from the assembled men, choosing solitude on this their last night of bachelorhood.

“Makes you wish we did this more often, eh brother?” Carefully removing a chunk of ivory with his knife, Farkas tilted his head towards Vilkas. “Think we’re getting soft, mostly taking city jobs.”

“Aye.” His tusk had been carefully split into parts. The main length of it, he wrapped in oilcloth for Sigrid to do what she would with it. Decorate their home, maybe. The round base he hollowed out into a ring, thinning and smoothing the sides until it resembled the bracelet he envisioned.

Making fine, crosshatched designs, he worked alongside his brother until the sun set completely,
They spoke quietly, now and again. Of small things. A funny story Carlotta had shared. The way the auroras danced above them. Something Sigrid remembered from her impressive, unbelievable journey. What it meant, now that they knew, knew their parents names. How they had begun their lives.

And as the fire died completely near the middle of the night, Vilkas laid himself down next to his snoring brother and blinked up at the stars. Feeling a pleasant ache in his loins as he shivered in expectation of the day ahead.

Finally, he would have her all to himself. Finally, they would be alone.

Idly he wondered...how could he get his woman out into the sun, practically naked, just to see those freckles bloom like constellations against her skin? To trace them, marking the path of the Warrior, of Fjori and Holgeir. Trace with fingers, then with his tongue.

As he thought of days to come, he drifted off into deep, dreamless sleep.

At peace with his world.
Yay! Weddings! I just love this song to listen to when reading this chapter. Yeah, I know, it's Outlander and not anything Viking or Skyrim, but god damn it it is too romantic to be missed.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3E8dWvirGh0&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&index=6

You caught me. I'm a cupcake. I loved writing this shit. All this...sweet lovey dovey stuff has taken its toll. Now I've got to go write some more blood and death to make up for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Startling from a dreamless sleep, Sigrid blinked as sudden shouting awakened her.

It was their wedding day. The auspicious day of Fredas (the only day to be married, according to Tilma) in the first week of Second Seed.

And thank Shor and Kyne for the end of Rain’s Hand. The last couple of days had been free from rainfall, and slowly the ground had dried from a sodden mess to actual grassy earth. Small blooms had peeped, unsure of their welcome, all across the fields and gardens of Whiterun. It looked to be a pleasant, sunny day. Perfect for a wedding.

They had turned in late last night, after soaking for so long with wine and hot water. Wrapping themselves in towels, they had lain down on the beds and immediately passed out into sleep.

But now it was morning. And there was so much to do!

Njada Stonearm was the source of the shouting, naturally. She arrived before there was any chance of breakfast, bearing Sigrid and Carlotta’s wedding dresses. She had wrestled herself into a dress as well, the Harbinger thought in stunned amusement. While it looked somewhat out of place on the venerated warrior, Sigrid couldn’t deny...the bitch had style. Njada’s hair had been braided into a half crown, the remaining length spilling against the back of her hunter green gown. “Hope you drank your hangover cures, ladies. Because this is probably going to hurt.”

After being poked, shoved and prodded into a tightly laced corset, Sigrid agreed. Feeling sick, she stealthily loosened it. She noticed that Njada did not give the same treatment to Carlotta, who looked relieved. No doubt due to the little Farkas baby growing inside. Awww.

The gowns had been chosen according to personal preference. Having asked what was traditional for Nord weddings, Sigrid was unsurprised to hear that pretty much anything went as far as color was concerned. Carlotta had chosen an Imperial style gown of white linen that draped becomingly, fastening at her shoulders and corded at her waist. On her head soon rested a garland of elves ear and wildflowers.

Sigrid had wanted a more warlike look. How fitting for a Dragonborn and Harbinger to wear full
armor to her wedding? She had argued for wearing a new version of her dragonscale apparel. But Njada and Carlotta had shaken their heads in a definite no when they saw the prototype lying in pieces at Warmaidens. It wasn’t even ready yet. And did she even have a romantic bone in her body, Njada had demanded? Didn’t she want to look stunning?

So she had gone full gothic medieval, instead.

Her wedding gown was a rich amber gold, with a tightly laced bodice and long bell-like sleeves that nearly dragged to the ground. It had been embroidered on the cuffs and the neck with delicate dragon runes in black thread. Sigrid had chosen them, drawing the runes painstakingly with ink on paper for Belethor’s seamstress, explaining exactly what she wanted.

All the Shouts she knew, including the names of dear friends and dovah. Words of love, faith, and trust written in Dovahzul. It would have to do. The part of her that was still Sonahsod approved, somehow. Saw her shining scales in the cloth of gold, and was content.

Despite the urging of her friends to wear more elaborate jewelry, she wore only her amulet of Mara, gifted to her by Vilkas. And that dratted crown…

Tilma had been sneaky. She had presented Sigrid with an ornate spiked metal crown, crafted of dark shining ebony. As she examined the beautiful thing, she realized it had been finely engraved with patterns of flowers and vines. Swallowing, she leaned over to allow Tilma to place it on her hair, which had been brushed out and left loose. When asked, the old woman wouldn’t answer where she had received it. Tilma merely smiled, and reminded Sigrid of her promise to wear anything Tilma had come up with.

It sat heavily upon her brow. A weight not too unlike the responsibilities she felt, encroaching upon her happy day far off. Waiting to pounce.

Prepared and waiting anxiously, they were ushered to the gates of Whiterun where Sigrid and Carlotta stood, surrounded by slowly gathering townsfolk. Somewhere close, a drummer beat out a slow tattoo, steady as a heartbeat.

There the women stood. Waiting for their men to return home.

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Slowly trudging up the path that led to Whiterun, the brothers led the caravan that bore the wedding feast.

And thank Shor the assembled men had finally found their balls, Vilkas reflected. It had been a morning filled with delays, moans and complaints, until Athis had quietly spoken to a few of the ringleaders. From then on, the trip back to Whiterun had been remarkably silent. Stoic, even. Vilkas owed the Dunmer a favor for that one.

The mammoth meat had been carefully wrapped and stored in the wagons, ready to be removed and prepared for the day of feasting. As Vilkas and Farkas led the horses who pulled the meat by the bridle, they approached the gates in solemn finery. Whispers greeted them, as the onlookers murmured in awe struck appreciation.

They had decided, after careful consideration with Athis and Majni, to go for all out intimidation.
Farkas had laughingly joked about showing up as a berserker, wearing only blood paint and woad and running in naked, screaming. Though it would have been funny (for all of three seconds, until Carlotta backed out of the marriage) Vilkas had encouraged him to wear his finest set of armor. And so he did.

Farkas was resplendent in the carved Nordic armor that echoed the style so favored in Solstheim. Deep runneled curves of quicksilver steel plate covered the black fur lining, making his impressive height even more intimidating by sheer mass. He wore Skyforge steel on his back and had foregone his warpaint for the wedding, opting instead to wear his amulet of Mara and tie his hair back in a tail.

Vilkas, on the other hand, had exaggerated his warpaint with almost black markings that made his cool grey eyes stand out in sharp relief. They were both clean shaven, hair newly shorn. He wore his amulet beneath gleaming ebony armor, finely crafted by none other than Eorlund Graymane himself.

Allowing himself a smirk as he came into view of his future wife, his smile widened at the shock she couldn’t quite conceal at the sight of them rolling through the gates. Damn, but it had paid off to bribe Fralia and Tilma into sneaking that crown onto the woman’s head. He dared any man to say that they did not look like a matched couple.

Standing directly behind the two women, Erandur the priest of Mara waited patiently for the procession to come to a halt. “Brothers and sisters, if you would please follow the wedding party to the Gildergreen.” He motioned with a sweep of golden sleeves.

Striding up to her, Vilkas could almost laugh at the tart look Sigrid shot him. Gods, but she was a beauty. Thanking Shor and Kyne and any of the other gods who were listening, he took her arm in his, holding her hand as tightly as he dared. Stealing a glance at his brother, he realized that Farkas was oblivious to his scrutiny, and was completely lost staring into the blushing face of his Imperial bride as he escorted her to the great tree of Whiterun.

As they walked a steady pace in the procession, Sigrid whispered to him out of her mouth. “What took you so long?”

Smug, he forced himself to keep a blank face. “It took time to kill a mammoth for your wedding feast. I hope one is enough; I know of your massive appetite.”

They walked for a few steps more.

“I’m going to do something unfortunate to you for that.”

“Gods, I hope so. Seems like forever since we’ve been alone.”

“Well, we’re not alone now. Oh no... everyone is staring.”

“I hope so. That crown was expensive.”

Before she could dignify that with a response, all of a sudden they were there. As if it knew somehow that the day had come, the Gildergreen had blossomed, traced in delicate pink blooms. Looking left and right, Sigrid saw so many familiar faces...there was Keerava and Talen-Jei from the Bee and Barb. Aela and Majni, surrounded by the Frostmoon Pack. Ri’saad and his caravan, Commander Maro, even Solaf and Bolund from Falkreath had arrived in time. Njada gave her a slight nod, holding Lucia and Mila by the shoulders with Athis hovering close by. Tilma,
Arcadia...even Jarl Balgruuf was present, standing with family and all his court to see their Thane wed the arms master of Jorrvaskr.

Erandur walked a slow step as he took his place in the cleft of the roots. The drumming stopped, and the quiet susurrus of voices ceased whispering as the ceremony began.

Raising his arms, the priest began speaking the words that had been passed down, old as the Skyforge. “Let us begin the ceremony. Shor Allfather, Loving Kyne, we gather here today to wed this man and this woman…” he gestured to Farkas and Carlotta, who stood beaming. “...and this man and this woman....” Sigrid could feel Vilkas tighten his grip upon her hand.

“...in the bonds of matrimony. It was Mara that first gave birth to all of creation and pledged to watch over us as Her children. It is from her love of us that we -”

Try as she might to listen, to pay attention to the words Erandur spoke over them, Sigrid felt almost edgy with suppressed excitement. All she could think of, all she could feel was his arm against hers. His hand holding tightly. The presence of his form so near, after so long. Sneaking a look up at his impassive face, the Dragonborn felt warmth flood her with affection. Nudging him with her hip, she smiled brightly and was rewarded by a small smile of his own.

“...a life lived alone is no life at all. We gather here today, under Mara’s loving gaze to bear witness to the union of these men and women, their souls sealed in eternal companionship.”

Taking a shaky breath, she felt for the twisted dragon-headed torque she had crafted days ago, preparing for the part in which she would pledge herself to him. “...May they journey forth together in this life and the next, in prosperity and poverty, and in joy and hardship.”

For better or worse, Sigrid thought distractedly as his thumb traced over her knuckles.

Erandur turned to Farkas and Carlotta. “Do you, Farkas of Jorrvaskr, warrior of the Hall of Companions, take this woman Carlotta Valentia to be your wife? Bound together in love, now and forever?”


Turning to Carlotta, who blushed prettily, he repeated the question, changing the names. “Yes, I do. Now and forever.”

They exchanged arm bands under the watchful gaze of Whiterun and the priest of Mara. Farkas slid a beautifully carved ivory bracelet upon her arm. With tears in her eyes, Carlotta returned the favor and gifted him a hammered quicksilver bracelet that had Nord runes stamped upon it.

Good choice, Sigrid approved wholeheartedly. She had been with the Imperial when the woman had dithered over which of Fralia’s wares to give her soon to be husband. This one had been the best, and the least fussy. She had good taste.

A frisson of nervousness flip-flopped in her belly as Erandur turned to her and Vilkas.

“Do you, Vilkas of Jorrvaskr, Master at Arms of the Hall of Companions, take this woman...Sigrid Farstrider, Dragonborn and Harbinger of the Hall of Companions, to be your wife?”

“Bound together in love…” his hand suddenly squeezed hers, tightly.

“...now and forever?”
His voice was strong, proud. “Yes, I do. Now and forever.”

Oh gods, her turn. “Do you, Sigrid Farstrider, Dragonborn and Harbinger of the Hall of Companions, take this man - Vilkas of Jorrvaskr, Master at Arms of the Hall of the Companions, to be your husband? Bound together in love, now and forever?”

She could barely speak, over the lump in her throat. Oh damn it. She was going to cry. “I really do.” As her mistake was greeted with a whisper of laughter, Sigrid blushed all the way to her crown as her husband smirked. “I mean...yes. I do. Now and forever.”

Hardly even hearing the priest as he continued talking, she almost jumped as Vilkas slid a bracelet carved from mammoth ivory upon her arm. Holding it up, she marvelled at the even, delicate patterns that had been rubbed with ink, to bring the designs out in stark relief against the yellow-white of the tusk. It was an amazing piece of art, and she bit her her lip shyly as he smiled down at her.

Removing her own offering, she was gratified to see his eyes widen as she placed the twisted open bracelet onto his bare wrist. She had worked for a full afternoon to craft the tiny dragon heads that topped the twisting spiral of steel, and it was adjustable for comfort. He treated her to an even wider grin, his teeth glinting in the light as she swelled with pride beneath his clear admiration for her work.

The Dunmer priest’s rich crimson eyes wrinkled as he smiled widely. “Then under the authority of Mara, the Divine of Love, I declare these couples to be wed!”

Feeling her face fairly split with a grin as she struggled to keep her eyes wide open, preventing the tears from spilling down her cheeks, she listened as Erandur continued… “I present to each couple these matching rings, blessed by Mara's divine grace. May they protect each of you in your new life together.”

As each couple took the rings and slid them upon their fingers, Sigrid dared to peek at her new husband’s face. It was a glorious wreck of emotion, his silvered eyes fairly searing into hers as she stood, enraptured. “...And may I remind you of the never ending love and commitment you have both promised today. Like these rings and armbands you have exchanged, may these covenants be unbroken and unbreakable.”

“You may kiss, in front of the gods and these witnesses, to seal the union.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could barely make out Farkas as he bent Carlotta almost double, eyes closed as he savored the mouth of his trembling bride in white. Feeling almost hyper-aware, with her heart fairly pounding out of her chest, Sigrid turned to Vilkas.

His hands left hers to slide up her arms, one hand grasping her shoulders as the other lifted her chin. She closed her eyes, those damn tears finally flowing down her cheeks as she felt his warm lips slant over hers, branding her forever his.

Lost in the moment as his arms slowly crushed her to him, her crown tilted askew as she gave as good as she got. Arching against him, she parted his mouth and glided her tongue against his. Rewarded with a rough gasp, she could dimly hear cheering and shouting somewhere far away, as she lost herself in that kiss.

Breaking free from one another, she realized she wasn’t alone as she burned with happy embarrassment. Vilkas had flushed a deep red beneath all that warpaint; and as he took her hand once more, they were surrounded by smiling faces as hands clapped their backs and cries for their good health and happy union were called out.
Smiling like idiots, they stayed close to Farkas and Carlotta as they were surrounded, hugged and kissed by loving friends and family, shaded by the far branching arms of the sacred tree.

Bound in love, now and forever.

********

Hours later, Sigrid was glad she had foregone breakfast.

The music, once started, had not stopped once that day. Skalds drummed, played and sang as dancers twirled and stomped, the circular patterns twisting and twining as everyone took their turn on the open floor of Dragonsreach.

She had originally thought their double wedding to be a small affair; maybe a few dozen people crammed into the smoky dining hall of Jorrvaskr. Perhaps in the training yard, with borrowed tables accommodating their guests, where they could get drunk and maybe dance a bit before turning in for a well deserved rest.

Damn, had she underestimated badly. Not taking no for an answer, Jarl Balgruuf had insisted on hosting the Dragonborn’s wedding, courteously inviting Farkas and Carlotta as well, to be held in the vast recesses of Dragonsreach.

The main hall had been decorated for the occasion, with wildflower strung garlands wrapped around the huge banisters, trailing along the carpets on the floor. Everyone had hunted for whatever spring blooms were available, and she grinned to see Athis plop a spring crown upon Njada’s head with a stolen kiss.

By the time the couples reached the great hall, the mammoth steaks and ribs had been roasted and smoked to perfection. Her mouth fairly watered when she smelled the spread that had been laid before them; stacks of loaves of bread, cheese wheels in all shapes and varieties sat next to trays of fish fillets, tureens of soup and more varieties of meat than she knew even existed. Bowls of apples, berries and grapes were spaced along the trestle tables at intervals, and she nearly hopped in place, wanting to try everything.

The best, by far was the mammoth steak. As they sat at table, graciously accepting the constantly refilled mugs of ale and mead, all she could do was try very hard not to smear grease all over herself as she devoured the rich fatty meat. Farkas loaded her plate with baked potatoes and grilled leeks, securing some of the ribs for his new wife. The Dragonborn grinned as she noticed Carlotta looking slightly green at the almost bloody slab Sigrid was digging into.

“Okay. I will admit - this was worth it. Mammoth is amazing.” She spoke as she managed to swallow the remnants of her second steak.

Vilkas laughed, clear and happy. “I’m glad to hear that you got at least something you liked out of this day, so far.”

Choking, she carefully wiped her mouth and turned to him, as he chuckled to himself and cut his own meat, which had been so seared that it was nearly black. “That’s not fair and you know it. How was I to know you were going to spend a fortune for this hairpiece, here?” She tapped the ebony crown, eyes narrowing slyly.
“Besides.” She daintily wiped her mouth, lips quirked in a knowing grin. “The only present I really care about gets to be unwrapped, later.”

He nearly dropped his fork and knife at the look Sigrid gave him, his wife sauntering away to chat with Carlotta who already looked tired from the excitement of the day.

Well. His mind stuttered, kept repeating the words his wife had whispered. Unwrapped later. Huh.

Pretty sure he was still grinning like a fool when she pulled him by the hand into the cheering circle of dancers, grabbing her long trailing skirts with one hand as he swung her laughing in the midst of their friends and countrymen.

Later.

*****

“I hope you didn’t drink too much tonight, because this is our ride out of here.”

Leaning his head back, Vilkas struggled to keep his mouth shut as Odahviing circled lower, landing with a heavy rasp of scale and wing upon the repaired porch of Dragonsreach.

“Drem yol lok, Odahviing. Glad you could make it.” Sigrid stepped forward, her face still flushed from hours of dancing and feasting. He felt a bit queasy himself, now that he realized what the night had led to. Oh gods. Please say we’re not flying dragon back, after all that mead and...and dancing and eating. Fuck no.

“We’ll be flying on Odahviing’s back to a...surprise location.” Smiling, Sigrid suddenly looked worried. “Are you alright, love?”

Sweat popped out upon his brow. “Uh…”

This was not quite what he had pictured when his new wife began whispering to him as they danced, teasing him with her veiled plans for the evening. Farkas had already ushered Carlotta away for the night. They had loaned the new couple Breezehome for the next week as a sort of ‘honeymoon’ get away (why that term meant what it did, he would never know) and Sigrid had answered all his questions about what their vacation involved with a sly wink and deflected responses.

But shit, he was far too tanked to ride dragonback and not vomit all over his lovely new wife. Oh, this was bad.

“Lost hin kendov laagus nalkun? Vankar do gaan, aalkos?” The air rumbled with Odahviing’s amusement.

The Dragonborn rolled her eyes, hissing through her teeth as responded. Vilkas tried to ignore the churning of his gut as he bit his lip, completely lost at sea in this conversation. “Tolro nid do hin maarahmik! Dreh ni wahl zey horvutah hi het ontzos.”

The red dovah tilted his head in response, still purring in that bass growl.

“Whatever.” She turned to Vilkas. “Don’t worry. Tonight’s trip won’t take very long at all.”
It took long enough.

He managed to hold in the imminent eruption of everything he had eaten and drunk, until they landed with a heaving lurch south of Lake Ilinalta somewhere in a forested clearing.

“Oh dear,” he heard Sigrid mutter as he shakily descended from the dragon’s scaly back and made his way to the nearest tree.

He managed to ignore Odahviing’s booming laughter as he threw up everything. Gasping, he slumped against the tree he was practically hugging as he realized Sigrid was stroking the hair back from his forehead. Vilkas realized she was speaking to him. “...-sorry I didn’t realize. I’m not a big fan of mead, unless it’s the spiced stuff. I should have known, since you’ve never rode dragon-back before that this would be a problem. Oh, damn it all to Oblivion.”

Embarrassed, he reached for something, anything to wipe his mouth with. A length of linen suddenly appeared, with a waterskin. Wiping himself off, he gratefully swished out his mouth as his woman thoughtfully left him alone.

Cleaned up and grumbling, Vilkas managed to stumble blearily towards the clearing they had landed in. He stopped, taking in the sight with a sudden, new appreciation as the dragon took off, still chortling to himself.

They had arrived at a tidy little cabin, roughly timbered in the old way. The sinuous lines of bears, wolves and dragons, with arched wings and long spiked tails, were engraved into the arched door frames. Flames burned merrily in the goat horn sconces, and Vilkas felt a sudden queer sensation as he looked around at the trees, the rocks, the sky.

“Where are we?”

Hidden in the dark, he could barely make out her smile. “Come on. Follow me inside.”

It was as welcoming as the exterior had been. With short, practiced movements with a tinder box, Sigrid bent over the firepit and soon a warm glow enveloped the room as she stepped back, her face alight.

“This...was something that came as a surprise to me, actually.” She spoke as though deep in thought, as she walked around the cabin. He looked at her, tracking her movements as her fingers touched the shelves, the solid table and chests, even running idly over the fur pelts that covered the wide carved marriage bed. “Does any of this seem familiar to you?”

He had to think about it for a moment; his head was still pounding from their trip. “Somewhat. I’m not sure. What should I be looking for?”

Sitting on the bed with a gusty exhale, Sigrid patted the bed. He gladly sat down next to her, gritting his teeth as the world spun. Damn it all, he would be worse than useless tonight. At least he could pull himself together enough to give her - his new wife, god damn it - pleasure.

“Back when this...was all a game, you remember? There was something in it called Hearthfire.” She patted his arm distantly, her eyes looking inward to another place and time. “It was my favorite. Building your own little paradise in the woods, farming, raising livestock...definitely a bit of escapist fantasy. It wasn’t until I spoke with your parents, in Sovngarde -” his throat suddenly went dry with
remembrance - “...that I realized that this place...Windfell farm? It was what I used to call Lakeview Manor.”

“This was your home. Yours and Farkas, when you lived with your parents Thadrig and Gydda. I’ve had it repaired and cleaned up, as a gift to you. A repayment of Breezehome, since that was such a wonderful surprise. And this is far more private...it can be a home away from home.”

A moment passed as she took his hand, holding it tightly as he looked around.

He remembered.

...Sticky. He was completely sticky, head to toe as he and his bigger twin got into the sealed crocks of beeswax and honey that Ma had carefully stored in the shed, not far from the apiary where the bees droned in their fields of wildflowers. Crowing at their bravery, Vilkas swatted at the big fuzzy bees with one honey coated hand...only to be stung once, twice. “Maaa!”

Farkas, his mouth sealed almost shut with wax and honey, managed to chew and swallow. “Shushh, she’ll be mad!”

He didn’t care. Ow ow ow, this hurt! “Maaa, help! Help!”

A sudden rushing of footsteps. And suddenly, strong arms held him up.“Ugh, Vilkas! Farkas! What have you boys done!?”

Sniffling, he held out his stung arm as he stuck his other hand into his mouth, sucking at the golden stickiness as if honey banished pain. He whimpered around his hand. “H-hurts!”

A sigh. “Of course it hurts, little cub.” Burying his face in her neck, he felt his hitched breathing begin to slow, as her hand rubbed slow, smooth strokes over his back. “Farkas, you come along too. Time for a bath, you mucky little Forsworns.”

“Aagh, nooo! Don’t wanna bath!”

Giggling as Ma hoisted him up almost to her shoulder, Vilkas felt the air breeze by as Ma raced after Farkas, who had stripped himself naked again and was currently streaking for the cow stables; his favorite hiding place. If Farkas managed to cover himself in straw and cow dung, he knew Ma would shriek even louder. “Farkas ruuun!” He screamed with joy. At least one of them would escape punishment today.
“Shor’s sake…” His mother huffed as she ran. “I’m going to give you such a wallop, boy!”

But she never did. After a thorough bath, Pa set them down later and gruffly forced them to apologize to Ma for the stolen sweet treat. The whole thing was forgotten as later, they were cuddled by the fire as Ma and Pa sang to them. Something husky and comforting that wound itself like a knot in Vilkas’s ears, until he drifted to sleep, warm and drowsing back to back with his twin...

And with a deep pang of resentment somehow mixed with gratitude, Vilkas realized he was crying. Shit, when had he ever fucking cried in front of anyone?

Making no sound, he slumped against Sigrid as she pulled them both down to the bed. He breathed against her neck, wrapping his arms around her as the tears slowly ended, drying against his cheeks.

“So, you remembered something.”

Yes. As he looked around, Vilkas suddenly realized he knew this place. Slowly, as they got up and dragged off their wedding clothes and armor, he told her things. Things like the deep depression in the wall near the door; that had been caused by Farkas flinging the cooking cauldron when his mother failed to provide lunch in a timely manner. Lifting a plank of wood on the floor, he pointed out the scratch marks he had made, laboriously scrawled as a boy, into the wood with his father’s stolen dagger.

Feeling the pressing weight of weariness come over him, he forced himself awake. “Sigrid...thank you. This has been quite, er, the surprise.” And he found himself, against all belief smiling with her, as she chuckled at the predicament they found themselves in.

“Raincheck?” She arched an eyebrow, looking at him as he returned her look with puzzlement. “Oh, right. Well, that’s slang for ‘shall we continue this later?’”

Vilkas was silent, thinking. “It’s a poor repayment of your gift. Fuck, the very night of our wedding...I don’t mind -”

She cut him off with a finger to his lips. “Shh. It’s really okay. I’m probably as tired as you are. Well…” she amended that as he rolled his eyes. “Okay, I didn’t slay a mammoth. But I’ve been keeping busy as well.”

Stripped to their small clothes, she tucked herself inside the crook of his elbow and sighed as he curled around her. “Raincheck? I promise, I have something really amazing planned for tomorrow. You will love it. It’s...not as sentimental as tonight was, but it will definitely relax us both.”

Nearly asleep, Vilkas managed to slur out a response, his body relaxing by increments against the layered furs. “Agreed. Raincheck.” She sighed happily, wrapping herself against him.

Entwined in each other, they fell quickly into a deep sleep.
Not gonna lie - my husband and I were both grinning like total idiots the entire day of our wedding. Although we didn’t have the problem Sigrid and Vilkas ahem...encountered.

Dovahzul translations:

Lost hin kendov laagus nalkun? vankar do gaan, aalkos? Has your warrior tired already? A lack of stamina, perhaps?

Tolro nid do hin maarahnik! Dreh ni wahl zey horvutah hi het ontzos. That's none of your business! Don't make me trap you here again.
Writhing against him, she gasped as he pushed. “Harder!”

“Fuck, woman I’m pushing in as hard as I can!”

She bit her lip. “Don’t...think...it fits…”

Gripping more tightly, sweat popped out on his brow. “We’ll make it fit! Wider, woman!”

Both warriors gasped, as suddenly the rock they had been wedging into the cracked stone managed to crack open the spring. Clear, pure water began to gush, where before there had only been a trickle.

Flopping down on the sand, Sigrid wiped at the strands of sweaty hair clinging to her forehead. “Whew! At least we have water now.”

Less inclined to roll around on the gritty beach, Vilkas stared, soaking in the sight of Sigrid wearing practically nothing but smallclothes as she scooped up handfuls of water and drank thirstily. Droplets of water rolled down her chin, her neck, tracing wet lines between her cleavage. Legs that had been burned and were slowly browning in the sun slid in the white sugary sand as she swallowed. “Oh, that is so good.”

Two days. It had been two days of disappointed hopes for Vilkas. Riding dragon back was an...interesting experience, to say the least. They had awakened the morning after their wedding to the sound of Odahviing singing draconic love songs (Shor’s bones, he thought their speech sounded awful enough. Singing was an entirely new form of torture). As they packed, forgoing armor in favor of lighter layers of clothing Sigrid explained what she had planned for the rest of their week off from responsibility.

It had sounded marvelous, at first. Four days of lounging on a deserted island in the tropical seas off of Hegathe, in Hammerfell. An island that had been vetted by Odahviing as completely uninhabited, wild and beautiful. The perfect place to enjoy some much-needed alone time.

Trouble was, it had taken two full days of flight on Odahviing’s back. Riding the air current that would cut days from their journey, bobbing up, and down...and up, and down…

Sigrid teased him, as they had camped that first night in the mountains lining the great Alik’r desert, that he had now coined the term ‘dragonsick’. Too miserable to argue, he had spent the entire night trying not to heave up any more of their water rations, as Sigrid had hiked off, taking in the sights of the majestic dust-brown landscape rimmed in a golden sunset.

That had been the first day. The second day, as Odahviing wheeled and turned, crossing the
neverending dunes dotted with green oases, Vilkas fared a bit better. He managed to keep his seat, clinging tightly to Sigrid who sat fully at ease in front of him.

With every dramatic plunge, she would raise her arms and scream “wooooh!” and shout encouragement to Odahviing, who always roared back in appreciation. He held on like grim death, eyes clamped shut. Vilkas was pretty damn sure the fucking dragon dipped more than was necessary, just to feel him squirm.

The only highlight of traveling this way had to be the close contact he enjoyed with his new wife. Usually Odahviing flew fairly high, sometimes passing through fields of clouds that misted their faces with cool wetness; pleasant after the beating sunshine of Hammerfell. But when the dragon skimmed mere hundreds of feet above the dunes, they shed off their outer protective layers, and he could finally feel her.

All her softness, her curves pliant beneath his hands, crushed between his thighs. The woman had finally gained back some plumpness after months of rest and regular meals. Considering how her ass ground against his cock with every rise and fall of dragon wings, Vilkas heartily approved, and tried to bide his time in this realm of Oblivion until they could land.

At which time, he thought darkly, he would make her pay dearly for all of the agony of suppressed desire she had put him through.

As they flew high over Iliac Bay, passing the cities of Sentinel and Hagathe they could see the sea stretching before them.

Vilkas had visited the North Sea a few times in his life. Had sat and watched white capped waves of silver crash upon rocky cliffs. Had walked along the monstrous glaciers and ice caves that emanated a cold, blue light. To be sure, Skyrim’s northern border of the Pale had a beauty unmatched by anything else.

But this was an exotic, almost alien paradise. The air that mingled with salt spray was so dry that his lips grew more chapped the longer they flew along the sandy coastline. The ocean disappeared into the west; the most brilliant azure blue he had ever seen. It nearly hurt his eyes, the brightness of the colors here, and he blinked against the wind, the sand and salt. As they soared closer to their destination, he could see the tall, wavering trees so strange in their form...all trunk, with bunched fronds of leaves and odd fruits.

“Hey, coconuts!” Sigrid had laughed, so free and happy. “Oh, I’ve got to find some limes somewhere. This is just perfect.”

Finally, they landed with a jittery thunk on a small island swallowed by the sea. Just as the sun was setting, casting the island in a golden haze of red gold clouds and shimmering waves that lapped soothingly against the shore. It looked like the paradise she had spoken of at length, and he felt a thrill of anticipation, at being alone with her at last.

Vilkas could make out striations of light and dark, surrounding the coast. “Oh, I’ll bet those are coral reefs!” Sigrid had responded with glee, when he had pointed them out. He listened in mild fascination as she extolled the beauty and variety of the many fish that probably swam there, how the corals were actually tiny animals that built up and deposited skeletons of bone that remained long after the creature's’ death. Something similar to her previous world that she had experienced, he gathered.

Vilkas didn’t really care. He just wanted to get off the fucking dragon.
He slithered off with a muffled oath of pain, as he helped lift Sigrid off the dragon’s back. She hopped down, grinning with that ever-brimming optimism of hers as she took in the sights. “Oh, Odahviing! Daar los tozeinvu! Just perfect!”

Well, it had seemed perfect. As they had bid the dragon farewell and set up their tent, laying out their bedrolls and starting a fire, it seemed pretty damn amazing. The breeze hovered at that point between warm and cool, laden with a salty mist that felt pleasant after so much sun. He had stood there, just holding his wife as she sighed in what seemed like pure bliss.

Too bad that damn dragon had punctured their water bags with his claws as he held them, that last day of travel. It had led to a fairly dire predicament, as the sun set completely and they were without any liquid refreshment at all.

Too dry to take a chance on any of the strange, multicolored fruits Sigrid had found on her walk down the beach, they eventually lay down on their bedrolls and tried to sleep. Thirsty, sunburned, and in an ill humor, Vilkas was in no mood to make love.

The next morning greeted them with a heat wave that nearly knocked him off his feet.

What was supposed to be a relaxing post-wedding getaway had turned into a struggle to survive, and Vilkas remembered that Odahviing would not return for four more days.

Four days of steaming, scorching sunshine that burned their pale skin. Used to the far north and the almost omnipresent cover of clouds, Vilkas had not been prepared for how draining even a slight sunburn could be. Sigrid had taken a chance, Shouting her healing Thu’um and slathering herself first with the inner juice of a fleshy leaf-like plant that she referred to as aloe. She tried it on her legs, and then when she did not immediately break out into a rash, she carefully smeared it on the worst of his burns. It was almost as soothing as the periodic dips he took in the clear, blue waters. As the first day crawled on, Vilkas couldn’t help but feel completely out of his element.

Surrounded by water they could not drink, seafood that was foreign (perhaps poisonous, as she held him back from catching a brilliant orange sea snake) and fruit they dare not eat without water, in case it made them sick. Some provider he had turned out to be.

To the Dragonborn’s credit, she had tried. Really tried to alleviate the hopelessness of their situation. Gathering the boughs of palm fronds for the fire, he watched her climb to the tops of those pliant trees in search of - fuck, what had she called them? - coconuts.

After she had opened several with her knife, only to find them green and completely lacking in water, Sigrid had stomped up and down the beach swearing up a storm. They had brought a few supplies with them, like the basics with which to start a fire, or make a shelter. The Dragonborn had even brought fishhooks in the hope that they might catch some of the sea life to add variety to their meals. But actual fish seemed scarce; when they waded in the shallows it was far more common to see tiny worms, sea stars and those damn snakes than anything they could boil or bake.

It had taken them another day to discover the trickling spring of fresh, pure water bubbling up from a broken rock, about a fifteen minute’s walk inland. Victory, at last. Even if it was a small one. Still, they had cracked it open even wider to better obtain the life giving liquid. This find guaranteed their survival, if not immediate comfort. There was still the matter of food to contend with.

But now, as they carried the mended waterskins brimming full of fresh water back to their camp on the beach, Vilkas suffered from thirst of another sort.
Sigrid had, to his delight and utter bewilderment, packed the strangest item of clothing he had seen on her yet. And that included the ridiculous garment she had been roped into wearing (he still winced, remembering) to sneak into the Thalmor Embassy.

“It’s a bikini.” She twirled on the white beach, her feet leaving soft imprints in the damp sand that filled as the tide rushed in. “What do you think?”

Clad in small clothes himself, he stood there almost at a loss for words.

His wife was wearing the smallest triangles of translucent white linen wrapped around her full breasts, threaded onto a cord that tied at her back. A triangle of the same fabric barely covered her sex (he could see the outline of hair, like nothing covered it at all) and was also tied on either side of her hips in a little bow.

His skin prickled with an inward swell of heat as he thought of just how damn easy it would be to walk over, pull on those dainty strings and -

“Wait. Is this something you would wear, back in the Dakotas?”

“Er…” She stopped twirling, as the truth hit Vilkas suddenly like a sledgehammer.

“Shor’s bones. Tell me you didn’t wear this in public. In front of other men.”

She bit her lip fetchingly and reached up to play with her hair, which had been piled atop her head in a messy bun. “Well…”

Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes and groaned. “How the fuck did Bryce not rip those men apart? Or even, for that matter, allow you outside in such…ugh.”

“Now wait just a second -”

“God damn it, woman.” He fisted his hands in his hair, feeling his ire rise as he thought of all the men who had probably seen his wife bared just like this, ripe for the taking. “What is wrong with your world?”

Seeing how he wasn’t listening, his wife growled and stomped up to him. And as she glared at him with those eyes, so fucking green…

...his breath left him in a surprised rush as she kicked him flat on the beach, whereupon she sat on him.

Her sand dusted ass ground into the fading sunburns on his chest, and he grit his teeth as she clamped her knees around him. Her voice was calm, as Vilkas seethed, struggling to ignore just how naked and yet not-naked she was, right on top of him after so fucking long without sex.

“Alright. I get that there are going to be some cultural issues between us. But,” Sigrid pulled the stick that bound her hair out, shaking her head until the mass of it fell in waves around her shoulders.

“...You’ve got to admit this is a pretty shitty start, if you are going to hold over my head the things I did before our life together. I can’t help that I wore a bikini in the past.”

“Granted,” She looked down at him from her perch, as she straddled his chest and arched an eyebrow. “...I haven’t had a smooth, un-stretchy stomach for quite a few years. So this is a bit novel for me. And I wanted to surprise you, but like everything about this trip it has monumentally backfired, and -”
Fuck, he was so tired of talking so much. About everything.

So he kissed her, instead.

She tasted like salt and the mineral water she had drank as she squeaked against his lips, fighting to free herself. Probably to keep talking.

He didn’t let her.

Wrapping his hands in her hair as he pulled her even closer, she had started kissing him back until they both gasped as they were swamped by a sudden wave.

“Ack! C-cold!” Sigrid panted quickly, still held captive by his hands. Feeling the water surge back into the sea, Vilkas blinked the salt and sand from his eyes as he looked at his wife.

She looked right back, still with that stubborn slant of her jaw as she huffed at him. Nearly naked, he noticed with glee as the pitiful scraps she called a bikini had become soaked through, and no longer provided even a flimsy attempt at protection. Her nipples poked out against the translucent linen, like round pearls.

“You know, wife…” he drawled, noting with an inward smile that she still looked suspicious. “I don’t think I like your choice of swimwear.”

Striking with the speed acquired through years of military training, Vilkas tore off the strings that held the clinging top fastened to her breasts. As she eeped, automatically covering her breasts with her hands, he did the same thing to that ridiculous triangle on the bottom that was fooling no one.

“I’m sorry if you feel differently.” He continued in a rational tone of voice, as she struggled wildly to retie the strings. Picking her bodily up, he heaved her over his shoulder and waded into the sea, to a chorus of feminine shrieking. Shivering as the cold enveloped them, he grabbed her more firmly, then threw her in the water.

There. That should do it. Grinning in triumph, he watched as she emerged, spluttering for air and bereft of any scrap of that bikini thing. It had washed away in the pull of the tides, and he took in the glorious visage of his lovely wife, stark naked and snarling with anger as she took wide, ungraceful steps through the sea as she tried to reach him…

“And you’re right. I shouldn’t hold anything you did in your world against you.”

Oh, she was fucking pissed. He tried to keep his face calm, his voice reasonable as he prepared for the glorious fight that was to come.

“...So, let’s just say that I’ll be in charge of planning our ‘vacations’ from now on.”

She tackled him. He let her, a grin wreathing his face as she tried to pin him in the shifting damp sands. He avoided her attempts to grapple him with ease, as their wet skin slid against one another, making it difficult for her hands to grasp securely enough.

He let her punch him once, twice, before he picked her up again. Standing, he started chuckling as she began calling him every foul name in the book, pounding his back with her fists. She must not have been that upset though. She hadn’t Shouted anything at him yet.

“...arrogant fuckwad chauvinistic skeever-shit for brains! Put me down!”

Keeping hold of her this time, he dragged them both underwater and let them sink to the bottom.
Opening his eyes, he held his breath and squinted against the sting of saltwater. They were just deep enough down that the currents did not cloud the water, and it was beautifully clear here. Flashes of tiny schools of silverfish flitted through branching coral, like birds flocked in trees. Her eyes, completely green now, were open wide, as bubbles burst from her mouth.

Gods, she felt so good in his hands.

He stuck out his tongue at her.

Feeling her suddenly lurch with a bubbling laugh, he smiled, seawater filling his mouth as he raised them both out of the water. Making a face, he spit out the stuff. Ugh.

He held her against him as she quieted, the tide pushing and pulling against them as the sea slowly moved closer to the shore. Gradually, she stood still and quiet in his arms.

Considering how best to say even more damn words, Vilkas just went for it. “I’m sorry I overreacted.” She jerked in surprise, looking up at him through the nest of sopping wet strands.

Gently removing a thick tendril of damp hair from her eyes, she blinked as he leaned forward and kissed her, tenderly. Pulling away, he sighed as she licked her lips. “...it was a nice ba-nini.”

“Bikini.”

“Whatever.” Rubbing his thumbs against the curve of her waist, he wiped some sand from the divot of her belly button.

Looking around, he realized the sun had started to set. They were facing the westward side of the island, so they had a full view of the burning blaze as it slowly sank into the dark wine-red sea.

“And Sigrid...this place is something else.” He started laughing as reluctantly she began to giggle, as well. “...It’s not your fault the damn dragon ruined our waterskins.”

“...Or that I was completely underprepared for how ‘deserted’ the island was?” Her voice was so dry, he could have toweled them both off with it.

“Yes, that too.” Grabbing her hand, he urged her towards the shore. “Come on. Let’s see if we can find something to eat, at least.” Still holding hands, they slowly made their way back to shore.

Suddenly she yelped and hopped, splashing again as she submerged. Thinking fast, Vilkas picked her up and grabbed the crustacean that had nipped her right on the toe.

“Ow, ouch, damn that hurt!” Sigrid grabbed her foot as he lifted the thing by its shell, peering at it. If he disregarded the brilliant blue-violet hue, it might have been the prettier cousin of the mud crabs he was so accustomed to in his homeland.

“Hmm. Think we can eat it?”

Sitting down butt naked near their fire, Sigrid sighed. “Probably. We’ve already got some water boiling. Might as well throw it in, and eat it with any bananas we can find. I think I saw a tree somewhere...ooh! and coconut hearts.”

“I thought a ba-nini was a swimsuit?”

“Banana. A banana is a...well. I’m not going to describe it right now. I’m still mad at you. Do you have any idea how long it took me to sew that bikini?”
“Thank you. I certainly enjoyed ripping the damn thing off.”

***********

It was the work of only a few moments to catch nearly a dozen of the clicking blue crustaceans. The sea crabs, when boiled in salt water and eaten with the sweet meat of the coconut, were actually quite filling. No bananas though. Damn.

All they needed now was some tequila. Maybe some guacamole and chips?

Sigrid moodily pushed her toes through the sand. Who the hell was she kidding? Her perfectly planned honeymoon was a disaster.

They were currently laying on their bedrolls, trying to pick sand out of places it didn't belong. She scratched some grains of sand out of her ear, noticing that her husband was surreptitiously still spitting sand. Yeah. Great honeymoon, Sigrid, she thought with an inner sigh. Make him barf, then burn. Starve him, and then start a fight.

At least their depressing situation had not stopped their idle banter. The handsome sonofabitch was fun to talk to, when he wasn’t armed.

"So, say a dragon went up against a herd of mammoths. Who would win?"

Vilkas finger combed his hair, pulling out a strand of seaweed. "How many mammoths? And what type of dragon?"

“Never mind. Alright...three frost trolls and Aela, naked with no weapons?"

“Fuck, she'd tear them apart. Without transforming.”

Gradually their conversation dwindled as the night went on. She chanced a look at his face as they lay on their stomachs, watching the sea heave and sigh against the sand. His face was introspective, closed off. The sunburns he had been healing from for days were beginning to darken, just enough that even without warpaint his eyes seemed ghostly. Almost too light, as his pupils retracted as he watched the driftwood dancing in flame.

She had royally screwed things up. First the dragon ride that made her husband hurl (and who would want to have sex, after being nauseated for days?) Then the massive disappointment of having no water and very little food. Sigrid had thought for sure that Odahviing would be a good judge of how much wildlife would hang around the island. She had forgotten that dragons like Odahviing usually fished for larger prey, far out at sea. Not hunting in the shallows for their meal, praying nothing was poisonous.

And then, she thought with a grimace, there was the bikini debacle.

She honestly wasn’t sure what he had thought, with the crazy turn that conversation had taken. She had literally jumped his bones and yet here they were, not having sex.

It had been a daring endeavor just to craft a bikini in the first place. And god, hadn't Njada given her hell, when the woman had come upon her sewing and realized what the sensual outfit was meant for?
Sigrid felt totally lost at sea. It had been months...months of waiting to be alone. Truly intimate. And here they were, on a gorgeous beach, picking sand out of their hair and coconuts from their teeth.

Some wife she had turned out to be.

"Vilkas." Already regretting her impulse, she rolled over to look at him. He continued staring at the sea. "I'm really sorry for the way this all turned out."

His face remained stony. "So you said."

Biting back a snarky response, Sigrid itched her shoulder. Damn sunburns. "Maybe you should pick our next trip. Is there anywhere you have really wanted to go?" Come on, she thought pathetically. I am literally throwing you an olive branch, here.

His head turned to her, the smallest tilt. "Hmm." His grey eyes were thoughtful.

The silence became almost uncomfortable as he continued pinning her with that stare. Sigrid squirmed, unwilling to break contact before he did. Damn it, she wasn't a whelp to be cowering under his teachings, anymore. Why did she feel so skewered by his glare still?

"Tell you what. I will make you a deal, woman."

It wasn't a question, and the dragon in her raged that he dared; oh, he dared to order her around in anything. As he shifted on the bedroll, the lean muscles in his shoulders bunched. Helplessly, she watched him move, her throat dry again as she saw the cut and flex of his torso slant in a 'v' beneath his ragged shorts. Restraining herself from leaping upon him and simply taking what she wanted, Sigrid chose instead to grind her teeth. She could wait. She was a patient hunter. "What kind of deal?"

When she responded, he suddenly smiled. Sigrid leaned back a bit on her bedroll, honestly a bit afraid.

That had been the most evil smile she had ever seen grace those lips. His grey eyes were cold, merciless in their scrutiny. "Let's play a game."

She swallowed, then spoke. "Alright."

His finger drew circles in the sand next to his bedroll. Slowly, he dragged his hand to her exposed shoulder, lit by firelight. Mesmerized, she watched as he focused on her shoulder, pulling down the strap that held her makeshift tank top up.

"Hmm. You're going to regret agreeing before finding out what it is you've agreed to."

Her throat was drier than her skin. "I trust you."

With that, heat suddenly pooled in his eyes, as his fingers suddenly grabbed her shoulder and pushed her bodily on to her back.

"Hmm. You're going to regret agreeing before finding out what it is you've agreed to."

Her throat was drier than her skin. "I trust you."

With that, heat suddenly pooled in his eyes, as his fingers suddenly grabbed her shoulder and pushed her bodily on to her back.

She made a token struggle, but it was obvious her heart wasn't in it. Vilkas merely looked at her as she lay passively beneath him, weighing something in his mind. "Do you have any idea what a torturer you have been, these last few days?" His voice was conversational, friendly even.

"N-no…"

"Well, I'll tell you. But first, wife, we're going to play a little game. The winner gets to plan the next
trip. The loser, "...damn, he looked almost carnal, with the cruel tilt of his mouth - "suffers the wrath of the winner. Fair enough?"

She was going to self combust. The fire popped and crackled as they remained motionless, staring, waiting for someone to make a move. "What are the terms?"

Placing an arm on either side of her head, Vilkas leaned forward, trapping her in his arms. Her breathing became embarrassingly fast. His muscles were like stones beneath the skin of his arms, uncomfortable as they yielded only slightly to the sharpness of her shoulders.

"Here are your terms," he spoke softly. "No Shouts. I am..." here she almost moaned out loud, as he leaned in, whispering against the shell of her ear. "...going to make you come on my hand."

Suddenly knowing where he was leading with this, she still swallowed heavily as he turned, his lips hardly touching her cheek. "Then, you will come on my tongue."

Oh, she was going to die. It wasn't fair. She held herself completely still, praying he'd have mercy and just skip the foreplay and take her, as his lips brushed hers ever so slightly. His hands cradled her face between them.

She couldn't see, couldn't see anything but the dark outline of her husband, silhouetted by the fire. "Then, I will make you come, riding my cock until you fucking...scream...my...name. " As though he were the one giving into temptation and not her, he captured her mouth with his. She accepted gladly, feeling herself sinking into the sand beneath the bedroll as he carelessly crushed her with his weight.

But what was breathing, compared to this? He pulled away just as she had taken her tongue to the seam of his lips, daring him to let her enter. "...And there's not a damn thing you can do about it. What do you say, wife?" He fixed her with a superior look; though she thought she detected a twinkle in his eye.

She knew what came next. "Bastard. I'm not going to come for you."

Shrugging, Vilkas lifted himself off of her. "Well, that's a shame. I guess we'll just have to spend our next vacation fishing in the swamps of Hjaalmarch, with all the draugr and the vampires and..."

“Alright, alright, let’s not get carried away.” Pulling her neck to the side, she tried to free her arm, to readjust the hair that was pulling at her scalp. He beat her to it, carefully freeing the mass of tangles from underneath her back.

She laid her head back down, pillowed by her hair. He waited patiently for her to answer.

Damn, and double damn. This was going to be a massive blow to her ego, she could tell. Looking him squarely in those cool, judging eyes she forced her face into a sneer.

“Fine. I'll play your game.”

Chapter End Notes

I may or may not have binge watched Naked and Afraid with my husband before writing this. Talk about the weirdest idea for a reality show ever. Plus, the PEOPLE they come up with to suffer for some dubious fame and money...
Höj din Vapen (Raise your Weapon)

Chapter Notes

Let's ramp it up a notch...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnwI7HpnGLY

Oh, this was a *bad* idea.

Once she had voiced her agreement, Vilkas had stood up from their bedrolls which were now completely crumpled and filled with sand. Not saying a word, he threaded his fingers through hers and led her back to the sea.

Shivering as they waded hip deep in the waves, Sigrid decided to take a stand on this, at least. “Hey, um. It’s going to be pretty cold since it is nighttime. So…”

He turned to her, somehow larger in the moonlight. Secunda was completely full tonight, and instead of the ever-present aurora of the north, the skies fairly glowed with stars.

Losing what nerve she possessed in the face of all...this, she swallowed. “Never mind.”

Vilkas tilted his head, as if considering something. “Let’s make an exception, this time. Why don’t you warm yourself with a shout. Then,...” his voice darkened, becoming almost hoarse. “I’ll take it from there.”

Breathe. Just breathe. As his hand tightened in hers, she took a deep inhale, then whispered.

“*Yol toor shul...*”

Heat flared in her belly, struggled to flare out between her teeth as smoke escaped in grey tendrils. Keeping tight hold of her Thu'um, she closed her eyes and allowed it to reverberate within her, thrumming until the water surrounding them was almost bathwater warm.

She hadn’t realized just how tense she had been, whether with the cold or the anticipation of what they were about to do, until his other hand squeezed the bridge of her shoulder and neck.

“Better?” Without waiting for her answer, Vilkas pulled her back against him, facing the sea. His left arm was a bar of steel, pinning her to him as she arched against the wet skin of his chest. Slowly, so *painfully* slow, his right hand dragged against her hip. Feeling his breath ragged against her neck, she took a millisecond to be smug that she wasn’t the only one having difficulty here, when -

- *Oh.* Never quite touching her where she most craved it, his fingers pressed in small circles on both sides of her. Not increasing the pace at all even as she squirmed in his grip, he continued his ministrations, her throat almost trilling as she struggled to hold it in, hold it back.
Light touches. Dragging the tips of his fingers against the cleft of her lips, back and forth in a maddening, unhurried way. Leaving her throbbing sex to rub his thumb on the curve of her hips. Taking time to slowly run his hand along her inner thigh.

Never seeming to worry that she was going to fucking implode, if she didn’t get something, anything that involved more friction -

- Until his left arm let go all of a sudden, almost dropping her forward in the water as he pushed the fingers of his right hand inside her. Almost jumping at the sudden incursion, Sigrid bit her lip and tasted blood as he palmed her, almost grabbing her entire pussy as he rocked his fingers back and forth…

*Shit*. Tight...the tight flush of heat that kept throbbing in such a damned delicious way was driving her fucking crazy, and she nearly lost her footing in the sand when finally his thumb began circling her clit.

Sigrid didn’t care. Didn’t care anymore that she had married an expert torturer who had promised to make her beg. She would beg. She would fucking blow him on his knees, twice a day if he would only stop the goddamn agony and make her see stars.

And somehow he knew. His left hand pushed gently, but firmly on her lower stomach as his hand that was doing such amazing things suddenly pressed in and -

-Riding the cresting wave of pleasure that burst, over and over inside of her, she fell back limply against his chest...until she realized the water around them was fairly bubbling with heat. The man holding her was laughing softly as Sigrid slowed her breathing, consciously silencing the purring rumble that had nearly toasted all the sea life in the area.

“...Damn. I think we’re going to have to come up with something for your, ah, voice.”

Still chuckling, he helped her stumble out of the deeper water to the shallows.

*****

Thankful that it was night so that her burning blush of embarrassment wasn’t quite so obvious, she sat where he bid her, on the sand.

Oh *hell*. That had been too easy. Way too easy to make her come, with just his hands. She felt a curl of nervousness thread through her as she could make out the wicked smile still hovering around his mouth. The tide rushed in against the sand, then pulled away, washing off the sand that crumbled on their legs and hands as they sat. She licked her lips and tasted salt.

“Heeem.” Still not touching her, as the waves slowly rolled against them, Vilkas turned to study Sigrid. She refused to look at him. “What would you say about upping the wager?”

She blew a breath of exasperation. “Well, I don’t know. What else do you want? It seems like you have me right where you want me.” It looked like she wouldn’t be planning any vacations for a good long while.
“Sigrid. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, she looked. Still smiling, his silvery eyes were warm with humor, with a shadow of something else lurking, waiting to surface. “Do you think you can manage to avoid Shouting, if we continue this game?” He tried not to laugh as she almost snorted, rolling her eyes.

“I...I can try. You’re not exactly making this easy, you know.”

His jaw tightened. “Good.”

Turning more fully to her, she saw the tension that tightened his shoulders. With some amazement, she realized that he had been hiding from her. Vilkas was tense. Nearly rigid, in fact, with the challenge of holding back; of mastering her at this little challenge he had set without satisfying himself.

And as she considered the little hints and observations over the past few days that suddenly made a whole lot more sense, a flood of happiness enveloped her.

He loved her. Loved her enough that he would tease her; play a game, to make up for their wedding night. To please his wife who had been so careless and vocal with her despair at everything that had gone so wrong.

Never had Sigrid ever thought she would think the words ‘sweetheart’ and ‘Vilkas’ in the same moment, but there they were.

Hallelujah. A miracle.

She wondered what it would take, to pull away that careful control. To bring them together, with no games or point system or fuss. “What do I get, if I don’t Shout? A trip to Cyrodiil by dragon? I’ll bet Chorrol is beautiful in the fall.”

As she watched him grind his teeth at that suggestion, she felt lighter. More confident. “I could definitely spring for that. I’ve always wanted to see the Imperial City too.”

Touching him shyly, she smiled as he shivered. “What do you want, love?”

Those ice cold eyes bore straight through her. “If you do Shout...I get to take you to Solstheim.”

Her jaw dropped as he managed a smirk at her reaction. “Oh, it’s a place I’ve wanted to visit for some time now. But with your particular...knowledge,” he drawled as she opened her mouth to protest, “…I figure it will be even more interesting. Since you know shit about everything.”

**************

Oh gods no. Damn it. She couldn’t let him win.

Sigrid had very clear memories of playing the Dragonborn DLC. Hermaeus Mora, Miraak, the Standing Stones that enslaved the minds of dreamers, rieklings…

*Hell no*. “You’re on. Go ahead, big boy. Do your best.”

Vilkas raised his eyebrows. “Lay down.”
She was not going to shout. Terrifying Telvanni wizards. Lurkers that erupted from the water. Sentient books that transported you to another dimension. No no no. So not worth it.

Laying back against the pearl-white sands that damply cushioned her, she tried not to shiver as he loomed over her, darkening her view of the stars as the tide surged around them both.

- And was pleasantly surprised to feel him press his lips against hers, gently.

So much better. Sex had many different moods, especially for them, she had learned. Sigrid loved the rough tie-me-up sex, the quickie and angry make-up sex as much as any rom-com heroine, but this...

He lingered, his hands cupping her face carefully as he savored her mouth, opening it with a flick of his tongue as he mimicked the waves, rolling himself inside. Salt and musk and man.

And she accepted him, hands crushing his back, his arms as she enjoyed this part. Damn, but he was a good kisser. The roughness of new beard against her jaw, the feel of hot breath mixing with hers as they struggled to breath against the ebb and flow of their mouths mingling...

...Only for her to be suddenly bereft, as he pulled away and began peppering kisses against her neck, her throat. Blinking, she fixed her eyes on the stars as wet hands covered in sand slowly stroked down her sides, touching the curve of her waist as he took her breast in his mouth and pulled, oh so gently.

God. It was going to be one of those nights, then. She could already feel herself almost leaking, evidence of her arousal washed away and gone as seawater lapped at her thighs. She was so glad he couldn’t smell her anymore, because this attention was already driving her mad.

Gasping, her hair ground into the beach as Sigrid threw her head back and closed her eyes; oh, she felt his cheeks scrape down, lower as the tender skin of her belly jumped as his lips brushed by…

And then a wave suddenly soaked them both.

“Pthpft!”

Seawater poured from her mouth as she spluttered, waving her arms frantically to right herself. Sitting up, she nearly knocked her poor husband over as he wavered between her knees, almost completely soaked in the surf.

Coming down from her cloud, she saw that Vilkas was carefully trying to rub the sand from his eyes, laughing ruefully. “Well, that didn’t quite go as I had planned.”

Feeling suddenly mischievous, she wrapped her legs around his waist. He groaned as she rocked against him, the smallclothes he still wore poor protection against the evidence of his arousal. “We can skip this, you know, and just go straight to the best part.”

Gasping a shaky laugh, he untangled her legs around him. “That’s...that’s not how this works. Damn it, Sigrid. Hands, mouth, cock. I have a plan.”

Feeling him shudder against her with the cold, she scooted closer. Wrapped her arms around his wet, quivering shoulders. “It doesn’t have to be so drawn out.” She whispered softly, feeling a rush of daring as he closed his eyes, almost as if he was trying to block out her words.

Sliding herself against him, she palmed the length of him through his smalls. “Doesn’t have to be so hard. You know, I-”
The sudden tightness of his hands on her hips was all the warning she received before he lifted up on his knees and ground against her, deliberately. Moaning with the slick, hot feeling of need, she fixed her ankles around his hips and arched into him, unashamed, as his fingers dug into her back, pressing her further, deeper onto him.

“Oh please,” she almost sobbed, as she felt the rough fabric of his shorts chafe almost unbearably against her nakedness. “I don’t think I can take your mouth on me, right now, it’s just too much.”

He wasn’t going to listen. With a jolt of despair and rising angst, she saw, saw his face shutter as he tamped down on his need, struggling as he pulled away to master himself and finish what he had started...

That was it. With quickly firming resolve, she decided to take away this obligation he felt, to pleasure her with his mouth. She would look forward to something like that later, much later, when he wasn’t quite so steely hard and taut and waiting under her.

The torment had to end, somehow.

“Sahlos Tolaan Slen,” she hissed in his ear, happily noting the sharp indrawn breath he took as his eyes flared wide, then -

Oh, it was perfect and exactly what she wanted as he struggled to remove his shorts, ignoring the waves as they both floundered, splashing cold saltwater as they tried to get him naked. She would have laughed, had she not been so fucking focused.

The thing about these Shouts, she thought absently as her panting echoed his, was that the feeling was almost infectious. Last time, it had nearly undone her as she had held back, had made good on her promises that evening in Breezehome. No such qualms now...she remained clinging to him like a limpet, arms locked tight against his shoulders as, finally freed, he grasped her hips once more and oh so carefully, as if she were something precious, lowered her down onto him.

How had she thought the water could be so cold? She burned, saw with delight as the effects of her Shout ripped away all pretense and caution from her lover. Nearly wild, he thrust against her, the sounds of flesh hitting flesh almost drowned out by their gasping pants and the rush of water. Long strokes that stoked the heat, flaring the tight snap of electric joy that sparked in her heart as she held herself closer, tighter.

She wished it would never end.

His mouth found her neck and nearly bit down as he came, almost jerking them backwards as Sigrid laughed with the pure joy of it, feeling the warm rush of his seed fill her as it starkly contrasted against the seawater that fought to tame them both.

He held her up against him, still, as not even a moment after his peak she shuddered in turn. Pleasure almost crossing that white hot threshold into pain as Sigrid whispered his name...an invocation to the stars as she slowly pulsed, lost in him as he was in her.

The night was no longer silent. Sounds reappeared in her perception. The still-burning light of the fire near their camp. The clicking of nearby crabs, walking along the shoreline. Water, lapping at their bodies as they simply held each other.
Relaxed and almost boneless with the aftermath, they remained entwined together as long as possible. Enjoying the rush, the relief of being together at last, and she felt his lips smile against the skin of her neck as she sighed, at peace.

Later as they curled up near the dying fires on the bedrolls, she suddenly remembered what it was she had forgotten. Something she dreaded that would shortly come to pass. “Oh, no!”

“What?!” Starting from almost reaching a deep sleep, Vilkas nearly tossed her into the fire as he looked around. “What is it?”

Sigrid lay back on her bedroll. Slowly, methodically, she began hitting her head against the sand. “Stupid, stupid stupid.”

“Sigrid, what is wrong?” Noting his battle-ready posture as he grabbed a rock to throw, Sigrid sighed heavily.

“Shit. We’re going to Solstheim.”

As Vilkas flopped back to their bed with an aggravated groan, Sigrid made a noise of despair, digging the heels of her hands into her eyes. “You don’t know what is waiting there, Vilkas! Morag Tong! A shit load of dragons! Icy crevasses, ash spawn. More cannibal riekling midgets than you can shake a stick at!”

Frowning petulantly as he pulled her against him once more, she huffed. “Next time, I’m just going to let you suffer.”

“Sure. Go to bed, wife.”

“I mean it! You were so tightly wound up...god, blueballs can’t be good for a man.”

“It’s not. And I’m going to forget you ever spoke that...that term for it. Shor’s beard, now I can’t get it out of my head. But I had it under control, woman, until you chose to interfere.” Unsure if he was being sarcastic or not, she leaned forward to peer back at him. His eyes were closed, mouth in a tight line.

Rolling her eyes, the Dragonborn stretched, feeling peevish. “Fine! See if I ever Shout like that again.”

Almost asleep herself, she came awake a moment later as he pressed a kiss to her head. “Mm...I don’t need it. S’nice, though. Go to sleep, love.”

Feeling a little smile emerge at his words, she cuddled up against him.

And slept.

******

“So, how was Hammerfell?”

Pausing with her spoonful of porridge halfway to her mouth, Sigrid blinked dumbly. “Er, what?”

“.Oh.” Staring back at Athis and Njada who waited expectantly, she blushed beneath her newly
freckled tan and looked away. “It was beautiful and awful all at the same time. It’s kind of a long story. You don’t want to hear about it, I’m sure...right?”


The Companions had assembled at table to catch up with the happily married couples. Farkas and Carlotta had announced their pregnancy, to the thrilled applause of all (especially Lucia, who promised she would be the best baby-sitter ever). She had popped out faster than Sigrid would have thought. Oh yes...if she could guess, based on the high morning sickness and size of her, Sigrid would bet on twins for the bride of a twin. She felt the twining claws of both envy and fear for her friend, and tried not to smile as Carlotta ran out to puke, yet again at the smell of hot food.

Vilkas had clapped his twin on the back with an unusually soft look in his eyes, as he whispered something that wiped the uncertainty from Farkas’s face. “Hey Harbinger!” Farkas hollered, interrupting Sigrid again as she tried to finish breakfast.

“Is it true we’re going to Solstheim?”

Aela, who was passing by the table carrying bags for her return journey home, retorted “…I hope so, Harbinger! You would not believe the number of jobs I’ve collected that the Companions need to attend to there.”

The Dragonborn sighed, tossing her spoon aside and reaching for an unopened ale. “Apparently, yes. We are.”

Her husband sat down next to her, with a slow smile spreading across his face. “And we’re going by boat.”

“Yep. Definitely by boat.”
Gå en fin linje (Walk a Fine Line)

- About two years later -

It was Midsummer in Solitude, and Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak was trapped.

Trapped like a skeeve in a hole, he thought grimly, as he wove through the milling throng that filled the Blue Palace for the festivities. The air was fragrant with the scents of freshly baked bread and flowers. Bards strummed lutes quietly in the background, as the wealthiest and most notable citizens of Skyrim gossiped, plotted and danced in the open tiled courtyards and ballrooms.

Not he. The Bear of Markarth was beyond such things, at the moment. What could it be but a sweet lie, if he chose to paste on a smile and pretend to enjoy himself? Nothing had worked out the way he had hoped.

High King Balgruuf the Great sat in state, next to his wife Elisif the Fair. They had been occupied this last week, giving judgement to the many petitioners who traveled far and wide. It was an old custom, to allow the common and coarse to plead their cases before the High King at festival. Balgruuf was patient, listening carefully and delivering verdicts with consideration and humor... even as the line that wound down the staircase and into the courtyard never seemed to shorten, no matter what length of time passed. Elisif, he could see, was less stoic. She fidgeted in her chair, occasionally gracing one of her court with a smile. Young and impulsive still. Ulfric remembered her as if it were yesterday when he had challenged Torygg. It had been evident to all how strongly the woman had sought guidance, first in her steward and then in General Tullius. It was almost insulting to think that this lickspittle of a female had been his opponent for so long. Ah, he thought with mixed satisfaction. How the mighty have fallen. Yet still, she ruled.

The King’s children sat upright in smaller chairs next to their parents. The boredom wafting from them was almost palpable; particularly from the well-fed girl who had a surly look about her. Future royalty of his mighty homeland, he thought with an inward scoff. The former Jarl of Whiterun’s bold proposal of marriage had shocked many who had attended the previous years’ Moot. Particularly Elisif.

It was rather a miracle that the woman had come down from her high dudgeon and accepted the man’s hand in marriage. Yet Ulfric had to admit; a measure of peace had resulted from their union. With a masterful hand, Balgruuf had kept the peace going long after the dragon crisis had resolved itself. Dragons were still seen, and some attacks still occurred. But there had been no more sightings of the great black dovah that the Greybeards believed was Alduin, the World Eater.

Now, it was up to the political leaders of the day to lead the people of Skyrim to further prosperity. To guard against further war, and inner strife.

Ulfric was not certain Balgruuf was the man for the job.

True, he had performed admirably so far. Not outright shunning the Empire after being crowned at the Moot, he did not welcome them warmly either. Trade had been curtailed, yet still existed with the East Empire Trading Company and other subsidiaries. The Thalmor embassy had been disbanded, but agents of the Aldmeri Dominion were still allowed entrance into Skyrim, as long as they abided by the laws. Talos worship was no longer so hidden, so legislated against...though no one quite openly celebrated the God of Men as they should, either.
It was a delicate balance.

Not the move Ulfric would have made. There would have been no mistake; no veiling of intent if he had born the Jagged Crown upon his head. Skyrim was meant to be free, free from elves and the grasping fingers of a dying Empire. He would have posted the banns. Ejected those of the East Empire trading company from their polluted perch; shouted their freedom from the rooftops, had he been given the chance.

But no. Now, there was only shades of grey, when the Stormcloak leader wished more than anything for there to be black and white.

All the Dragonborn’s doing, he thought acidly, as he continued searching the chairs and tables. Damned nuisance. Where was the woman?

Ever since the news had reached him in Windhelm that a Dragonborn had come again to Skyrim, he had paid extensively for any news. Any information that might give him an edge, and perhaps draw this new burgeoning hero to the right side of the rebellion. Shor knew, Skyrim needed all the help they could get against the combined might of the Imperials and the Elves.

He had been thwarted in all attempts to meet the woman, who it was whispered was the Harbinger of the Companions, as well as the slayer of the Dark Brotherhood. Ulfric rather thought it would be impossible to ever wipe out the shadowy cult of assassins. He knew, because he had hired some of the assassins that still hunted the Dragonborn, that anything could be bought for the right price. Considering all he had read about the burning of the sanctuary, however, he had found himself feeling a grudging respect for this stranger.

No...it had not been until that ill-fated peace summit at High Hrothgar that he actually laid eyes on the Nord that did not look like a Nord.

Not imposing, at first. Not at all. At that meeting he had been unimpressed. Dragonborn Sigrid Fastrider was shorter, scarred and rustic despite the Greybeard’s attempts to gentrify her with fine clothing and jewels. He had struggled to understand her words past that flat accent, which had fairly shaken the room once her anger struck a chord with her Thu’um.

If he was being honest with himself, Ulfric thought as he peered down the winding staircases and bumped against Thanes and housecarls, he envied her. Her quick grasp of dovahzul was so unlike his own, painstaking efforts to be taught even a few words of the Thu’um of the Greybeards. Years he had spent, training under the old men, and for what? He respected the Way of the Voice, would not shun it if any of his people declared an interest in learning. But it was not realistic, in these violent days. Peace could only last so long. Someone, somewhere would break when they could bend no further.

And Ulfric Stormcloak would be there that day, waiting to take the lead once more. To save Skyrim from herself.

Lifting a drape to peer inside a small walled off alcove, he surprised a woman breastfeeding a new bairn, attended to by her Dunmer bodyguard. Apologizing, he made to turn away, until the woman called out to him. “Jarl Ulfric, a moment if you please.”

The weight of his fur cloak nearly snagged against the carved stair railing as he stumbled, hardly believing his own eyes. “Dragonborn. Harbinger Sigrid. You’ll forgive me for not bowing.”

She laughed, those brandy-gold eyes lighting up in wry amusement. “Please don’t. Come, sit with me. I’m just finishing up here.”
The Dragonborn was...somehow different, than the last time he had seen her. She still wore a
noblewoman’s finery instead of the dragonscale armor he had heard so much about. The rich dark
blue of the gown suggested an evening sky, and created a lovely foil for her dark reddish brown hair.
She wore nothing save an amulet of Mara and a carved ivory bracelet, her hair bound in a single plait
down her back. With sudden realization, Ulfric noted how smooth her skin had become. The scars
that had marred her lips, neck and hands were gone. Some sorcery, no doubt. A milk drinker’s
choice, to remove such marks of valor.

Perching himself on the small chair, hardly more than a stool, Ulfric watched as she covered her
bodice with quick, practiced movements and sat the child upright and supported in her lap. The babe
blinked sleepily, hazy eyes unfocused.

“I had heard some time ago that you wed. Congratulations are in order...and good tidings for the
birth of your child.”

“As are introductions. Jarl Ulfric, this is my housecarl, Teldryn Sero.” The Dunmer clad in chitinous
armor fairly reeked of ozone and magic, and he returned the slow nod he received. “And...” she
patted the child’s back fondly, as the wee one burped, “...this is my Thadrig. Only a few months old,
but he’s quite tough.” Waving the babe’s chubby fist at him, she spoke in a high squeaky voice. “Say
hi to the grumpy Jarl, Thadrig!”

Raising his eyebrows, Ulfric thought he heard a muffled laugh, but when he looked up the Dunmer
had not moved, his arms still folded. “A pleasure. Dragonborn, there is much we should discuss.”

Her face continued to smile pleasantly. “No, I don’t think so. Not until you rescind the assassins you
have been sending my way.” Tucking the newborn’s swaddling clothes more tightly, she laid the
child against her shoulder and began rocking slightly, her eyes still fixed upon him.

“Then, we can talk.”

Ulfric thought quickly, scanning any scrap of information that may have implicated him as one who
might wish the Harbinger dead. He was not aware that she knew. “I’m sorry, but you must have
mistaken me for someone else. I fight my own battles, Harbinger.”

“Oh, no.” Those eyes hardened into flint. “I’m quite sure. The last one you sent was very talkative.
And honestly, you are wasting your time. My husband is rather enjoying the chance to practice his
bladework, after remaining indoors for so long.”

He heard the whisper of leather and steel, the footfalls, before he turned to see who had arrived.
“Harbinger, is everything well?”

Looking up, Ulfric Stormcloak gazed upon one of the largest men he had ever seen. The man would
have dwarfed Tsun himself. Beautifully crafted steelwork covered him neck to foot, his grey eyes
smeared in smoked warpaint. He was fairly bristling with weapons, with the crossed pommel of a
warblade evident upon his back, as well as several daggers and a belted sword. The stony face was
framed in long spills of dark hair, that were...Ulfric blinked...being yanked at by small child.

Very small. Incapable of speech yet, as the tow-headed little girl babbled nonsensical words and
pointed to the Dragonborn.

“Well hello, Fjora! Farkas, please let me introduce you to Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak of Windhelm. And
yes, all will be well once he leaves. Which he will be doing immediately.”

Feeling a swell of fury rise within him at being ordered so, the Bear stood. Suddenly the tension in
their small section of the palace sizzled, as the bodyguard’s hands suddenly burst into flame, waiting. Ulfric dared not move, as the Harbinger’s shield brother shifted his body weight, pulling the girl child he carried back as he drew steel and held it ready.

All this, and there sat the Dragonborn still, her eyes solemn as she took in Ulfric’s slowly working throat and tight lips. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she cautioned quietly.

He saw red. “You think this peace will last? It will not outlive this festival. Woman, you are meddling in the affairs of your betters. It is you who should stand down. Stand down and give suck to your brat,” Ulfric spat, feeling his jaw clench as Fus Ro Dah yearned to be set free once more.

There seemed to be few who noticed the fight brewing in this quiet corner. The onlookers who had noticed turned tail and fled immediately, as Ulfric mulled over his options.

He could Shout this woman and her spawn into the wall. They would die quickly, bashed against the stones. His problems would be that much closer to being over. How simple; easy to blame it on an accident. A test of the other’s Thu’um in good faith that just went awry.

Or he could retreat, to seek another angle by which to influence this woman to his side. He didn’t have to like her to use her as an ally. This option seemed less optimal, the longer they stood like this. Teldryn Sero’s sharp, grey planed face was sinking in an ever darkening glower, the flames dancing in his hands as the babe began a soft hiccuping cry. The Companion held his sword point steady in a position of defense, his pale icy eyes watching for any change, any minute movement.

Seemingly ignoring the threat he posed, Sigrid Farstrider patted the child’s back, rocking the bairn until it quieted once more. But those eyes were nearly slitted as she watched him; watched Ulfric’s throat almost vibrate with the need. The gripping need to show her how far she had misjudged, how vulnerable even a Dragonborn could be.

It would be nobler, better for Skyrim, if she became a dead hero receiving accolades. Instead of the thorn in his side, advocating such indecisive policies.

More footsteps rasped against the stone, as the three men and one women remained locked in a standstill.

“Ulfric Stormcloak.”

Swallowing one last time (Gods it itched ) Ulfric turned.

The resemblance of the newcomer to the giant warrior was evident. So, Ulfric thought with an inward sneer. This was Thane Vilkas.

The man’s disdain for the trappings of politics had become notorious, and even now he wore a full set of Nordic armor here, at festival in the nation’s capitol. Unlike his brother, he wore his hair unfashionably short, strands falling into those warpaint etched ghost-grey eyes. Eschewing any circlet or sign of nobility that a normal Thane might display with pride, Thane Vilkas carried a daedric warblade almost as tall as he was. A dragonhead torque twisted around his right wrist, the hand almost shaking as he took in the scene before him.

“Hello love. Please let me introduce you to Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak, of Windhelm. He was just leaving.” The Dragonborn spoke pointedly, her eyes awash in good humor once more.

“Well, then.” There was a hissing slide of metal as Farkas sheathed his sword, the Dunmer bodyguard dousing his flames with a feral grin. “Allow me to escort you out, my Jarl.”
Nearly frogmarching him away from the rapidly disappearing Dragonborn and her associates, Ulfric struggled to free his arm from the man’s iron grip. “Enough, Thane. I can find my own way.”

“See that ‘your way’ no longer crosses that of assassins, Stormcloak.” Releasing him, the Thane’s scowl matched Ulfric’s, turning slowly colder as the Jarl of Windhelm lifted his head in a snarl. “If I find any more of your friends creeping into Whiterun to seek my wife and child,” the man continued quietly, “...I will come for you myself.”

With a creak of metal and leather, the Thane spun on his heel and walked at a seemingly unhurried pace back to the Dragonborn. He nodded as fellow festival goers hailed him as a Companion, asked about his family, and generally gave him well wishes.

No such approbation had greeted him. With a startled realization, Ulfric found himself quivering with the desire to escape. He felt the weight of the measure of those icy eyes, as he stood there. The Companions were known for being fair and impartial, but he knew, now. Had stared into an unspoken promise of death. This one would seek his lifeblood.

Peh. Turning to leave out the wide double doors, Ulfric blinked into the bright light that suddenly greeted him. Feeling better, as though a shadow that had been stalking him was now removed, the Jarl walked in sure, sharp strides towards his waiting court who had already prepared for their departure.

He had been willing, more than willing to fight until the tables had turned. A true Nord never backs down, he thought to himself with a self deprecating shake of his head. It seemed his plans would have to be altered, in the meantime.

Shades of grey, indeed.

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It would be so much easier, Vilkas mused, to simply kill the old bastard and be done with it.

As he sat there on the balcony of Proudspire Manor, the newest Thane of Whiterun and erstwhile Companion rocked his newborn son, deep in thought as Sigrid slept the sleep of the dead in her room.

He had asked Sigrid, after that encounter in the Blue Palace, for what felt like the thousandth time if he should not just end the Bear of Markarth and his plotting, once and for all. The man simply could not take a hint. Not even Elisif, with Sigrid working on her, guiding her in talks and dinners that lasted long into the night, had been so irritatingly defiant. The assassins were the last straw; and as he gazed into the sleeping scrunched up face of the son swaddled in his arms, Vilkas vowed to himself that this one’s sleep, at least, would be untroubled. He would find and kill the Jarl of Windhelm himself if any further threats were intercepted.

Even with her new dry-spoken housecarl, for whom Vilkas had rather great respect for after months of fighting aside, he did not trust his wife’s safety anymore in this city. Too many strange smelling packages, filled with complimentary pies or vintages that turned out to be poisoned. Too many sneaking visitors in the night, bearing garrot-wires or blades.

The trip they had taken to Solstheim after their marriage had been just as action packed as Sigrid had
promised. She still would not speak to him about the strange disappearances that had taken place after finding those sinister looking Black Books...only shuddering awake now and then, with dreams she joked about later as being the product of ‘too many Cthulu jokes’.

Whatever that meant, he thought in fond exasperation. There had been only benefits to their trip, in his opinion. He certainly was several bookcases richer in new volumes for them to read. And after months of killing ash spawn, clearing riekling from caves and mead halls, and slogging through dungeon after dungeon, they had amassed quite a fortune.

It didn’t hurt that their Harbinger insisted on stopping to talk to nearly every goddamn person on the island. Thank Shor and Kyne that she had been forced to slow down from a sudden bout of nausea a month after they had lain together in that ice cave. That secluded, perfect night (when Farkas and Aela and the others had been occupied with some riekling infested barrow) he had given into his yearning to show her the eerie blue-green icicles and deep yawning crevasses. To share the beauty of the cold, frozen north in a way that few travelers had seen. Maybe watch the sun set over the glaciers as they rested, finally alone together.

They had made Thadrig that night. Nine months later, safely esconced in Breezehome with Carlotta attending her, she had birthed their first child.

As the babe fussed in his sleep, tiny hands clenching and reaching, Vilkas tucked the fur bunting in more tightly. The little one was finally transitioning from a vaguely potato-like appearance (which his wife, laughing, had reassured him that all newborns arrived with) into someone that vaguely resembled them both. Definitely Sigrid’s mouth and chin. And perhaps, he thought warmly, his and Farkas’s eyes. Passed down to Fjora and Gydda, his new nieces. And now to his son. Though the hazy blue-gray could just as easily transition to brown, Sigrid had warned him.

Too soon to tell.

Vilkas had not been prepared for the incredible changes that fatherhood had wrought. On one hand, he had never felt so content with his place in the world. As he watched over the weeks as Sigrid’s belly grew tighter, firmer in the swell of life that grew within; he marveled at the miracle that was their child. The first time he had awkwardly held the fragile red-faced bairn, who was screaming in rage at the injustice of being ripped from his warm home in the womb, he had been stunned at how surreal...how right it was, to hold this small one born of their love. Sigrid, exhausted from her labor, had gifted him with one of her stunning smiles and had allowed him to cradle her and the boy as she fell asleep. As he watched them both, their peaceful faces lit by candlelight, Vilkas thanked the gods for the family he had been given. He was a father, at last.

And also an uncle. Farkas and Carlotta’s twin girls had been born more than a year ago, and had thrown Jorrvaskr into a state of joyous chaos. Fjora and Gydda were both blonde haired, grey eyed she-devils who had successfully wrapped the Companions around their pudgy fingers. They were just beginning to toddle around, tripping into things, knocking weapons off of tables. Their big sister Mila was just growing into the bloom of young womanhood, and her combined efforts with that of Lucia had been just enough to keep them all from going mad from constant vigilance at Jorrvaskr.

On the other hand, he had never felt such deep, gripping fear. Another soul to care for, to feed and protect from all who would seek to do them harm. Vilkas had just barely adjusted to being married, and now it seemed as though his world had been turned upside down once more by this precious bundle that cried, ate and shat in a never-ending cycle.

The ascension of Olfrid Battle-Born as the new Jarl of Whiterun had resulted in many changes as well. He had been named Thane after repeated summons to discuss battle strategy and to mediate conflicts between the Battle-Borns and an ailing Vignar Grey-Mane. The old patriarch had died
(some said of shock) when the gossip about the elopement of Jon Battle-Born with Olfina Grey-Mane had spread. If nothing else, it had mended the rift between the two feuding families, as they had mourned the old warrior. Their marriage also made the decision to support the canny Olfrid as a suitable replacement for Balgruuf more palatable to the staunchly traditional Nords. Family and honor had been called upon. Jon, and by extension the rest of the Battle-Borns, were now Grey-Manes in the only way that mattered.

Vilkas did not care overmuch for the posturing, the carefully crafted words and games nobles were forced to play. But if he looked at it like a game of strategy, as Sigrid had told him once, then the challenge of tracking the flows of conversation, of shifting loyalties and influence became much easier to invest his interest in. The title sat uncomfortably, but Thane he was. He would do it honor by trying his best, though he feared he was a poor politician.

“Is he still sleeping?”

Looking up, he saw Sigrid blinking blearily as she pulled a blanket close around her shoulders. Padding closer to them, she kissed Vilkas on his cheek and stood to better take in the view.

Proudspire Manor was an impressive home. More like a palace, in Vilkas’ opinion, but since Sigrid had purchased it at a fair price (preventing the return of the Necromancer Queen Potema certainly influenced Elisif to knock a few thousand septims off the cost of the real estate) they had used it as a home base for the Companions in Solitude. More and more often, they were taking these trips at the High King’s behest. It was only a matter of time before they’d try to keep the Dragonborn in the Blue Palace. Sigrid’s advice had become highly sought after, by High Kings and Jarls alike in the newfound peace that was balanced, ready to tip on the edge of a sword.

“Well, say what you want about Solitude. The view never gets old.” Returning to sit next to him on the porch, the Dragonborn motioned for Vilkas to hand her the sleeping babe. As he did so, the boy slowly came awake, yawning and baring his pink gums as he began that gasping, hiccuping cry that always awakened Sigrid, no matter the hour.

He watched, amused, as she shushed and sang to little Thadrig, bearing her breast as he greedily latched on and began to suck, grey eyes focused somewhere near her smiling face. Leaning back in the chair, Vilkas knuckled his forehead.

There. He had to say it. “Ulfric won’t stop, woman. He is too strong willed to take no for an answer.” Turning to his wife, he set his jaw. “Let me end him.”

“No. Not yet.” The tiny sucking sounds continued as Sigrid readjusted the babe’s hold upon her. “Jarl Ulfric still has some part to play, I think. What if the Aldmeri Dominion do end up attacking again? We’ve worked too long and hard to have them target Skyrim over other, more likely countries. Closer lands to the Summerset Isles.”

“Skyrim may be among the most far-flung of the nations in Tamriel, but the fact is they still have invested an interest in us, Sigrid. The Thalmor are not just going to ignore us now.”

Staring back with an equally stubborn look, Sigrid sighed and looked away. “I know.” Her voice was quiet, sad. “It’s probably wishful thinking, but I...I can’t imagine another Great War, in our lifetime. In his lifetime.” Carefully popping the boy’s mouth free, she switched him over to the other breast before he could raise a fuss. “I want to know that we did all we could, to make Skyrim stable. Safe. For our children, and our children’s children.”

Vilkas stood and walked over to Sigrid. Leaning over, he put his arms around her shoulders, and cheek to cheek he watched along with his wife as Thadrig slowly fell asleep once more.
She laughed, a tired sound. “Milk coma. Cutest thing ever.” Easing him away, she leaned back into Vilkas’s hands as he started to massage her shoulders. “Mmm. No. I know you keep asking me, and after today I really do see where you’re coming from...but I can’t let you just murder Ulfric Stormcloak. Not even if the bastard is asking for it.”

“I could challenge him to a duel. He’d be honor bound to keep it.”

“Oh?” She turned, trying to face him as he worked on a tight spot on her neck. “And what would you do if he Shouted at you, as he did Torygg? Am I to be a widow so soon?”

“Well, of course the Dragonborn would be my Champion.”

“Ah I see.” His hands slipped lower beneath the neckline of her dress as he worried a knot in her shoulder blade. “So I’d be doing all the work in this duel of yours, hmm?”

“You *are* the Dragonborn, as you keep reminding me. If you insist on righting every wrong, taking every peasant’s futile quest to find lost rings or chickens, then certainly. You may help me end that sorry fucker’s life. Before he takes yours.”

Slumping, Vilkas rested his head in the crook of her shoulder and neck. “Sigrid...there may come a time when I cannot see the assassin’s blade before it finds you. Or, Shor forbid, Thadrig. What then, woman? Not even Teldryn Sero can be everywhere at all times.”

He felt her breath out, a warm mist against his forehead as it ruffled his hair. “I’m going to die someday, and so are you. But I’ll be damned if I live in fear.” Almost catching his nose, she kissed him, gently, on the lips. “I have faith in you, dear.” Her mouth quirked in a grin. “And in myself.”

“Now, let’s go to bed. Just to bed. Ugh.”

Helping her stand, Vilkas felt his spine crack as he winced. “Seems like all we want to do is sleep, nowadays.” A shame, but she was still healing. He could not blame her for the exhaustive schedule she kept, caring for their son. There would be time enough for that, later.

She laughed in quiet agreement, walking with him to their rooms as they tried to be stealthy. He could hear Farkas snoring softly in the room he shared with Carlotta and their children, and was reassured to see the Dunmer housecarl almost rise from his chair, sitting as he nodded at Vilkas as they entered their own chambers.

In the dimness of the room, he watched as Sigrid carefully laid her burden down in his carved wooden crib, a gift from Eorlund to the Harbinger. Reassured that the child would not wake, she allowed Vilkas to pull her onto the bed.

She groaned, holding her stomach as her head hit the pillow. “I think I’ve forgotten what a normal, uninterrupted night of sleep feels like.”

“Me too.” He kissed her, softly. On her temple. On her cheek. Lingering near her chin, he buried his face in her neck once more and inhaled the scent of milk that followed her. A soothing smell.

“Goodnight love.”

“G’night. If something gets past Teldryn, you can use the sword hiding in the vase, or the dagger under the pillow.” She absent mindingly patted the bookcase. “Leave me the one hiding behind the Dance of Fire series. I like Daedric blades. If they make it that far, they deserve to bleed out.”

Chuckling, he wrapped the furs and blankets more tightly around her. Their breathing became slower, more even and it was the work of a moment to fall into a deep untroubled slumber.
Till din Tjänst (At Your Service)

Chapter Notes

I was honestly going to end the story after the wedding with maybe a few anecdotes. Perhaps some interludes. But after an invigorating discussion with groovymarlin, I've been persuaded to see that there are so many possibilities left to pursue, storywise. Hopefully the direction I've taken makes sense.

Oh, and let me know if there is anything in the past story that seems unfinished or weird. It's gotten to be a monster, for what I had thought would be a short cute story about a modern gal who ends up in Skyrim. Thanks a bunch!

“How can the Skaal stand it up here? It’s freezing.”

His employer did not look up from examining her latest find; a rather cryptic appearing book bound in black. If he looked at it from the corner of his eye, he would swear that the letters moved. “You’ve got me there. Tradition makes people do a number of batshit things, Teldryn. I’ve a mind to ask you questions about Morrowind, myself.”

“Ask away. Just...ask somewhere else.”

Teldryn Sero, sometime blade for hire, shifted in the snow. He could feel the cold creeping up from the soles of his chitin boots, slowly deadening all feeling in his legs. If they did not move soon, he would lose feeling in something he really cherished.

The massive swirling funnel of air no longer dominated the village of the Skaal, thank Mephala and the actions of his newest boss. Unfortunately, now the Skaal village was filled once more with walking, talking Skaal. Trying not to gag as a hunter began to gut a horker nearby, he flexed his fingers around the pommel of his elven sword and forced himself to abide.

“Not much longer, my dear fetcher. I want to wait for the others before we move out. If we manage to leave before the storm, that is. Frea is still consulting with Storn about possible lodgings for us here.”

“Marvelous.” Turning in the fierce winds that were blowing east from the mountains, Teldryn was grateful for his helmet. Wiping the eyepieces clean of snow, he could make out the form of his employer once more as she put away the book, shivering in the cold that promised a blizzard sometime that night.

The Dragonborn who hailed from Skyrim was a peculiar sort. She favored what she told him was dragonscale armor (and who was he to say differently? It certainly looked as though she had cobbled it from scales of a sort) layered over furs. The visible parts of her face looked pale even for a Nord, exhausted from the unusual magics that she had meddled with. Against his recommendation, Teldryn thought sourly. And that of her gruff husband, as well as the rest of the strange group she had trailing
after her.

He had heard, of course, of the Companions of Whiterun. Skyrim’s version of the Fighters Guild that he was more familiar with. That they were associated with werewolves had only been a rumor, up until his abrupt introduction to the Frostmoon Pack. Abrupt in a surprised, nearly having one’s head torn off sort of way.

Fortunately for them all, his employer had made contact with one of their own previously. They had all meshed into a torrid sort of group hug that he had stayed far away from participating in. The dubious pleasure of being sized up as so much meat was his, as the Dragonborn chirped in her perky way about the Stones they would be visiting while the werewolves stalked around them, always watching.

Gods. He might have turned the woman’s offer of employment down, had he known the errands she ran included the company of werewolves. And trips to every standing stone in Solstheim; which in turn summoned monstrous poison spitting lurkers, mask clad fanatics and bespelled rieklings every time the woman uttered that...that Thu’um thing. Nord magic, he supposed, as loud and unsubtle as the people were.

But, it could have been worse. It was rather a kindness she was doing, releasing all those souls from enslavement to this Miraak fellow. He had found himself waking up next to the Earth Stone one fine morning, and had managed to convince himself that it was the result of too much exuberant drinking. How utterly fascinating to know that he had been sober. Geldis Sadri owed him a draught of sujamma.

If only the job didn’t involve so much traipsing around Solstheim. Exhaling in boredom, his breath fogged the chilly air, even through his full helm. Teldryn had had enough of Solstheim to last a lifetime. Out of hope more than anything, he had raised the question of where his new employer hailed from. Praying to all the Gods of the Reclamations that it wasn’t Windhelm. He had been treated to an hour long discourse on the wonders of Whiterun, a city located in the bowl of a tundra plain surrounded by mountains, trade capital and cultural jewel of Skyrim.

He’d had to feign interest (what Nord town could compare to the majesty of Blacklight?) but those twin brothers must have seen right through him. The monstrous knuckle-dragging brother had laughed heartily, clapping him on the back until he winced. “…May not be what you’re used to, Mer, but Whiterun is a sight better than Windhelm. Thank your Azura for that, should you choose to follow us south.”

Ah...south. Thinking longingly of warm summer winds, sujamma and lasses with loose morals, Teldryn ignored the frigid numbness and waited.

His luck changed with the coming of night. “Harbinger, there you are!”

Closing the map she had been studying, the Dragonborn stood from the bundled firewood she had rested upon to wait. Teldryn almost moaned a sigh of relief as he saw her fellow Companions approach from the southern end of the village.

The shaman of the village took that opportune moment to approach. “Skaal friend. Sigrid. Come! You and your brethren have been welcomed to the hearth of our Great Hall for the night.”
Accepting graciously on behalf of them all, the Dragonborn led their motley crew inside the largest peaked building. Discreetly rubbing his gauntleted hands together, Teldryn Sero relaxed almost the moment he entered the divinely warm dwelling.

Just in time. He could feel the frost creeping into his codpiece at this point. Danger of frostbite had been averted, for now. Thank Boethiah.

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“Pour some more water on the rocks, will you please?”

It was hot in the sauna. So deliciously hot that he could almost imagine he was somewhere other than this icy rock entirely. Stros M’kai, perhaps. Or Vvardenfell. He sighed. Not that there would be anything to see there but dust, anymore.

Leaning forward with a groan of pleasure, Teldryn poured another ladleful of water upon the firepit covered in rocks. Steam hissed as the liquid hit the coals, wreathing them in a haze of humidity that carried the heady cedar scent of the benches they sprawled upon.

“Ah. That will help. Hold still, you mammoth.”

Sigrid had almost climbed the back of the larger twin, Farkas, as she furiously kneaded and rolled the muscles in the man’s back with her hands. “Ah...ouch! Eeh!” The massive man was unguarded in his reactions, cringing as his Harbinger dug her thumbs into his spine. “Honestly, Farkas. You’re worse than Aela when you lie. This will help.”

“...Think I’d rather face another Lurker than you, shield-sister. Doh!”

The other man, Vilkas was it? He lay almost completely supine, his eyes closed. The woman Aela had hovered, unable to relax and almost pacing in the heat of the sauna until she excused herself to rejoin her fellows somewhere out there in the blizzard. Strange, that one.

Teldryn rolled his shoulders, tilted his head upon his neck as he stretched himself, gloriously loose. They had adjourned to the sauna after a very bland meaty, mead filled supper. The conversation with the local Skaal had been almost stultifyingly boring, if not for Sigrid interrupting with the most random of questions.

Did the Skaal worship the nine Divines? Why not? Did they have a history of seafaring, like the Nords further south, or had they always stayed in Solstheim? If so, then how far back did their history extend, and how did they know? Was history transferred orally, or written down and re-recorded over time? How long did the vellum they wrote history upon last?

Teldryn would have laughed, had it not been apparent that the Skaal were overjoyed to have such an illustrious outsider to brag to about their simpleton ways. He had caught the eye of her husband, who had merely shrugged indulgently and continued wreaking havoc on the spread of food laid before
them.

Just another example of how incredibly odd this employer was, that she still had such a childlike fascination for such things. He had been astonished, at first, when he had first been hired straight out of his seat at the Retching Netch. The slight Nord had taken the time to meet and greet every single insignificant citizen of Raven Rock. Every yam seller, artisan and shopkeeper poured out their woes. He would have nodded off from the similarities the complaints all shared; go fetch this, or recover that. One old codger even wanted her to to grab some pickaxe for him; a task the man could have easily accomplished himself.

Yet she had listened attentively, to everyone. Even now, he was currently carrying a load of quivering netch jelly for the alchemist; an offer of good faith, Sigrid had said as she winked. Didn’t they want to develop good relations with the only potion crafter on the island?

He watched her grimace in pain, as she hopped off the giant to curl up on a stool in front of the steaming rocks. Perhaps she would be needing some potions now, Teldryn thought with mild concern.

“Serah, may I be of assistance?” He inquired.

The Dragonborn’s flushed face dripped with sweat. Farkas put a hand on her back, as she panted shallowly. “No, Teldryn. Thank you. It’s just...er...that time of the month.”

At the blank stares she received from the men, she huffed. “Womanly pains.”

Oh.

But of course. Farkas quickly removed his hand, as his shield sister snickered at his reaction. The Nord was young, still. The difference in races being what they were, he never actually dared guess the ages of any of the men he had been called upon to travel with. Such a cruelty, to only have a mere span of decades to live.

Now that she mentioned it, he could smell the faintly rusted scent of old blood, as she discreetly crossed her legs on the wooden stool. Just like his sisters, so long ago. Teldryn could almost smell the sour-sweet powders and roots his Mother had stirred, pinch by pinch, into a mug for his older sister. The medicinal tea had almost overpowered the stench of refuse that trickled down their alley, filling the Grey Quarter with the smell of home.

“There is something I know of that may help.” Standing, he walked over to his travel pack. It was the work of a moment to take the powdered root and tap four pinches into a horn of boiling water from the sauna’s cauldron. “Here. Canis root tea. Should help somewhat with the pain.”

Her face brightened. “Oh, by Dibella’s blessed panties. Thank you.” She sipped carefully, making a face at the bitterness.

Her husband suddenly spoke from his bench. “Hey, Dunmer. Have you ever visited Tel Mithryn?”

Putting away the remaining root powder, Teldryn Sero squatted down near the fire to stir the coals hidden beneath the rocks. “Indeed I have. The great Towers of the Telvanni, alive again in Solstheim. Quite a sight.”

Sigrid spoke next, her face calming as she huddled around her tea. “Storn recommended we speak to Neloth, the wizard there. About these books we keep finding that have something to do with Miraak.”
“You could speak to him, I suppose. He’s been there for quite a while. No doubt the old Mer has his own collection by now.” Toying with the idea of asking what she really intended (he was no fool. He had seen her that first time, when her eyes went wide and she was forcibly sucked into the realm of Hermaeus Mora) he decided against it. It was not his business, at this point in their venture, to make demands of the boss.

As the three Companions quietly discussed the best path to the southeast, he allowed himself to blank out, blissful in his ignorance. It was what it was. He would follow, for now. Unless she proved to be as obstreperous as his previous buyer. The one who had single handedly gone berserker on a massive bandit camp.

No, Teldryn had never seen that particular Nord again. But, as he watched as Vilkas sat up and slowly began massaging his wife’s lower back, as she crumpled over in relief, the Dunmer wanted to believe that this job would be different from the rest. Better.

To fill his pockets with septims had been his single source of real joy, these last few decades. Since leaving the Grey Quarter for Raven Rock, the idealism of his youth had cankered into the jaded rock of an old n’wah. But, he found as he had assisted the Dragonborn and her Companion friends with various menial tasks, killing things had never been so amply rewarding. Monetarily and spiritually.

Would the trend continue? Only time could tell.

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It was their first stint at Kolbjorn Barrow that revealed to the Dunmer sellsword just how utterly strange his new traveling companions really were.

The first time had been a light run. Just a few draugr to kill, as they carefully stepped over the decaying bodies of those unfortunate miners suckered into an ash pit dig. **Fools,** Teldryn Sero thought, as his blade and flame swiftly dispatched what undead dared to attack him. The ash reclaimed everything. The trees smothered in it; the very sea belched chunks of pumice and heart stone. The Red Mountain’s ruin had kissed the edge of Solstheim, and what it touched, it burned for good.

The second time they had returned to Ralis Sedarys to assist in clearing the barrow, he had been surprised. Only the Harbinger, her husband and his twin brother had come this time, and as they quietly stepped into the unearthed grave, he was forcibly barred by Vilkas from rushing to meet the draugr that came, dry and rustling to attack.

He saw the reason why, when not a moment later an ear piercing Shout set the three undead ablaze. As they woodenly dropped, still burning from whatever words of power the Dragonborn had uttered, Teldryn felt a slight amount of panic. Just a dab, really.

How could he protect one that he dared not step in front of?
When he asked, Vilkas just gave him a look. “Figure out a way to flank Sigrid without entering her line of fire, elf.” He had nearly bristled at the mention of his race, until he later realized it had merely been a statement, and no more. The brothers had been nothing but polite in their wanderings...with the Dragonborn being almost effusive in her endless questions about his culture. Indeed; Teldryn had heard far worse some nights at the Retching Netch, and not by any Nord either.

Frankly he wondered at her decision to hire him at all, as they later faced the dragon priest Ahzidal. The Dunmer found himself hovering in the periphery as the Companions circled the masked priest. Reanimated draugr and the poor corpses of the miners attacked mindlessly, fended off by the powerful strokes of twin warblades as Sigrid ducked and rolled, Shouting almost methodically at the nightmarish being. Gouts of fire filled the air with smoke, and he struggled to see, to protect the ridiculous s’wit who smiled too much.

Azura save him. He stared as she catapulted lithely over the stone table that held urns and weaponry, fairly breaking the priest's dried bones in half as she slammed her sword down into the spine, effectively ending whatever dark magics had kept the thing alive for so long.

“Hmm. Good. A useful one.” Sigrid spit polished the enchanted mask, almost thoughtlessly turning to him. “Hey Teldryn. You like destruction magic, right? Do you want to use this for a while?”

He had stared dumbly as she plopped the priceless artifact in his nerveless fingers. Had not moved to assist, as she and the brothers scoped out the tomb for anything of value before having words with that Ralis about what had awaited them in a ‘simple’ draugr nest.

Something else, indeed. The enchantments of the mask warmed his skin, as he carefully fitted it to his face that night when they had all curled up in their bedrolls, fast asleep.

And felt the warmth of a priceless, much rarer treasure than enchanted armor.

Trust.
Ever söker Aldrig Veta (Ever Seeking, Never Knowing)

Farkas did not like the effect these books were having on his shield sister.

Specifically, he was worried about her. Sigrid had always been a bit strange, to be sure. But it wasn’t until they had stepped onto the docks of Raven Rock, had climbed the mountain covered in the skeletal remains of dragons long dead that Farkas felt actual fear.

Vilkas had reached for Sigrid, had tried to hold onto her form as something pulled, ensnaring the Harbinger, body and soul into the Black Book of Waking Dreams. She had screamed in fear at the unknown force as they had held with all the strength they possessed, fighting against the wrenching, oily power of the book. Farkas had despaired as her arms dissolved, his brother panicking as Sigrid was stolen yet again to a place they could not follow.

And yet, in a breath of a moment she had reappeared. Shaken, obviously terrified but unhurt. Her eyes were wide, pupils dilating in horrified fascination as she spoke about another Dragonborn. Some sod named Miraak.

And Hermaeus Mora, Daedric prince of knowledge and fate. Of course, Farkas grumped to himself as he picked through the Dwemer ruins of Nchardak. Naturally.

It had to be those damn books that had so enraptured his friend and Harbinger.

He knew of Sigrid’s great love of reading. Shor’s beard, Farkas had sat there, knitting those many weeks that Sigrid had spent lying abed, listening right along with her as Vilkas read to them. Gradually, many jokes and wry comments suddenly made a damn lot more sense, as Farkas pieced together the shards of logical wit that seeped into his awareness the more he was read to.

Once, when he made a joke about Barenziah and Tiber Septim, a ribald joke that included a horker and a staff....Athis had just stared at him. As though he had suddenly grown a cock straight from his forehead and an extra nose.

Hey, Farkas thought sullenly. He could be funny and smart. Maybe not as smart as Vilkas. But his brother was a scholar at heart. If they hadn’t been raised at Jorrvaskr, Farkas had often teased him that he’d be doing experiments in some mage’s laboratory up north. That had spawned some truly incredible fights that still made him smile fondly, in remembrance.

Farkas knew he was not an idiot. Despite what many in Whiterun fancied aloud in his hearing, Farkas could read. He just...preferred to do other things with his time. The words seemed...jumbled, somehow. No matter how long he had stared at the pages in frustration as a boy, the words never lined up for him the way they had for Vilkas. Failing almost every test he had been given, Farkas had soon stopped attending lessons. And so, he did not read.

Once, when he had confessed this deep dark secret to his Harbinger, Farkas had been surprised at the look of compassion she had given him. “Oh, you great big wonderful dolt,” she had sighed, patting his hand as he looked away in shame. “There is nothing wrong with you. Having dyslexia (he had given her a glare for making up shit) just makes it a bit...well, a bit more difficult for you to phrase things the way you’d like. Or read for long stretches. That’s all. Certainly nothing to affect your daily life...unless you want to work on it.”

For so much of his life, Farkas had focused on what he was good at. Beating up skeever shit milk drinkers? That he could do. Perform pushups in full armor, one handed? Done. Decimate an entire
band of thieving raiders? They would be running and screaming once he showed up.

Speak what he really thought, without stumbling or searching for words?

...Huh. The Harbinger might have had him there.

Sigrid had listened. She had helped...had given Carlotta ink, and paper. Children’s samplers for him to practice. Over time, he learned to think about what it was he really wanted to say, as he had painstakingly struggled to do all his life. Think before talking. Say, before doing. It made perfect sense in his head, but his mouth always botched it up in the execution.

He didn’t deserve her. His patient, kindly Imperial woman. His wife, pregnant with his children (his chest swelled with pride and hope) who always seemed to know what he wanted to say when it just would not leave his lips.

Zenithar bless her for her efforts. He soon found better, more hands on and nonverbal ways to show his appreciation.

Vilkas could keep Ysgramor’s brains. Farkas just wanted to remain the brawn; the heart of it all. What need had a warrior for wits, when he had shield brothers to do the tactical thinking? They were better together, at each others’ backs as they always had been.

So, it wasn’t really helping that his loving, mother-hen of a sister was suddenly afflicted with sleeplessness. He’d find his brother and that Dunmer sellsword completely passed out from the labors of the day, with Sigrid reading late by candlelight. Sometimes until morning. Every night with a brand new book, surrounded by sheets of scribbled notes, crossed out paragraphs and diagrams of things he had never heard of.

And as the weeks passed in Solstheim, and the shade beneath her eyes grew more pronounced, he finally voiced his worries to his brother.

Vilkas, who had caught the excitement of seeking unknown tomes of knowledge a bit less violently than his new wife, had blinked with surprise. It had taken a few days of joined observation, of watching Sigrid furtively steal away books from the tombs and barrows they ventured to, that Vilkas admitted she might have a problem.

And don’t even get him started on those damned Black Books, Farkas thought with a grimace of distaste. Or on this strange Telvanni wizard, this Neloth who looked at Farkas and Vilkas as though they were the scum of the earth, the very stereotype of the brainless Nord barbarian.

Well, he thought with some amusement. His brother was no barbarian.

With every new, blasted book Sigrid encountered, the creepier her questions became. Was the Heart of Lorkhan really embedded in the Red Mountain? Could black soul gems really entrap a human soul, then reanimate the dead, effectively resurrecting them? And what about the Dwemer, the Dwarves lost to time? Wouldn’t it be fantastic to find out what had happened?

Even Teldryn Sero had avoided her after that last one. So many questions. It was like traveling with a scholarly mage. One Oblivion-bent on self destruction.

No...Farkas truly despised all this dungeon delving for books and arcane knowledge that was slowly tearing his friend apart. A Dragonborn, driven mad by power...wasn’t that what the soft-voiced Frea had feared?

It had driven a wedge between Vilkas and Sigrid as well; for the longer she became enthralled by her
reading, the less he actually saw them talk. Farkas stopped caring about surprising them in the throes of passion, as more and more often they slept apart. Anxiety colored his brother’s expressions, replacing the deep contented happiness that had disgustingly wafted from him after their marriage for months.

And now, there was only uncomfortable silence, as they followed Neloth even further into the bowels of Nchardak.

A day. One fully wasted day of hacking through Dwarven ballistas and sentinels, raising and lowering water levels to obtain those silly cubes the wizard had fawned over.

And now, as they reached yet another Black Book, Farkas felt his heart sink into his stomach. His brother stood hovering behind Sigrid, watching her in undisguised concern as she shakily walked closer to the massive volume that lay, tantalizing and dark, on its pedestal. Farkas lingered with Teldryn Sero, sharing a look of inhibition. Could it get any worse?

"At last. I hope it was worth it. Please... be my guest. You deserve the first look.” As the wizard continued his nasal recitation, Vilkas shot the Dunmer mage an evil look. Sigrid never noticed, her eyes fixed solidly on the volume labeled ‘Epistolary Acumen’.

Farkas shifted on the soles of his feet, nervous. *Big fucking name for a big fucking heap of trouble, shield-sister...*

“Besides, it could be very dangerous.” Neloth pursed his lips. “These books are known to drive many people insane, Dragonborn. Like all Daedric Princes, Hermaeus Mora is not to be trifled with. But he is subtler than most of his ilk, appropriate for the prince of knowledge and fate. Many scholars and loremasters have been ensnared by the lure of learning the secrets that only Hermaeus Mora possesses.”

His brother bit his lip. “Let’s not tempt fate then, shall we Sigrid? You may have the honor of limitless knowledge, wizard.” As Vilkas tried to draw her away, taking her hand in his; Sigrid broke free with a grunt of frustration.

“Damn it, *let go*, Vilkas! I have to do this!”

As he released her, looking as though he had been slapped, Sigrid glared at Neloth. “I am *not* going to follow the path of Miraak, or kowtow to a tentacled hentai nightmare. I’m in this *purely* to save the people of Solstheim.”

Farkas thought she might actually believe her own lie, as he rested his hand upon his brother’s stiff shoulder and watched as the book claimed his Harbinger once more.

Neloth waved goodbye with a grim look on his face. Teldryn heaved a sigh. “Well. It was nice working for her, while it lasted. Shame, that.”

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*Miraak stood before her, as she crouched besides the burning bones of the dragon she had just killed.*

*His voice was deep, scornful. "Did you ever think of the pain? Of having your soul ripped like*
that?"

Sigrid knew. If her mind could work, then she could speak, to tell Miraak of the Shout that had
turned her into a Dovah. The others shouted, yelled at her. Arms shook her as she reached out to
him, to the only other who could truly understand...

Laughing, the other Dragonborn left in a dissolving pool of light and dark.

But, she reflected as she picked up her bloodied sword, as Vilkas and Teldryn continued waving,
yelling at her in words that were just sound. He had left while taking the soul.

Fucking hypocrite.

Books.

Sigrid ignored the black bubbling pools of tar-like viscousness, the thin whiplike slaps that
occasionally tasted her as she passed dreamily by.

There was only the books, and the search for the book.

The walls and floor were paved with the written word. Page upon page of esoteric knowledge, hers
for the taking. Books no one had ever heard of. Volumes of mysteries solved, history preserved in its
rawest form. Hers to keep, if she could only find the next door…

One. Two. Three.

Three lights, like anglerfish lures. Touch them and they open.

Doors opened.

She blinked, trying to focus her eyes upon...too many eyes. Beds of writhing serpentine tentacles
dripped green and black goo, as eyeballs slowly blinked open and shut. The entire mass of the thing
looked fairly insubstantial, neither here nor there.

Sigrid wondered how it could turn pages, if there were no hands. Tentacles?

Did Daedric Lords even eat, or shit? Oh God. Was one of those tentacles really a dick???

"Well done, my champion. Your journey towards enlightenment has finally led you here, to
my realm, as I knew it would."

“I’m not your champion.” She replied almost reflexively, looking around to see if there were any
other books on pedestals lying around besides the blobby god.

A massive eye that blinked open a slotted pupil hovered, gazing at her like it could autopsy her from
a distance. "You will serve me, willing or not. All who seek after the secrets of the world are my
servants."

After an alarmingly long time trying to tear her own, human sized eyeballs away from the gargantuan Thing, Sigrid began walking shakily down the looping path. There had to be another way out of here. “Don’t need your help, thanks. I’m just here to keep your friend Miraak from going postal, again.” She had been studying, wracking her brains almost non stop trying to find a way to learn the Shouts she needed without entering here.

Yet the more she visited, strangely the more she craved the solitude. The spiraling whirlwinds of books. Even the Keepers seemed more watchful than hostile; if she crept at a distance, she could feel their stares upon her as she leafed through even more books in search of what she sought.

"No. Look around. You have done nothing here on your own. You could spend a hundred lifetimes searching my library, and you will never find what you seek."

Ignoring the Lovecraftian nightmare as long as she could, Sigrid gingerly stepped onto the mesh walkway towards the last possible exit. A black, squid like arm surged from the black lake, nearly gripping her as she dodged it the last second.

Feeling her heart race with sick fear, Sigrid suddenly looked up. The mass of tentacled eyes was drifting lower, towards her.

*God damn it.* “Hey, isn’t Miraak your buddy? Why offer me anything, if the amazing “First Dragonborn” already is in your pocket?”

"He has served me long and well. But he grows restless under my guidance. His desire to return to your world will spread my influence more widely. But it will also set him free from my direct control."

Paralyzed by those pulsing, slotted eyes and writhing arms, Sigrid felt like she was caught in quicksand, as a single trailing tentacle slipped onto her shoulder.

“It may be time to replace him with a more loyal servant. One who still appreciates the...gifts I have to offer."

Oh. Oh eww. The tentacle was slowly worming its way into her armor, down into her cleavage.

“Er...your tastes wouldn’t happen to run towards the pornographic in reading material, would they?” Thanking all that was holy that she had *never* had the slightest interest in Japanese hentai porn, Sigrid struggled to break away from the questing tentacle. It latched itself onto her nipple and suddenly squeezed.

The Dragonborn squawked. “Ouch, dammit! Let go!” She flailed her arms, drawing her sword when the tentacle lingered.

Faster than she could see, the tentacle retracted into the mass of frothing eyes.

“I see more than you think, Dragonborn. Harbinger. Outworlder.”

Hermaeus Mora surrounded her, until her body was wreathed in a snake’s nest. She couldn’t look,
couldn’t stray from the massive eyeball that commanded her vision. In its blackest depths, she saw a figure.

Miraak.

“You seek answers. The eternal unknown. The wonders of Aetherius. What would have happened, Dragonborn, if you had stayed in your world? I can show you. I can bring you such...closure. Peace.”

Tentacles brushed her lips, begging entrance into her mouth.

“LET ME IN.”

Her mind went completely blank, as she felt the queerest urge to open-

*****

Vilkas was just about to open the damned Black Book and read it himself, when Sigrid reappeared. Neloth caught her as she fell, his crimson eyes fairly sparkled with curiosity. Farkas stepped forward, frowning as Vilkas stopped him with an outstretched arm.

Gods. What fucking mess has she gotten herself into, this time? She warned me about Solstheim. Fuck it all. I should have listened.

"What happened? What did you see? Different people have very different experiences when reading these books." The Telvanni wizard examined her closely, as though knowledge could be absorbed via osmosis.

She was silent. Teldryn Sero crept forward and offered her a waterskin. It prompted a startled shudder, as Sigrid recognized him and took a drink gratefully. “I talked to Hermaeus Mora.”

“Hmm. You're still acting surprisingly sane, too.” Neloth almost sounded disappointed.

Vilkas clenched his jaw. Arrogant fuckwad.

“Well, what did he have to say?” The wizard demanded. Helping her up, Sigrid clutched her waterskin, her face blank as Neloth waited, drumming his fingers impatiently on the stone pedestal. “He must have wanted something from you.”

Slowly, Sigrid’s bloodshot eyes latched onto his. “I learned the...the second Word of the Bend Will shout.”
It was as though ice water had flooded his veins. Vilkas stood there, mouth working to say something. Anything, really, as Neloth cocked his head, still scrutinizing his wife.

"Hmph. Those Shouts we discussed, eh. No wonder the Dwemer were so interested in that book. It was indeed one that Miraak used to advance his power as Dragonborn. But I assume there's some bad news?" The wizard stepped forward, only backing away when Farkas and that sellsword flanked Sigrid in unified aggression. It would have pleased Vilkas to no end, had he not been so frozen in place.

_Bend Will._

_Bend Will._

_GOL HAH DOV._

The Shout Sigrid had dreaded learning. The one the Greybeards had warned her of. The one she had told him of long ago, that exerted mastery over others. Claiming their will. Stealing their agency. The subtle, invasive force that colored all Dovahzul, creeping into their Thu’um. Mastery of All.

Sigrid had feared it above all other Words in the Thu’um of the Dovah.

And with this creeping realization, Vilkas felt sudden, crushing despair. She had already changed and he had not seen it. Did not know, that she was changing so fast, turning away from him until it was too late.

“Damn it, let go, Vilkas! I have to do this!”

All those nights, I only thought she was reading...

Since no one else was speaking, Neloth jumped in. “It would be unlike Hermaeus Mora to allow anyone to gain such knowledge without exacting a price.”

As he watched, pathetically hoping for another look, another trace of his wife’s attention, Vilkas waited on edge. And sighed, almost audibly in relief as her tired hazel eyes suddenly cleared. “It was not given freely.”

Sigrid shook herself, her hands trembling as she squeezed them into fists. As if just barely realizing that Farkas and Teldryn Sero stood at her sides, almost touching her, Sigrid stepped forward. Vilkas noted she did not so much as glance at the Black Book. “That tentacled pervert wanted knowledge from me that he could obtain nowhere else. Now, he has it.” She sounded tired. “And I have my answers also.”

As though her feet could no longer hold her, she plopped down to the floor. Held her head in her hands.

“...I wish I had never heard of Hermaeus Mora.”

"Hmph. What secrets could you have worth keeping from old Mora?" The old Telvanni almost reached for her, until Vilkas stepped forward with a growl. Backing up, the wizard’s lips pulled themselves into a slight sneer.
“Sounds like a bargain to me. Hermaeus Mora learns some fascinating new ways to cook a chicken, and you become the second most powerful Dragonborn that ever lived. Well. That gives me a lot to think about. I need to get back to Tel Mithryn. I have some ideas about how to locate more of these Black Books...”

Vilkas watched the back of the wizard as he strode away, still talking to himself. *Good riddance.*

“...Brother? You’re needed over here.”

Turning away, he looked over at his wife sitting on the floor, who was now sobbing as though her heart had been broken.

Farkas was there, hunched over awkwardly and patting her back as he shot a look at Vilkas that fairly screamed *help me!*

Without a word, Teldryn Sero removed his helmet.

Vilkas’s eyebrows shot up. He could count on one hand the number of times Teldryn had actually gone helm-free these last few months. This was the third time. And now the plain faced older Dunmer was murmuring something in her ear. She hiccuped, face puffy from crying as she listened.

Walking closer to Sigrid, he sighed in exhaustion. Perhaps the sellswords’ words would penetrate that fog that had somehow taken her away from him. She allowed him to help her up, but still. That blank look, almost of shock, stayed with her.

-If someone had told Vilkas on their trip to Solstheim that books would be the cause of their relationships ruin, he would have punched the bastard in the face and laughed. Long and hard.

What harm could a book cause?

She turned away from them all, busying herself with preparations to leave. The three men looked at one another helplessly. Vilkas followed close behind as Sigrid fairly sprinted from the ruins of Nchardak.

As he struggled with his instinct to stop her, to gather his wife in his arms and make her talk to him, Vilkas felt the weight blocking his chest increase until he could barely breath.

*What had she learned from the Prince of Knowledge and Fate?*
"If he who employs coercion against me could mould me to his purposes by argument, no doubt he would. He pretends to punish me because his argument is strong; but he really punishes me because his argument is weak."

- William Godwin

The ash wastes were quiet at night.

Winds hardly stirred the grayish silt. Even the creepers and ash spawn seemed content to rest, silent and still.

Too quietly for Teldryn Sero. The Dunmer had gone on a scouting mission, his path looping him around their camp for at least a few hours. His relief to be gone from their current situation had been apparent in the tone of his parting; the freedom of his strides as he bounded away from the stiff, silent couple.

Farkas had found some reason to leave as well. He had returned to Raven Rock to barter their passage home with Captain Gjalund. That the mail arrived with the ships was a fortunate circumstance.

Farkas had taken to writing short, often misspelled but determined letters to Carlotta. He would often read and reread with his newfound literacy the letters he received, sleeping with them tucked into his armor, or under his pillow.

It was a sweet habit. A sweet thing to do. As she idly traced the Black Book titled 'Waking Dreams', Sigrid felt any of the tenderness she might have reserved for herself wither.

She thought she probably would never sleep again.

Just her, and Vilkas. Alone together, at last. They had not spoken since leaving Nchardak. Since she had broken down with the weight of her new, awful knowledge. A seer in truth.

He could not follow her to Apocrypha.

So she had faced Miraak and his dragons alone.

They had waited. Her friends had waited for her by the place she had opened the Black Book.

And she had returned. Babbling, screaming and nearly in ribbons from Miraak's spells and Shouts, but damn it, she had survived.

The small fire they had allowed buried in the ash popped and crackled in the cool night air. Ash hopper roasted with yams tasted surprisingly like a Thanksgiving dinner, Sigrid thought with rare nostalgia as she stirred the driftwood embers.

They had cared for her for nearly two entire days, here in this rocky depression west of Tel
Mithryn. They had bound her wounds, poured potions down her throat.

Smiling sadly, the Dragonborn looked away from the fire. She had good friends. And a husband she didn't deserve.

The scars would remain, a living proof that would not be taken from her. A fleshy record of her valorous deeds in Solstheim.

And now, as she was alone with her husband, Sigrid pondered the problem before her.

Where had she taken the fork in the road that had let to this...this stalemate?

Chancing a look at Vilkas, she felt herself sink into an even deeper funk. He looked terrible. In truth they both did. A lack of sleep, combined with the manic frenzy to find more tomes, more undiscovered treasures of knowledge had taken its toll. They had found treasures, all right. But for all the jewels and enchanted weapons and arms, it was a cold victory.

Since that night, weeks ago in the sauna, they had not touched beyond a grasping of fingers. A quick kiss to the cheek. Brief hand holding as he helped her up and down, over the winding dwemer staircases.

He had offered his hand, first. Vilkas had shown her concern, had reached for her. And she, like the worst sort of heartless bitch, had snapped at him for it, like he was nothing.

Like they were nothing. Gods, she couldn't even think anymore, beyond the books, beyond Miraak, beyond the Shout.

Always, that damn Shout.

And weren't they a pair? She snapped a log with unnecessary force, tossing it into the fire. Their relationship had been combative from the very beginning. As they had fought one another for supremacy, slowly and steadily it had transitioned over the years, binding them into so much more. Their battles were more sensual than martial, now.

Or, at least they had been. How could she fight with a man who would not even look at her, much less speak to her?

Acknowledging her part in this epic cluster fuck was...painful.

It was me.

I pushed him away, thinking I was doing us all some grand favor by studying so damn hard. Being smarter, removing Miraak without having to deal with Hermaeus Mora.

I was so wrong.

Even now, in this wretched not-knowing, Sigrid felt another awful thrill as she caught sight of the Black Book. Firelight seemed to sink into its strange cover, instead of reflect it.

Knowledge without limit. All the possibilities laid out before her, like, like...

...Like choosing her character in the Start Screen menu. Any myriad choices of ways to be, to look and act. Anything was possible. She had wasted countless moments just screwing with the appearance, adding scars, hair mods, stupid shit.
Alduin had revealed all her many deaths. And they were legion.

But Hermaeus Mora (*that sadistic fuck*) had shown her far more frightening things.

For a memory, a taste of her world ripped with the barest of permissions (really, more like a vague curiosity than any agreement) from her brain, he had almost fried every cell in her body with the video reel of all those delicious possibilities...

The Prince of Knowledge and Fate had shown her what could be.

Sarah Kincaid Ferguson, elderly and frail as she held hands with a wrinkled Bryce, followed on the walking path by their brood of children and grandchildren.

Sigrid Farstrider as High Queen, ruling alongside her beloved husband High King Ulfric Stormcloak as they sailed to the Summerset Isles with their armies; prepared for the war to utterly end all wars.

Sarah, twisted and beaten. Mumbling nonsense as she walked an unending round with Dervenin. Taking tea with her Lord Sheogorath. Tea with cheese and intestines, as they merrily threw skeever shit and rubies at one another across the table settings.

And the one that had nearly bent her mind with the strangeness of it, Sonahsod and Alduin.

Together. Alive and free, soaring and plunging as they sang over a Skyrim set aflame. No regrets, no weighing the consequences. Just ash and fire and bones.

Sigrid had received so many answers. But especially the one she sought above all. The one that kept her awake.

What had happened to Bryce and the kids when she had left them, that fateful day in Yellowstone National Park?

She knew.

"...Vilkas?"

He did not move.

Realizing that her husband was distancing himself intentionally, Sigrid shuffled a space away, almost coughing as she nearly ended up face first in the firepit.

His hands grasped her hips, then righted her. As she turned to look at him, with hope, she found him as he had been before.

...Staring into the fire with a cool, calm fury that no amount of wheedling or cajoling could melt.

Vilkas told her once, after a makeup sex marathon that had almost been worth the fight, that he preferred to stew alone after an argument.

To work it out, analyze it somehow. And whether or not it had made sense, by the end of what Sigrid called his 'Spock' period he reassured her... he would be ready to listen. To engage her in conversation again.
She hated the Spock treatment.

Sigrid’s first instinct was to demand his attention, force him to talk about it and work it out, then and there. Sit on him, literally, until he spit out what the hell was so wrong.

Though Sigrid had learned to wait, compromise...this was too important.

He could listen, even if he didn't respond.

"I'm...so sorry. Sorry that I took off your head about the book." She paused, trying to find the words. "I thought, with my foreknowledge of events, that I could change Miraak. By talking, arguing...fuck, even that Bend Will shout used on him would have been better than what Hermaeus Mora tempted me with."

She thought about telling him of Miraak's gruesome end. Impaled by his own gods tentacle. Like a skewed kabob.

So much talent and power, wasted. Could she have influenced him for the better?

Was it even ethical to try?

Vilkas was hearing her now. That dark head had tilted, almost incremental in its angle towards her. But his eyes still stared at the fire.

Nothing for it. She continued. "He...wanted to know things. About my world. Our technology...those phones, I showed you mine, remember? But there is so much more, Vilkas. I hope he didn't see everything."

Nuclear warfare. Weaponized viruses. Firearms. The Internet. Cars, planes, spy cameras. There was an infinite list of things she prayed had never left her brain, to be encyclopedically filed away by Hermaeus Mora.

"...and in return, you know what I wanted?"

GOL HAH DOV.

No.

"...I wanted closure. To know the...the unknowable." Tears slid down her cheeks. She smeared them with the ash on her wrist in irritation, then continued with a shaky laugh. "Guess you're wrong about me, you know. I am selfish. So, so selfish."

The fire was almost dead now, smoking as the embers feebly flared, glowing in the dark.

"I wanted to know if I had left them, Bryce and the kids, to a better future. That I didn't just give up and leave, because I fucking missed you like my heartbeat, or because of anything noble like killing Alduin, ...or even because it was just so painful to not be able to tell them anything."

"And they were okay. In all the alternate universes Hermaeus Mora showed me, about six out of ten were fairly happy endings. Now those are NOT bad odds."

She realized he had drawn silently closer, his undivided attention on her now.

Still, he said nothing.

With a crack of...something deep inside, she stood, gripping the book. "And you."
Gritting her teeth against the grief, she spat it out. "Don't you want to know your fate? With and without me in your life?"

Her heart snarled and snapped, ached in the pain of it.

She knew everything. And it was eating her alive.

*********

Vilkas could hear her. He just preferred not to.

His lovely, stubborn wife was like a dog worrying at a bone. She had an unflagging perseverance that did her credit in battle, but was far less charming in their marital spats.

As Sigrid finally deigned to speak to him, after weeks of hardly noticing they breathed the same air, he shunned her.

Like a pouting boy, he thought with no small amount of self disgust. More than anything, Vilkas just wanted to hold her again. To reassure himself, after this last unbelievable spell of daedric realm traveling, that she was finally hale and whole.

Not gasping with a punctured lung, five broken ribs, a fractured hip and two broken legs.

She had fallen before them, as though dropped from a great distance. Dragon back, she informed them later. It had nearly stopped his heart.

Teldryn Sero had been thorough in his examination and treatment. She had a good start healing what was there, before she had awakened and used the incredibly helpful Shout of healing.

And now this. She would try to justify her actions once more.

He wouldn't give in, this time. She had gone too far.

"...want to know your fate? With and without me in your life?"

Snapping to attention, Vilkas turned to look at Sigrid head on. "What? No."

Clearly her misery was unfeigned. She had a heaping dose of what she called the 'ugly cry face', where all the tension forced itself into a grimace that he supposed some might find unattractive.

He only noticed how green; pure olivine green her eyes became when enhanced by her tears. "No, Sigrid. I don't care what this god told you."

"But you die!" His wife wailed. And the floodgates had been opened.

Reluctantly, Vilkas listened as Sigrid listed his many lives and deaths. His potential marriages to Ysolda, to Aela and Jenassa and Hrongar (he blinked at that last one).

How she had seen them grow old together, raising countless possible children, only to have her hopes dashed as another future showed them dead in a cave, in a war or some dwemer ruin.

He let the tears come. Waited for her to cry herself out.

When the last chest wracking sob had stilled, he cleaned her up. Tenderly, but firmly, Vilkas wiped the ash smears, washed away with a clean wet rag the tears smudged into her blood paint as she looked at him in shock.
Now, he had her attention.

He faced her completely. Took her shaking hands in his (gods, what relief to hold her even in such a small way). And he spoke.

"Sigrid, dear. I don't give a fucking horker's salt encrusted ass-hole about any of that shit."

Smiling at her resulting giggle, he began kneading his thumbs against her palms. "I accept your apology, for your sharp words. But," he cut her off when she showed signs of interrupting. "I don't really believe that our fates are chosen for us, waiting somewhere for the perfect combination of events."

Sigrid sniffled, her liquid hazel eyes wide. "You don't? But they were all so real, like...like I was there, seeing it in front of my eyes!"

Slowly, with some trepidation and a great deal of love, Vilkas held her to him, tightening his grip on his crazy, stubborn, wonderful wife. She sobbed once more against his chest.

He thought suddenly of something. "When he showed you your futures, did you see what would have happened, had you not pursued the path of the Companions?"

Feeling her nod, her tears soaking his shirt, Vilkas sighed. "So why does it matter so much? All these other possible futures are not now. We are not them."

Raising her face, he wiped beneath her red rimmed eyed and tenderly captured her mouth in his. As he pulled away, she followed with her mouth, hugging him as he smiled instead.

"I chose you. And you made the incredibly wise decision to favor me." he whispered into her ear, as he reached his hand stealthily down her pants and into her smalls.

-Damn. It looked like Teldryn Sero was back already.

Retracting his hand, he wrapped it around her instead as she mock-huffed in disappointment.

"All clear, tonight. It seems Azura favored us well." Building up the fire with the ease of years of practice, the Dunmer sat across from them.

It was hard to tell, with that chitin helmet he always wore. But the man's voice was droll as he spoke. "So, you two ironed out that argument finally."

Vilkas nodded and rested his head upon the top of her hair, nearly laughing as he realized she had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

After he had wrapped her securely in her bedroll, Vilkas got Teldryn's attention.

"Say, friend...since you know the island best. Do you know of any truly awe inspiring ice caves none too far from here?"
Deer Carlotta,

We hav reeched Raven Rok. Lots of elves heer. Lots of jobs to. Dont worry - with all of us togethir we kan kill anything. Meybe buy yur on farm with my shar.


I haat riting but I promised.

Miss u and ur body. Wait fur me. All be bak before yu miss me eeting all ur fuud.

Yours, Farkas

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Dear Farkas,

Wow, your spelling really has improved! We can go over the words you are still having trouble with when you get home, if you still don't mind.

Mila has been such a help. She worked the produce stand all by herself yesterday so I could rest. Don't worry - most days are good now that the morning sickness has passed. I've just forgotten how slow I feel at everything when I'm pregnant. I'm not seventeen anymore!

I think Sigrid is right that we may be having twins. It feels different somehow than it was when I carried Mila. I feel more of my tiny passengers' kicks and jabs. Definitely a small Companion in there!

Have you thought of any names yet? Remember, it could be a girl.
I miss you so much. The bed feels so cold and empty without you. I don't care about my own farm or treasures that you might find. Just come home, safe and whole, back to me.

Always yours, Carlotta

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To Njada Stonearm,

I suppose you think you are incredibly funny. I found that stupid fur bikini in my pack and nearly set it afire. Hope your joke was worth it, you darling bitch.

Aela was right. There are more jobs than we can shake a stick at here, just in Raven Rock alone. Please deduct five hundred septims from my personal accounts and not the main treasury for the funds promised to one Teldryn Sero, a skilled Dunmer sellsword who knows all about Solstheim. You'd like him...he's a sarcastic ass, just like you.

We're about to visit Majni's home at Frost moon Crag, then take a trip to clear out this temple of...well, I'm not positive what's in there, but I have a hunch.

How are Athis and yourself? How are the new bloods doing? I'll bet they are sighing with relief at the ease of their regimen now that I've stolen their Master at Arms away.

Please check in on Carlotta, and make sure Tilma gets her naps. She might blacken one of her amazing apple pies again and that's just inexcusable. Let's not burn down Jorrvaskr a second time, please. Have Lucia check on her, too.

Njada. Don't you dare send me any more 'friend fiction'. If I have to read another short story about the soft skinned outlander being saved and fucked in the ass by a dashing Nord bandit, I will - I promise - send you to Morthal to suck swampwater for an unspecified length of time. Take it out on Athis. And keep writing...just write something else. I beg you.

(I know you're writing about me you smug elf licker. Go eat a dick.)
Dear Carlotta,

Almost I wish yu wer heer. It is cold but beootifal just like yu.

(Scratches and crossed out sentences, punctuated by torn parchment and ink blots)

Not that yu are cold. Maybe just yur feet? Yu can laff, but all I want is yu alone with me, to see this sunset. I dont have the werds for it. I will try.

Lotta, all I kan think of is yu and our bairn. Yu feel big (scratched out) bigger than with Mila? I hav herd that twins beget twins.

Names: Farkas :)
   Vilkas
   Jergen
   Kodlak
   Fjora
   Carlotta

No matr how big you get I will want yu. It is all I think abot. Yur body under mine, yur hands in my hair. I miss yur mowth and wat it dos to me. I will show yu when I kom bak. Promise.

We are looking for books instead of reel treshure. Snore.

Thinkin of licking yu hed to tow when I see yu agin.
All my love, Farkas

(Included in the letter is a set of Dunmer robes labelled for Carlotta and some strange alchemy ingredients addressed to Mila)

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Dearest Harbinger,

All is well here at Jorrvaskr. I've taken the liberty of overseeing the correspondence between you and Njada.

Yes. I found and seized your last few letters. I feel somewhat conflicted, since I have benefitted immensely from her 'friend fiction' as you refer to it. But I am saddened to see that the leading man is no Dunmer, which Njada assures me will be remedied in future installments. Thought you'd like to know and prepare accordingly, in any case.

(Also: Do you know where I might procure a reasonably priced thesaurus? If I have to read 'heaving' or 'thrust' again, I will do something violent.)

Tilma has been slower than usual in her tasks of late. I fear the old girl is finally stepping into her grave. Lucia has been a whirlwind of activity. Give her due credit when you come home, Sigrid.

Oh, and give my regards to one Teldryn Sero. I've actually heard some of his exploits in Dawnstar. Lock away any unwed maidens or spare sujamma. No, actually just send the sujamma or flin to me if you have some to spare. I miss the taste.

Cordially, Athis of the Companions

(P.S. Wasn't that incredibly tiny fur wrap thing itchy? On behalf of Njada, I am forced to request a description of Vilkas's reactions. Don't kill the messenger.)
To my dearest Farkas,

Oh, the robes were amazing! I wonder what they used to dye them that rich burnt orange and blue! Very comfortable and exotic...they fit my ever swelling belly perfectly. Thank you, love.

Mila and her apprenticeship to Arcadia are both going well. She was overwhelmed by the odds and ends that you sent her to study, especially the scathecraw. I have high hopes for her in her field of study. Her future security will be assured, if only she keeps her focus on learning alchemy instead of mooning over High King Balgruuf's boy. Thank the Divines he is all the way in Solitude.

As far as your carnal intentions are concerned (ask Vilkas, not Aela or Sigrid to read that if you're having difficulty, I want you to read this. Not you, Vilkas. Him.)

- I will hold you to your promise. Something about the pregnancy has been utterly frustrating. I dream of you, and awake in a sweating fever, trembling for the want of you and those hands.

Every day I carry our child I am reminded of the means by which we created him or her. It is Impossibly distracting. You should be prepared to give up your first few days to me, so that we can spend some quality time together.

Now that Mila is staying at Arcadia's home, we can be as loud as we like. No excuses, Farkas...your shield siblings will have you for months. I want only a few days of your undivided attention. Trust me, love. I will make it worth your while.

When are you coming home?

Your wife, Carlotta
To Athis, resident Dunmer of the Companions,

I am enclosing a full case of the Retching Netch's finest sujamma, shein and flin. Please don't hesitate to ask for more to be shipped over. I find I have rather a taste for the good stuff. Remind me to tell you about bourbon and whiskey sometime.

If I had tried on that ridiculous scrap of fur, I certainly wouldn't model it for my husband without very good cause. And you're right. It was terribly itchy. (Please inform Njada that if she sends me any further flights of fancy that they be rid of fleas, at least.)

Please continue sending the new bloods two at a time on the easier jobs. Save any that involve dwemer ruins, bandit camps or jilted spouses for yourself or Njada.

The rumors you have probably heard by now are true. There is another Dragonborn here in Solstheim, kept alive in a daedric realm known as Apocrypha for centuries. It is going to be a hairy fight, taking this bastard down. You have my last will, if it comes down to that.

That last story Njada sent made me blush whenever I see Teldryn Sero bend over. Gods. No more. I don't want to read any more scarily vivid descriptions of any Dunmer anatomy or metaphors involving fruit. No offense to yourself; I cannot be distracted right now.

Tie her down if you must, Athis, but get it out of her system before we come home. I have to concentrate on sifting through the massive amount of reading we have here. Think I'm onto something.

Forever cold,

Harbinger Sigrid Farstrider

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(Letter unsent, crumpled at the bottom of a travel pack, illegible from snow melt)

Harbinger Dragonborn Sigrid
My love,

As I write this, we are crammed into a cave that reeks of rotting boar meat and unwashed riekling. I've smelled Farkas's small clothes and found them to be more pleasant. But that damn blizzard is back, and this is the only shelter for leagues. So here we are.

I am writing this so I have some reason to sit close, to share the light of your lantern as you read. Earlier, as Farkas snored in the corner and that Teldryn pretended to sleep, I tried to touch you. Just a caress, really. You moved away unconsciously, so focused on your reading. You did not have time for me.

More and more, I sense a strange distance between us as you pore over those books. It does you credit, all your hard work searching for the means to end this other Dragonborn.

But Sigrid, I miss you. It has been a fucking drought since that night in the sauna, when we rolled in the snow and I took you, holding you wrapped around my waist behind the forge where no one walking by could see.

Your body remains, but I fear your mind is somewhere else. Where have you gone?

And how can I follow, when you disappear?
"By the Nine. What are they doing with all that?"

The citizens of Raven Rock fixed incredulous stares upon the slow trudging group of warriors, white with ash and carrying a Khajiit caravans-worth in looted goods.

Yes, it seemed Teldryn Sero had finally found himself in the most ridiculous situation he had ever experienced. Well. Since that time he had challenged a stranger to a drinking game and lost spectacularly.

What had been in that brew, he thought with rancor as he began unloading bulging sacks of gleaming ingots, armor and raw gems before an awestruck Glover Mallory. Teldryn had awakened with a fetcher of a pounding migraine; stark naked on what must have been a hagraven's nest. With said hagraven cawing fondly, stroking his nakedness with her grimy claws.

Uncomfortable. Almost as preposterous as becoming a beast of burden to the Dragonborn. Savior of Skyrim, Harbinger who was currently squeaking directions whilst being held aloft on that giant Companion's shoulders.

His employer had not fully recovered from her serendipitous victory in Apocrypha. Potion mixtures and Dovahzul aside, broken bones needed time to heal. He had voiced this opinion, punctuated with complaints and world weary sighs as the Nord female persisted in her stubbornness.

They couldn't carry her, she insisted. Not with all the sundries they had collected for the gold, too valuable to throw away. No, she would limp along after them.

Sigrid had attempted to walk with Vilkas and Teldryn to Raven Rock, only to fall painfully again and again on her splinted and wrapped legs. After much swearing, arguing and a brief moment when he had taken out his irritation on some ash blighted trees with an axe, he and Vilkas had crafted a sort of sled to drag the feisty little 'n'wah back with them to civilization.

With every bump, every jolt as they dragged her across the blasted lands to the market town, she almost groaned. Ignoring his twinges of satisfaction at her discomfort (if he were to pull her along like Barenziah in a chariot, she could suffer as well) Teldryn Sero smiled behind the helm as he realized that the woman never did let her cries of pain be voiced.

True Nord, and all that. He was almost proud.

For her brave reserve, he had dosed her with the mildly narcotic tincture of emperor parasol moss and crushed glowbugs. Sigrid had then finally relaxed, wearing a silly grin. His ears quivered as he picked out stray words of nonsense that she muttered for the rest of their journey.

When they had arrived, he had asked after her health, as was only polite. The Dragonborn had brightly asked him if he was the Jabberwocky, and would he mind bringing her the mushroom that made her big again? For she was feeling quite small.

Teldryn Sero would have genuinely been interested in finding out what a Jabberwocky was, had her husband not chosen that moment to drag her from the crude sled and dunk her headfirst into the rain barrel. Repeatedly.
And now, dried off and transferred to her new perch, she clung to Farkas’s broad back like an infant Riekling and continued to issue orders. "Keep the jewelry to the side, away from the enchanted armor. Vilkas, can you take those ingredients to Milore Ienth? No, Teldryn, books and spell scrolls must be kept apart!"

It had taken the entire afternoon before all sales had been settled to the Dragonborn’s satisfaction. They had settled in their rooms at the Netch with all the weight from their packs transferred to their money pouches. Quite considerably richer, he marveled. More septims than he had ever seen in one place. And still, their travel bags were half full.

"Here, serah." Almost weaving on his feet, he took the heavy pouch of septims from her with an inquisitive tilt of his head. "Payment. For lugging my sorry ass through the wastes and your share of the treasure."

Through his concealed surprise, he realized his employer was nearly asleep herself. The dose he had given her was truly worth attempting again, he thought drowsily. If only to find out what a Jabberwocky was. Last he saw of her (after giving cautious thanks for the windfall that would seed his retirement) she had passed out. Vilkas had wearily returned his nod as the Companion carried the woman to bed.

And now they were canvassing the wilds of Solstheim again. On horseback.

Teldryn Sero tugged the reins for what felt like the thousandth time as the dozy mare he had been given to ride plucked grass as she walked, munching in contentment. Privately, the sellsword though he could have made better time rolling down the hill in a wine barrel, but as Sigrid was still being coddled by her husband, the Dunmer would have to endure.

Vilkas, along with Teldryn's assistance had dragged the woman to pray before the shrine of Azura found within the temple of the Three at Raven Rock. Had seen health and vigor flow once more, as the Dragonborn shed her splints and bandaging, pulling her new scars this way and that with her infectious grin. The chit couldn't be healthier if she subsisted upon a diet of ground soul gems and mossy dew.

All that, and they were riding these trotting bedrolls back to the Skaal. Her husband, he thought with a private smirk, was quite the worrying wog. For all that the fetcher never smiled and spoke in monosyllabic grunts most days, Vilkas could be surprisingly...tender towards his rashly generous spouse.

Teldryn would relish taunting the warrior about it later. They were on horse, so he would suffer to ride on horseback. For now.

As they followed the coastal road, they heard voices ahead. Vilkas stopped them with a raised fist as he dismounted and crept slowly nearer. Farkas lingered near Sigrid, worry replacing his usual air of disaffected boredom.

Lingering near his charge, Teldryn kept his fingers near his blade, magicka crackling close. Just beneath the surface. And he listened.

"...Your stomach isn't my problem. We'll act when I say we do and not before."

A woman. Couldn't tell by just a voice, but the inflection was pure Nord. A man responded, his frustration similarly accented. "Well, you'd better say something. And soon."

How curious.
Teldryn Sero loved surprises.

*********

Sigrid had not stopped scowling at Bujold since she had laid eyes on the disenfranchised leader. The feeling seemed to be echoed in Bujold the Unworthy.

Vilkas almost didn’t want to ask. Well, he admitted to himself, he would. Just to see what hare-brained, yet completely truthful answer Sigrid would give. The woman always had a method to her madness. Always a reasonable explanation for the most damned strange schemes.

He just wished they had encountered the layabouts who had once resided in the mead hall on a better day. The Dragonborn was usually quite attentive to the requests of others (in his opinion too kindly. Some milk drinkers needed to learn the hard way that nothing in life came free.) But the day was overly warm. Hot, almost. High summer even here in the far north burned bright with scorching sun. His barely healed wife was onry, sore and premenstrual...and apparently held strong opinions about the quality of the warriors they were about to assist.

Vilkas felt only pity for the stubby grey beast people they were about to massacre. The Rieklings, led by an unusually intelligent chief, would not be reasoned with, Sigrid had whispered. They only followed strength. Which seemed utterly lacking in the fighters of Thirsk. Vilkas had heard less bitching from a gaggle of chatty nobles than this lot.

The heat and tension created a rather stiff atmosphere with the other warriors as they climbed to the riekling den that had once been a mighty hall.

Vilkas looked around, soaking in the rich, evergreen scent that mingled with a cold salt snap from an unseen ocean. There was plenty of wildlife here; he could hear rustling in the undergrowth as they walked along, saw birds take flight as deer stood motionless in the trees.

When they finally reached the mountain ridge where the occupied hall lay (ugh, he could smell it from here), he wiped the sweat from his forehead and pushed past the other warriors who had paused, unsure of how to proceed.

He had traveled almost the entirety of Skyrim, even some of Hammerfell and into Cyrodiil, but he was still stunned by the extraordinary view.

The mountains dropped sharply into thick forests of pine, spruce and fir. Even further below, Vilkas could see the cracked white edges of a glacier dipping into the sea. Lake Fjalding gleamed a pure glass blue, reflecting the streaked clouds in a mirrored sky.

Cold and stark, wild and beautiful.

"Gods, I could live here." He whispered to Sigrid, who was preparing for battle with a deep frown. She looked up from examining the edge of her blade and huffed. "Here? Really?" Her expression softened as she took in his awe, looking around with fresh eyes.

"It is beautiful." Pulling a face, she leaned in close, raising on the toes of her boots to whisper in his ear. Nearby, Teldryn Sero slouched against a tree, probably eavesdropping, Vilkas thought with amusement.
An indrawn breath, then a sigh of words. "Bujold has already lost her right to leadership of this warrior hall. This selfish bitch is going to lie to herself and her fighters to keep her position on top."

Despite the sweat trickling down his back, running down his face to drip onto his armor, Sigrid drew even closer.

"Her husband Kust won't believe if I reveal her trickery. Hilund will be sympathetic to her, Elmus is a drunkard. The others are varying degrees of useless sacks of meat. This whole thing will go tits up, no matter what choice I make. Do you really want to stay to fight here with this lot?"

He slowly smiled, feeling her press against him as she wavered on her toes. Bujold was throwing them black looks. Her ire made him feel bold, careless. "Who said I wanted to live with these milk drinkers? Couldn't even preserve their own hall from the little boar riding fuckers."

Finishing his whisper with a nod towards the glacier, Vilkas turned his face, to feel her cheek brush the curve of his chin. So very close to touching lips. "Ready for another wager?"

She made an inarticulate noise in response. "Hmph. If I kill more Rieklings than you, I get to take you fishing. Right over by that glacier."

Her voice was all the sharper, for being kept at a whisper. "If I kill more rieklings than you, you get to buy us all drinks at the Retching Netch. And you have to sing me something. Publicly."

"I'll take that bet." Teldryn Sero unfolded his arms, and with one fluid arc drew his elven blade. A ball of lightning sizzled in his other palm, fingers cradling it carefully. "Farkas and Vilkas against Sigrid and I. You fetchers haven't got a chance. Watch out, here they come."

"Huh?" Catching only the tail end of that conversation, Farkas drew steel with the rest of the warriors as a horde of howling, screeching Rieklings poured from seemingly nowhere.

Vilkas could see them emerge from the hall doors, the dirt scars against the grassy sides of Thirsk where they had burrowed. Some lifted flaps of vegetation; bushes cleverly concealing hidden tunnels.

Smarter than they looked. Running towards the enemy, he felt the wind dry his teeth, bared in a fierce grin. Farkas was right beside him, every movement a shadow of his own as they began slashing and stomping upon the wretched creatures.

Sigrid emitted a howling scream, something vaguely dovah but unfamiliar bloating her form with a wavering, humming power. She seemed to grow tree tall, translucent horns emerging from her helmet and gauntlets.

As Teldryn electrocuted three Rieklings in a bolt of chain lightning, their fellows turned to run, gibbering in fear from the apparition of the Dragonborn as she chased them down, still shouting Dovahzul. Some of the Thirsk warriors were frozen in place as well. One unlucky man was gutted, falling in sudden sharp jerks as blood poured darkly from his open mouth. Rieklings ran across the twitching body, intent on the Nords still standing.

Kust, Bujold's husband, grabbed the spear from the dying man and heaved it at the riekling chief. A good throw. Dancing madly, the chief hopped away just in time, cackling with glee.

"...you diegood redmeat iron hardsuit much for riekling! Ehk! Killkillkill!"

"Laas Yah Nir..." The Dragonborn hissed. Taking advantage of her pause, Vilkas decapitated two Rieklings at once; their heads bouncing Merrily until they lay at his wife's booted, glowing feet.
"Five!" He barked in joy, seeing her mouth pucker in an aggrieved pout. She turned her head left, then right, seeming to look beyond the battlefield.

"You'll never win, Companion! Those heavy antiques you wield are too slow!" As if to demonstrate, Teldryn swung his sword in an upward vertical slash, spilling loops of intestine from a squalling riekling as his blades' downward curve took an arm off its fellow. It clutched the stump, beady black eyes leaking tears as it suddenly leapt, growling and biting into Teldryn's calf as the Dunmer hopped about, trying to dispatch the pest.

"Well fuck you, arms don't count!" Farkas roared back, almost crushing a tiny warrior with his boot, while he pulled his warblade free with a sucking squelch from another riekling's blood soaked chest.

"Just focus, don't overthink it!" Vilkas was about to scream something pithy back to Sigrid, to crow about his leading score when he saw that she wasn't speaking to him at all.

About a dozen of the little vermin had surrounded one of the Thirsk women. Her brown eyes were round and wide like a deer; ready to flee as she searched for an opening to escape. The axe and shield she had brought dropped from nerve less fingers, forgotten in the stink of fear.

"Pick them up!" With a graceful economy of motion, the Dragonborn cut through three riekling backs, kicking them out of the way. "Your weapons! Pick up the axe!"

Shaking in fear, it was like the woman was deaf in her terror. A spear suddenly bloomed from her neck and gut. Those deer eyes were confused, wide still as she tumbled, dead, to the gore soaked earth.

Sigrid screamed; high and furious. Bringing her sword down in a whirling figure eight form, she neatly killed two chattering rieklings in her rage.

She was catching up. Damn. Vilkas had no desire to sing. Following Farkas inside the hall, Vilkas coughed at the sour stench of musk, mangy feet and spoiled alcohol. There were just a few left.

The two handed blades he favored were only slower, he thought smugly as he slashed and gutted his way through the den, if one was slow. Vilkas and Farkas had fought with great swords since they could lift them, shakily, from Eorlund's knotted grasp. The weight felt reassuring; almost comforting in his hands.

Sixteen. He counted, as Farkas kicked aside another, using its rough furred garb to wipe his sword clean. Together, they had killed sixteen.

Wiping sprayed blood from his eyes, Vilkas rather thought they could have handled more, had the woman and her bodyguard not been so industrious.

"Bujold! Wait there, a moment please." Sigrid called out as the surviving warriors trickled into Thirsk. The dragon aspect had faded from sight...she now resembled just a woman clad in dragonscale. An annoyed woman, he thought victoriously as she stomped up to him, a blood soaked Teldryn Sero close behind. "How many?"

Vilkas quirked an eyebrow, curling his lip at her attitude. "Sixteen."

"Dibella's soaked knickers!" Turning, she kicked a nearby riekling corpse viciously with her boot. Inscrutable behind his helmet, Teldryn seemed to look at the twins for a time, then pulled out his boot knife and slit the throat of a nearby riekling. "There, serah. Now we are tied."

Sigrid chucked ruefully, pulling off her helmet. Matted auburn braids spilled out as she scratched her
scalp with gore encrusted fingertips. "Nah. That's not how it works, you sly dog. They won, fair and square."

She heaved a dramatically put-upon sigh as she turned to Vilkas. "Huh. I hope you actually know how to fish. This isn't some ploy to throw me down some crevasse, is it?"

He tilted his head impishly. "Like I'd ever admit it."

"Well. That was...exhilarating." Bujold approached them warily. Vilkas would not have called the face she pulled at the Dragonborn even similar to that emotion. Standing solidly, battle blade still to hand, he flanked Sigrid with his brother and the Dunmer as the other fighters drew closer.

His woman sighed. "Right then. Let's save some travel time." Turning to Bujold, Sigrid's frown deepened. "I have the Sight. You should not attempt to regain Hrothmund's favor, Bujold. He won't bless you."

Scoffing, the leather clad Nord crossed her arms, conscious of the warriors who shuffled nervously behind her. "Oh really. And why should I believe some scruffy lowlander instead of my own past?"

Sigrid's gaze was cold. "Because I know you, Bujold. I've Seen you."

The warriors began to mumur amongst themselves as Sigrids voice rang loud and clear. "You may have been a good leader once." She turned her head and spit into the smelly den they had cleared. "But a great leader would never have allowed her fighters to become so soft, so goddamn bone idle that they could be chased from home by these little shits."

"No leader is better than a poor leader. Hrothmund's shade will tell you the same."

Steel hissed as Bujold drew on her, face bright red with rage. "And who are you, thinking you can speak to me like that?!? I'll tear you apart!"

Choruses of "a fight!" and "make 'er bleed!" resounded as the women tested each other, blades held ready.

Vilkas was not really worried. He stood by his brother, eyeing the exit to their left in case they were turned upon en mass and had to make a quick retreat. He sighed as Sigrid attempted (rather poorly, he thought with a chuckle. She must have really despised the Thirsk leader) to talk Bujold out of fighting. To relinquish her rule peacefully.

But talk seemed to fall unheard on the warrior's ears. It was useless now. Amidst the shouts and hollering, Sigrid's blade met Bujold's.

Metal sparked as metallic edges ground against one another. Circling, the dim firelight glistened, shining red on the swords as Bujold took a mighty swipe, her crazed eyes fixed on Sigrid.

The woman dodged, jumping up on a wooden table and leaping as Bujold smashed that too. Quickly, Sigrid taunted her, picking her way across the snarled mess of bodies, empty mead bottles and overturned chairs, effectively barricading herself from her enraged opponent.

"...call yourself a true Nord?!" Bujold panted, wading her way through the detritus to end the Dragonborn. Vilkas saw Sigrid smile, sadly. Then she took a deep inhale, and shouted, just as Bujold was about to swing again. "Fus Roh Dah!"

The unlucky would-be leader was thrown backwards; body hitting the timbered walls with a sickly crunch.
Hopping off the chair she was standing upon, Sigrid ignored the sudden silence as she strolled almost blithely to where her challenger lay. Lifting her hair out of the way, the Dragonborn lowered her ear and listened for breathing, for sounds of life.

"She is not dead." Sighs of relief and exclamation greeted her statement, which she cut off with a motion of her sword. Her face was still dark. "I think honor has been satisfied. She will remain with you. Alive, for now."

Stepping towards the other warriors, who shrank back as she approached, Sigrid sheathed her sword and folded her arms. Vilkas shared a bemused look with his brother. These milk drinkers were about to receive an earful.

Her voice rumbled thunderously through the walls of Thirsk. "This. This is how would you repay those who take the time to assist you in your hour of need. As Harbinger of Jorrvaskr, I am ashamed that we hold anything in common."

Gesturing once more, Sigrid's face twisted in disgust. "You, warriors of Thirsk, owe me and mine a life debt. For her unworthy life. Watch for my letter. I will call it in soon."

Kicking a table out of her way, Vilkas and the others followed quietly as their Harbinger departed. He could barely make out her mutter as she opened the wooden doors wide, with a groaning creak. "I just hope this shit was worth it."

********

Had it been worth sparing Bujold's life?

Almost nodding off by the fire of the Skaal's Great Hall, Sigrid cuddled back into her husband's arms. It was done. Eyes on the horizon, she reminded herself as she happily watched Farkas and Teldryn verbally abuse the quality of the ashfire mead they were imbibing across from them in their seats.

Sniffing, she smiled at the scent of snowberry soap. Clean again. There was, she reflected, nothing better than baking in the sauna, scrubbing all the nasty crud off with soapy water and brush, then rolling naked in the (shockingly cold!) piles of snow just to jump back in the dry heat of the sauna. Bless the Skaal for living where the cold of winter never really melted. The heat, meshed with sour rieklings and stinging sweat, had been completely unpleasant.

Mmm. Nothing better than that, except maybe the feeling of safety, enfolded in his arms. Discreetly she turned to smell him, shifting on the pile of furs they sat upon.

His voice was rough, warm. "Stop smelling me, woman."

"Hey. You smell good." Taking another deep sniff, she burrowed against his chest as one of his hands came up to stroke her back. He was wearing the oil she had gifted him not long after their honeymoon. Bergamot and sandalwood. Or, she thought wryly, the closest thing to it here, in Nirn. She could still barely make out the musk of his sweat, overlaid by the sap of wood he had carried in for the fire.

The fire cast shadows upon the stairs and furnishings, moving like something unseen, out of reach. She grew pensive staring into the flames as he combed out long strands of her hair with his fingers.
"Vilkas." The burning logs crackled, glowing red embers flaking into the air, dying in grey wisps of ash.

"Do you think I did the right thing, leaving that woman alive?"

She felt him move behind her. "Yes. You said it yourself; those sods rely overly on her judgement."

Sigrid closed her eyes. The dark, after all the brightness of day, was soothing. "We may need them soon. My last courier brought me news that Ulfric is regrouping his forces near Dawnstar."

He grunted, weary of revisiting the same subject. "His soldiers are too few, spread too far to mount any type of offensive action. He'd be a fool to try anything now, with the Moot over and done with."

Ah, yes. Something she had done right by her new homeland. Stretching, she felt light as a butterfly, flitting in the wind. So much better than the weight of her knowledge, burdening her for so long with its implacable consequences. "Best days work I ever did, convincing Balgruuf to rule."

Sigrid felt his chuckle, rich and approving. His arms tightened around her waist. "Hmm. Elisif would have been a nightmare. Too easily swayed. The woman had at least half a dozen advisors."

"And Ulfric even worse, with his bullheaded plan to eliminate all trade and concourse with anyone allied with Cyrodiil. Pretty much everyone." Opening her eyes, she watched lazily as Teldryn Sero and Farkas started singing some Morrowind drinking song.

Farkas's bass growl rumbled pleasantly alongside the Dunmer's smoky tenor. Turning her head, Sigrid looked up at the upside down face of Vilkas blinking above her. "Why won't you sing? I've never heard you sing anything."

She felt his breath puff against her face as he laughed. It smelled like ashfire mead, a hint of fire and honey. "Trust me, you don't want to hear me sing. I can barely carry a tune."

She pouted playfully. "Agh. But you can fish, right? You're not just talking out your ass, with your vast grand experience of fishing in Whiterun's very dry tundra?"

He tickled her for that, her wheezing giggle muffled by her hair as she flopped like a dying horker, desperate to get away. "I'll have you know that unlike some, I have spent considerable time fishing along the Sea of Ghosts. Kodlak took us when we were young, to bolster our winter stores every summer when the slaughterfish spawned."

His hands were no longer tickling, but caressing, as he slipped his warm fingers underneath the coarse fabric of her sleep shirt to trace the curve of her belly.

Leaning against his chest, she relaxed, shivering as his calluses scraped the tender skin. "Huh. Well, at least it's summer now. I'd hate to fall in the sea from a fishing boat here during the winter."

"Soft. You should test yourself against the cold more often, wife." His hands slipped further, covered by the angle of his legs as he palmed her beneath her leggings, tracing tiny delicious circles around her throbbing clit... in full sight of the Skaal and their companions.

Sigrid made a tiny eep of protest. Not the place for this. But she was trapped. If she moved out of his embrace, anyone could see the subtle movements of his hand inside her pants. Writhing, she bit her lip as she tried not to make a sound. His other hand sought her breast, cupping it firmly as his thumb rolled the tip of her nipple, delicately flicking it until it stood tight and trembling.

Before she could voice a half hearted complaint, he had removed his hands and was pulling a heavy
fur throw over them both. "Bastard..." she hissed as his face remained bland, pulling away when she tried to place his hands where they had rested.

Squirming uncomfortably, Sigrid blew her hair out of her face with a frustrated sigh. His hands moved to help, running through the damp strands until they lay smooth upon her shoulders. She sandwiched herself in the crook of his arm, feeling his chest rise and fall with his quietly concealed laughter.

Damn him. Damn him to Oblivion for being such an insufferable tease. "You already won, you cocky shit. Don't get carried away."

She felt the fur pelts slide against them as he pulled them beneath, completely covered. In the dark, she gasped as he pulled her against him, his mouth finding hers. Opening her lips, she traced her tongue against his lower lip, feeling him tighten his grip as he claimed her tongue for his own.

It was over far too soon. As footsteps neared them, Vilkas made a noise of irritation. Licking her upper lip in apology, he pulled down their furs just in time to see Farkas and Teldryn approach, their faces wreathed in offended humor.

"Well, I was going to ask if there were any spare furs, serah, but you can go ahead and keep those ones."

Sigrid rolled her eyes, aware that she looked completely ravished, with her hair standing on end and her mouth swollen from kisses. Her husband scoffed, his arm still around her, stroking gently. "Go find your own bed partner, elf."

"Oh, I keep asking. But he just won't give in to my many charms."

Farkas stretched, dwarfing the Dunmer with the breadth of his arms as he yawned. "I'm a married man. You should ask the Skaal. Fairly sure they have a pet snow bear you can cozy up to, somewhere. Or a spare horker. Grey wrinkly skin, but you wouldn't mind, since you're covered in more of the same aye?"

The two continued their light banter as they stole some furs from the pile Vilkas had cocooned them in. Arranging themselves around the firepit, they prepared for a well deserved nights rest.

Sigrid felt her eyes slowly droop as Vilkas spoke softly to the other men. She could feel his chest rumble with the words that her ears slowly tuned out in favor of sleep.

His hands playing with her hair was the last thing she remembered before dreaming stole Sigrid away.
"Trauma destroys the fabric of time. In normal time you move from one moment to the next, sunrise to sunset, birth to death. After trauma, you may move in circles, find yourself being sucked backwards into an eddy or bouncing like a rubber ball from now to then to back again....In the traumatic universe the basic laws of matter are suspended: ceiling fans can be helicopters, car exhaust can be mustard gas."

- David J. Norris, The Evil Hours

Nothing was ever easy.

She had not bothered to speak, to reason with the elf, Vilkas thought numbly. Pulling her blade free from the dying grasp of the Thalmor soldier, Sigrid stormed into the abandoned lodge, leaving him in stunned silence as the elf woman reached out to him. Just a twitch, really. Those long slender fingers stretching, grass green eyes wide in disbelief...then -

Dead.

Standing there, he decided not to go in after her. She could come out with the prisoner, and he could help her later. Somehow.

Everything was turning out so wrong.

It had started with the Skaal.

********

"Outsider! I remember you." Baldor Iron-Shaper cried out in relief.

Sigrid loosed the ropes that bound the Skaal blacksmith. Distantly, echoing with screams, the shifting snapshots of futures infinite played in her mind.

A gruesome gift from the unwitting favor she had bestowed upon the Daedric Prince of Knowledge and Fate.

Her hands trembled as she tossed the cut rope and stepped back. Looking around, her breathing slowly calmed as Sigrid saw no torture table. No racks of gleaming implements to rip and tear and slice. No hammers to crush the bones or smash the nerves.

It was not the same. It could not be the same. Solstheim, not Falkreath. She was in the here and now, not then.
Slowly, the Skaal's voice penetrated her awareness.

"...Thank the All-Maker that you have come! These accursed elves have taken me from my home."

The words seemed to come from a far distance, from someone else. Sigrid felt nearly airborne, her heart beating rapidly; a bird trapped in a cage. Holding her breath, the pain in her chest eased as she forced herself to be calm. She had to be calm.

"Okay. Elves. Are you hurt badly? Do you need healing?"

"No, my wounds are not serious. I don't think the elves were trying to harm me. Perhaps they intended to frighten me. At worst, I have a few bruises to show for my ordeal." The man sounded almost puzzled, as she walked him out of the derelict dwelling.

"Baldor, right?" At his nod, she paused by the door. Licking her lips, she realized how incredibly thirsty, how parched she was. Swallowing, she tasted salt and rust.

Wiping her face, the Dragonborn pulled her hand back in confusion. She was covered in fresh, almost sweet smelling blood. Huh. Something to wonder about later. "Why would the Thalmor abduct you? It's not like you Skaal worship Talos or anything."

"I do not know this word Thalmor, but if you mean elves, they were trying to learn the secrets of forging Stalhrim." Emboldened by Sigrid's slow nod, he rushed on, almost eager to share. "Their leader, an elf named Ancarion, has a map. He says that it shows the location of a secret location of stalhrim."

As she paused at the door, confused, Baldor took it upon himself to explain. "Enchanted ice, Stalhrim. As hard as iron and cold as death. Stalhrim can be forged into deadly weapons, but the art is known only to the smiths of the Skaal. And if not for your timely rescue, Skaal-friend, it would be the elves' knowledge as well."

The door banged roughly against the stone walls. She sucked in a breath of clean sea air, refreshing after the moldy hay and dust inside.

There was Vilkas, with the strangest expression on his face. A dead Altmer soldier lay at his feet. Sigrid shook her head; memory seemed to play only in sharp, short bursts at the moment. Her husband was so smart. He could tell her what was wrong with her once she spared the time to ask.

Later, when her thoughts ran in orderly lines once more.

Her words were low, cold. It didn't sound like her voice at all. "Where can I find this Ancarion?"

Licking his lips, Baldor Iron-Shaper's eyes flitted from her to Vilkas, then back. "They have a ship. They took me there, and showed me the map. You will find it on the northern coast of the island. Please, do not let Ancarion make his weapons."

Dimly, Sigrid realized she was bleeding. Her own blood, this time, as her nails cut into the flesh of her palms. She willed her hands to open from the tight fists. The words she heard were nonsensical mush as reluctantly she opened her hands.

Blood tipped claws, not hands. The claws of a dragon. *Dovahkin, Hi los mey wah lorot hi vust filok hin hahnu!*

"... Kill him or let him live, but take the map from him. It belongs with the Skaal. I will return to the village. When you have the map, please bring it to me there. And thank you. May the All-Maker
bless your days."

She never noticed him leave. She was still staring in horror at her hands.

*********

Traveling to the northernmost tip of Solstheim took two days of steady riding on horseback.

They had bid the blacksmith farewell at the outskirts of his village. Vilkas did not want to bring Sigrid near anyone else when she was in this state.

It was supposed to be so simple, he thought in rising despair. Drop Farkas and Teldryn off to the docks on their way back to Jorrvaskr with the gold they had earned. Venture north, to take his wife on a nostalgic fishing trip that, hopefully, would end with their clothes in a pile on the floor of their tent as they spent the night making love.

Didn't they deserve a moments rest, after a summer that seemed more like a bard's tale of demons, daedra and heroes than anything solid or real?

He had not factored in the trauma of another Thalmor rescue.

I wish we had never heard that damned conversation that began all this, Vilkas thought wretchedly as he checked and circled their destination on their map. Northshore Landing. A mere speck of a dock, used by the desperate, the poor and those who wished to remain unnoticed.

The news that a Skaal had been seen, captured by elves headed southeast had provoked an immediate and unusual reaction from Sigrid. As Vilkas carefully gathered the particulars, asking for any other clues that might assist them in finding the missing man, she just stood there. Stood silent, stone cold. Never responding when he prodded her. Not even when he raised his voice could he get a response. Her face might as well have belonged to a Dwemer Centurion, gilded and blank.

It was not until he grabbed her hand, as she turned her horse down the same circular path three times in a row, that she lashed out.

...and looked at him in astonishment, as Vilkas winced, blood trickling from the furrows she had scratched above his eyes.

She thought her hands were bound, he thought grimly as she mindlessly flexed her wrists, her ankles. Took off her boots and wiggled her toes, unusually focused on them.

Sigrid had apologized, her words curt and quiet. He had nodded politely. Gritted his teeth as they continued, seriously reconsidering the wisdom of pursuing this task to its end.

Those brandy-gold eyes were so far away; back in the dank, cold room where she had nearly died. Tortured, frozen and starved by none other than the Thalmor bastards he had ended, long ago.

That first night they stopped to rest on their journey to Northshore Landing, she had sat unblinking before the fire. Readying himself mentally for anything, Vilkas cautiously sat himself down across from her. He had already checked for weapons...after injuring him, she had dully consented to be stripped of her sword and dagger while they camped. She was clad in a simple linen shift, her sleeping furs resting in her lap.

"Sigrid. Do you...will you talk about what is troubling you?" Picking up a broken branch, he began
picking it apart, urging himself to give her space. Let her come to him with her thoughts. Don't look, don't see her like this, don't -

He knew, after spending nearly a lifetime at Jorrvaskr, that combat affected men and women in different ways. He remembered Skjor's worst nights as a boy, when the Great War was still fresh in everyone's minds. The endless screaming - the nights Skjor spent pleading to someone, begging for forgiveness. Vilkas had checked his room the morning after, curious only to find no one else there. And more rarely, there were choked, racking sobs...only partially muffled in furs.

Jergen himself had warned Farkas and Vilkas never to sneak up on him or any veteran, to catch them unaware. The simple and ordinary often changed in the mind of a wounded warrior into the horrors of battle. A friend might see his comrade in a moment of stress and attack him as a foe; only realizing his mistake after death had been dealt, all too late.

Kodlak had taught him further, after Vilkas had killed his first man. He could still recall the sick, restless dread that plagued him after clumsily gutting the Nord bandit who sought his life. Memory was a funny thing. Vilkas could still remember the exact shape of the man's nose, his warpaint, even the sky blue of his eyes. The sound he made, a hoarse grunt as Vilkas's blade parted his skin, slicing so easily inside to spill the glistening, weighty loops of intestine on the man's feet. He had finished the battle, protecting his brother until there were no more threats, no bandits left alive.

Then, he had doubled over, vomiting mere feet away from those sightless eyes that somehow still held him in judgement. He'd never tell his wife, but it was fairly common for the newly blooded to react in such a way.

It was taking a life. He would have been more worried if Sigrid had shown no emotion at all. Ambjorn had been like that.

The old Harbinger had explained that while battle was often raw enough to spark nightmares, it was the morally ambiguous tasks, the jobs that involved the deaths of innocents that tainted the soul.

Vilkas would have preferred not to examine the many causes of his wife's terrors. He could think of too many; some he would rather forget himself. But avoiding any argument smacked of cowardice. He would be there for her. She was his.

"Sigrid?"

For so long, she remained silent. He tried not to fidget as the sun san slowly beneath the horizon and the logs began to burn low. He was starting to believe that this was not the night she would choose to speak. Until she did.

"...Five years, two months and eight days."

Almost shredding the branch he held in the rush of relief that followed, Vilkas kept his features calm. Implacable. "Go on."

He watched as she twisted the mammoth ivory tusk bracelet on her wrist, fingering the deeply etched grooves. "Five years, two months and eight days to the morning. I know it happened, even though it happened to me in...in a different me."

_Fucking Hermaeus Mora._ "What happened?"

Her hazel eyes snapped to his. For a moment, she looked almost present. Aware. "The Thalmor took me. Took me to that fortress, and kept me. You never came."
The ivory circle spun around and around. "I almost died, all alone on the ship after Sanyon decided I was prime material to make a bid for a higher position of power. The rocking made me so ill, until I couldn't hold down even the gruel they sometimes remembered to feed me. I...lost my feet. They cut them off, here, at the ankles when the rot stank too badly."

"They kept me in a cell. It was exactly eight by ten feet, if one can count feet without feet. I...shuffled. On my knees."

She giggled breathily, continuing only when Vilkas gestured painfully for her to continue.

"They...started bringing me out for special meetings. The cream of the crop. All the highest and most influential Altmer would hold these...parties. They gagged me and paraded me around with a collar and leash."

The branch had been mauled into a pile of splinters. Forcing himself to relax, Vilkas focused on breathing. In and out.

If she could tell him something so fucking traumatizing; worse in the sense that it had not happened, but still could...then he would listen in stoic calm.

"I was... praised for revealing truths, possible outcomes for...for the Dominion. They fed me...treats. Shocked me when I misbehaved."

Her expression remained blank. "Once, as they celebrated their conquest of both Skyrim and Cyrodiil, they held a grand ball. Not that I saw much of it. They chained me to a wall, with other Nord and Imperial humans and took turns, taking their pleasure."

"I...think. Though I am not sure, that that was what broke me, in the end."

"I wasn't a woman, to them. I wasn't human. Fuck, a human didn't register on their radar as a sentient being."

The part of him that was not utterly horrified at this slow, seeping of words wondered what radar was.

"It...it took five years, two months and eight days for the mages to decide that they had drained every drop of possible usefulness from me. For my life had lost its worth, once I could no longer predict the future with any degree of accuracy."

She closed her eyes. "Don't ask me to tell you how I died. Damn it. Look. I know its not real. I can...keep the visions back, most of the time. It's...fuck, how do I explain?"

Vilkas noticed she was shaking. Before he registered moving, he was there, tucking her fur pelt securely around her shoulders. Managing a weak grin, Sigrid continued to shake, her mouth opening and closing as words failed her.

He was about to say something. Anything, but hopefully something soothing and respectful that didn't express just how much he wished he could have been there in that timeline, killing anything elven that dared to look at her when she spoke again.

"...It's like a device in my world called a television. I told you about this, right? All those moving pictures telling stories, changing with every flip of the channel. Flip flip flip -" Sigrid made a movement with her hand, like pushing a lever repeatedly with her thumb. "...and that's exactly what the visions are like."
"Most days, the television is turned to what we are doing now. I don't think about what was, or could be. When I do, it...it branches, into multiple infinite branching possibilities. Logarithms to the tenth, you know? Oh, damn it you wouldn't."

"-and it becomes this roar of sound and I can't. I can't deal with it. Sad, happy, none of it. It rides me, until I am forced to watch it. To see it through."

Shaking, she touched him on the arm, so tentatively. "That happened when I heard about Baldor. My future...life as a Thalmor slave was paraded in front of my eyes. I couldn't help it, couldn't stop myself when you, you touched me and I -"

He held her, tightly and without words as she fell into his arms and cried and cried. Pouring out her sorrow, her horror at hurting him, all the buried stress and grief fountaining out until she was still, slumped in his arms.

She was sleeping now. He would not bind her choices again. How could he take away a chance to redeem herself in her own eyes? Out of sight of the camp, he applied fresh snow and crushed elves ear to the cuts.

Only then allowing the tears to slide, unseen, down his cheeks.

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Ancarion sat on the gently rocking deck of his ship. He had spread four maps before him on the table his subordinate had dragged from below deck. Held down with stones on their corners against any stray gust of wind, his dark slanted eyes narrowed even further as he compared the markers, seeking for signs he may have missed.

Skyrim. Solstheim. Cyrodiil. And the Skaal map, the most crudely illustrated of all.

Somewhere on this island lost to time lay the materials and skill used to create the weapons of the Nord kings of old. Truly, a worthy pursuit of energy and funding. His superiors in the Thalmor hierarchy may have sought Stalhrim and the knowledge of its creation for personal leverage against the people of Skyrim...

...but he, Ancarion, awarded the highest accords in his class for historical archaeology, was excited. If the blacksmith would only cooperate, there would be so much he wanted to ask. To create anew.

Ancarion templed his tapering hands, allowing himself to drift in a brief fantasy that was more real now than it ever had felt in the sunlit gardens of the Summerset Isles. He would sit where the mighty Atmorans once ruled in Benkongerike's Great Hall, run his fingers along the mighty rock sculptures and priceless sarcophagi that contained those long dead heroes, laid to rest in a treasure trove of Stalhrim ore. Only the mightiest warriors were graced with such favor.

Every scrap of enchanted ice his team uncovered would be lovingly labeled and studied. Every cracked pot, linen shroud and embalming tool would tell him something new; a piece to the great puzzle of the ages.

He just needed to purchase or discover a Nordic pickaxe in fair condition. Then, with the Skaal's help, the work of the scholar could begin.
Vaguely, still trying to retain his vision of Atmora reborn, he noted that the soldier who stood watch was conversing with two of the locals.

"You're interfering in official Thalmor business. You will leave immediately."

Curiosity piqued, Ancarion strode towards the landing deck. He heard the Nord woman speak in a firm, no-nonsense tone. "I'm here about the Stalhrim map you elves took from the Skaal."

*Ah. By Zenithar, this would set him weeks behind schedule.* Sweeping past the soldier on guard, Ancarion folded his hands within his robes, rubbing his fingers to ward off the ever present chill as he scrutinized the intruders. The two Nords stiffened as they noticed him, the man in particular sizing up his enchanted robes, draped hood and marked lack of weapons.

"So you know my purpose here, then? I suppose you must have found that dullard of a blacksmith." Pulling one hand free, Ancarion wriggled his fingers, allowing a trickle of flame to dance and play between his knuckles.

"Unfortunately for you, my mission here is also a secret. To protect it, I have no choice but to silence you. Now, give me one good reason that I should not kill you where you stand?"

It would be an unnecessary waste to kill these yokels. But they didn't need to know that.

The woman turned her gaze to him. Just like that, his bravado leaked away, like a punctured sieve.

Looking into those wild, rage blinded eyes Ancarion could see the legacy of the primitive Nord berserkers who ran, careless of their mortality, naked onto the field of war. The historical tomes spoke of the faces streaked with woad dye, the warpaint that was their only decoration aside from a vast array of bladed or blunt weaponry.

Ancarion remembered tittering nervously with classmates as their books described in detail how the men fought fully erect; adrenaline fueling the lust that sought blood for their blades rather than flesh.

Though, he tilted his head with inner amusement as he looked over the two Nords and their savage finery, after meeting these two he would believe the rumors. Even the hearsay, immediately silenced if a teacher caught wind of it, that whispered of massive orgies and profane Nord rituals performed after a successful victory.

He could definitely believe that these two would fight naked to the death, fully prepared to knock boots afterwards.

Almost drawing her blade completely out of its sheath, Ancarion and his two soldiers also prepared for an imminent fight...until the man stayed her arm.

"No, Sigrid. This is unnecessary." His guttural accent was interesting, the Thalmor decided. Falkreath? Or Whiterun? It was broad enough to be either.

"They kidnapped Baldor. They've murdered and raped indiscriminately for decades. Vilkas, you know what they did. You know what they could do." Chin jutting defiantly, the woman struggled to escape the man's grip.

Now, her accent was a mystery. Almost Breton in its flatness. But not like any Forsworn he had heard mimicry of; no, more similar to the High Rock speech was this one's voice. Odd.

"I have never pillaged or plundered, seeing as I am but a humble archaeologist and history enthusiast. But our secret is now an open one. I will admit, Nord, we are not making the progress we had
hoped."

As he spoke, the man and woman seemed to share a unspoken conversation. Ancarion waited, magicka flaring from his fingertips, to see how this would turn out. He would not make the mistake of his predecessors in thinking that those who fought with strength of arms were lesser than those who used spells. He had seen too many coffins shipped back to the Summerset Isles to fall for that brand of idiocy.

They shared a look for a moment more. Then, as though the wind had been taken right out of her sails, the woman hung her head. The man did not release her wrist, but instead entwined their fingers in a tight grip. Turning to Ancarion, the Altmer was surprised to see nothing but cool censure in his icy, almost glacier white gaze. "Baldor is free of you. But that map belongs to the Skaal people. It would give you and your people honor, were you to return it."

Stroking his chin, Ancarion considered. He had already made triplicate copies of all pertinent information from the map. There was still the matter of obtaining the Nordic pickaxe. And, he thought with the slightest shade of regret, he had not considered retrieving the blacksmith as kidnapping. He had been overjoyed to discover that one who worked in the old ways was even alive. So, he had ordered his associates to fetch him.

He might have been a tad rash, come to think of it. "Hmm. Perhaps you are right, the venture might be more trouble than it's worth."

The Altmer nodded at the two natives. He received a very small nod in return from the man. The woman simply scowled at him. "Very well, you have convinced me. We will depart the island shortly and seek out weapons elsewhere."

Truly, there was nothing else to be said. Carefully rolling the Skaal map, he presented it with a flourish to the woman, who looked as though she wished he would drop dead on the spot. The man seemed to agree with his line of thinking. Once they possessed the map, he tugged her away by the hand he still held tightly in his own, shooting the mage one last, considering look.

Watching them go, Ancarion sighed. Two rough and ready warriors, off on a noble quest to return a map that certainly led to treasure. Stories had been written of such deeds.

Calling for wine to be brought to him, at once, Ancarion relaxed back in his newly imported, upholstered chair.

Now, how had that daydream continued? Oh yes. The return of Atmora to Solstheim, the icy weapons of old just waiting to be discovered in haunted tombs of the glorious dead!

He smiled as a sweating, nervous soldier brought him a carafe of wine and the new quills he had asked for before all the interruptions.

"You there. I will also require my volume titled 'The Barbaric Tribesmen of the North.' I need to refresh my memory on...certain Skyrim traditions, to verify their accuracy."

Looking up, he noticed with annoyance that the soldier was lingering, glancing with poorly concealed covetousness at the wine.

"Well, go on!"

Chapter End Notes
Dovahzul translation:

Dovahkin, Hi los mey wah lorot hi vust filok hin hahnu! Dragonborn, you are a fool to think you can escape your dreams!

Also, the part about running naked into battle is totally true for the Celts and some Scandinavians waaay back when. The erection thing terrified the Romans who were conquering bits of Great Britain back in the early Middle Ages, so obviously they wrote all about it.

Hey, if I saw a screaming naked dude sporting a woody and something bladed and sharp coming at me, I would run too.
I can't believe he pulled it off. Sigrid marveled as she picked her way through clumps of seaweed and gravel.

They were somewhere north of the glacier that crackled and crawled beneath Thirsk Hall. The icy white expanse was rimmed with broken evergreens and split boulders. A dramatic backdrop to an even more lovely sight.

Vilkas had his back turned to her, busy untying the mooring lines to the boat she assumed they would be fishing on. Balancing on a flat rock, she stopped to appreciate the form of him; the defined muscles of his back and shoulders flexing beneath his tunic as he gathered up the heavy ropes to toss them aside.

How the hell did I get this lucky? Stepping between clusters of mussels and oysters clinging to bare rock, she picked up the hem of her skirt to avoid being drenched by the rising tide.

Bowing to whimsy, she had forgone her cumbersome armor just this once. After all, her husband had reminded her, wearing armor was more of a survival hazard on a boat than a help. Tossed overboard, even in her light dragonscale plate she would sink like a stone.

And once in awhile, even the Dragonborn deserved to feel pretty on a date.

It had been three days since they had left the Thalmor agent to his own devices. Sigrid had been so sure he would not give up the Skaal map without a fight. She realized, strangely, that she was rather glad to be proven wrong. Ancarion had seemed so... young.

Her visions had come and gone since that day they left the bookish Altmer in peace; trilling like a rickety film reel in her subconsciousness. If she ignored the niggling feeling of more, always wanting to know more ... she could quash the grisly previews before they took over her senses.

Meditation helped, she mused she she stood there watching Vilkas prepare for the day. The Greybeards had taught her breathing techniques that calmed the white noise in her mind, blunted the draconian tendency to rage. Done often enough, she found it enhanced the fine control of her Thu'um with the side benefit of blanking out any unnecessary distractions.

Like Daedric gifted prophecy.

Gods, but she despised that she truly was a Seer now, for real.

More than ever, she had become a walking time bomb. A risk to anyone who guessed the full extent of her power. The Thalmor were still out there, with who knew how many copies of a dossier that named the outworlder Sarah Ferguson.

Sarah was dead, Sigrid thought with bittersweet sadness. Had been for some time. The woman they searched for from another world was only a ghost now. The Thalmor were still out there, with who knew how many copies of a dossier that named the outworlder Sarah Ferguson.

The newly crowned High King Balgruuf had disbanded the Thalmor Embassy and the Aldmeri Dominions’ special license to capture and question suspected Talos worshippers. But they were still given leave to travel the land; insomuch as they followed the laws. Thalmor like Ancarion, searching for what Shor only knew here, in the far northern wastes.

And, she reminded herself, Thalmor like that plotting, snooty twat sadist, Elenwen.
Peaceful observance of the White-Gold Concordat. Right. Like Elenwen would suddenly decide that her life was wasted in politics, and take up charity work for disenfranchised orphans of the civil war, knitting them ickle blankies. Highly unlikely.

She would worry what the nasty elf bitch was up to later. Her courier spies had been strangely silent about the previous Thalmor leader since she had lost her job and been unceremoniously booted from Solitude. That had to have rankled. Something, anything was bound to turn up eventually.

But not today. She rubbed her hands against the chill that still clung this late in the summer. Today, she was on vacation.

And, she thought admiringly as Vilkas turned to her, smiling...vacation was looking swoon-worthy.

He had shaved off his beard. His smooth skin threw the innate beauty of his masculine features in their best light. Almost, she thought, almost stumbling over the strangeness of wearing a dress, almost he looked like someone she would have recognized from her old world. A queer mash-up of Clive Owen and Michael Fassbender...but still a je nes sais quoi that was Vilkas alone.

“Well, hello. I have to warn you...my wife the Dragonborn is lurking somewhere around here.” He snarked, taking in the sterling grey gown of wool that had threads of embroidery shot through the hems and dagger edged sleeves. Almost like tarnished silver, Njada had commented, rubbing the thick cloth between her fingers.

It was one of her favorites. Particularly when it was torn off and thrown in a messy wad by the bed. She had high hopes for such an undressing tonight.

“Hello to you too! I have to say, I like what I see.” Peering into the boat, she could see bundled furs, fishing supplies, and even a crate of her favorite alcohol. Only brewed in small batches by an elderly sour Dunmer outside Riften, Sigrid had developed a taste for the sharp, tangy apple ale after visiting years ago.

He remembered the ale I like. Feeling the start of a silly smile pulling at the corners of her mouth, Sigrid took Vilkas’s hand as he helped her into the boat, whooping as she nearly fell face first with the rocking of the waves.

His hands steadied her, lingering around her waist. “Whoa there. Trust me...you don't want to swim here. The slaughterfish can grow beyond the length of a man.”

“Gee. Sounds fun.” Looking askance at the boat, which had a mast and sail and everything, Sigrid bit her lip. “Are you sure you can handle this...ship, canoe...er, thing?”

Giving her an arch look, her husband loosened the last anchoring line, sending the ship floating free. “It's a sloop, hardly a large boat at all. Just enough for the two of us to handle, but not so small that we tip over, and risk freezing to death in these waters.”

“If you say so.” Watching as he lashed the newly furled sail down, Sigrid looked out at the water. It was a clear afternoon, the North Sea a hazy leaden blue. “Fishing is so...boring. I really can't believe you picked this as your prize.”

Chortling, Vilkas handed her a sharp hooked spear and some rope. “Going to make you eat those words, woman. Here, tie these together. We’re going after the giants, today.”
“Aaugh! I take it back! I take it all back!” She screamed as a monstrous slaughterfish the size of a great white shark thrashed wildly, caught and bloodied by their hooks and spears.

The scales glittered in the light as it breached, revealing a long snout absolutely packed with hooked fangs. The curled fins thumped the side of the boat with a wham ,toppling Sigrid over. Reaching for something solid, she grabbed hold of the mast and held on for dear life.

At the prow, Vilkas was pulling the line tight, laughing like a maniac. “Look at it!” He screamed. “Look at the size of it!”

The fish thumped the side of the boat once more, the planks heaving with an ominous cracking sound. “I see it, you crazy bastard! Just let Jaws there swim away, and maybe it will let us live!”

Wind whipped his hair into his eyes as he turned, still grinning wildly. “Ah, not when we're this close! We’ll let it tow us around the bay for a bit. Then, once she tires…” He held a wicked looking fillet knife aloft and brandished it towards his prey, “…we feast!”

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It took three hours of the slaughterfish dragging their ship around the bay at jetski fast, hurl-inducing speeds before they brought their catch, slowly, haltingly on board.

Sigrid managed to peel herself from the mast to help with the work of skinning and filleting the massive thing. Leaving the spiny remnants on the beach for the bears, Vilkas tacked the sail for the northern part of Solstheim, fielding all her questions with a smug, silent grin. Eventually she sat down on the seat with a huff, as he bundled up the sail and hauled out the oars.

-Only to be surprised, yet again, as the ship glided into a yawning opening in the bulk of the glacier.

Light filtered through the thick ice in a bluish glow. As Vilkas carefully steered them inward, pushing off the cave walls with his oars, Sigrid craned her neck to take in the scale of what lay before her.

The white walls climbed to reach heights that soared to an incredible elevation when suddenly a light nearly blinded her. Shielding with her hand, Sigrid's eyes refocused enough to see that they had entered a sea cave lined with ice, lit by the light from a jagged crevasse high above them.

“Where did you find out about this place?” She marvelled, helping him tie the gently rocking boat to the small ledge of land that spilled against a frozen cliff. Black gravel crunched underfoot as they surveyed the cave. Damn, this place must be nearly as wide as a football field. It had a hushed quality to it, sacred almost.

Like a cathedral. She touched the opaque, slick wall and hovered her hands over the ice, feeling it nearly radiate with the cold.

“Your friend Teldryn Sero recommended this as the perfect quiet getaway.” Pulling out a basket, Vilkas displayed a jazbay pie with a mock-salute. “Only the best for the Harbinger.”

“Nice. Remind me to give him a raise.”

*****
Slimy and unappetizing the slaughterfish may have looked swimming for its life, Sigrid could not deny that it tasted divine when grilled in butter, wrapped in salt and frost mirriam leaves

*Five star Michelin cuisine, caveman style.* She tucked in with relish, following Vilkas's lead as he handed her eidar cheese to demolish; crusty bread rolls and slices of jazbay pie all washed down with light crisply sweet ale.

Feeling starved after the business of fishing and setting up camp, in no time they had sated their hunger and lay drowsing by the fire.

Sigrid yawned, stretching fully against the softness of her sleeping furs. Her husband was lying next to her, slowly savoring the roe from the slaughterfish, collected in a bowl.

They were a delicacy, he had explained to his nonplussed wife. She had dared to crunch down two of the gooey, strongly fish flavored marble sized eggs. It made her think of what eyeballs might taste like, which even after years of sampling the weirdest shit Skyrim had to offer (ash hoppers, skeever hide, rancid fish oil dip, BLEUGH mammoth cheese that tasted like sweaty feet) had been too much. She declined any further samples.

He was now licking his fingers clean. She watched in fascination, feeling something pull deep inside her as each finger entered his mouth in a smooth glide of motion, slowly sucked free with a small pop.

“If I kiss you right now, will you taste like fish guts?”

“Come over here and find out.” Rolling over, Vilkas neatly pinned her as she, laughing even as she turned her face *far* away, batted away his hands. “What's wrong? No kiss, after all this hard, brutal work to please you? You're a cruel woman.”

She tilted her head, giggling as he rubbed his head against her stomach. “No way! Not until you clean that taste out of your mouth!”

“I'll just have to replace the taste with something sweeter.” Working quickly, he unlaced her bodice with quick deft hands. She helped him pull the salt-sea smelling wool off of her, writhing beneath his appraising gaze as he took the time to unwrap each leg from the clinging fabric folds, lingering to place a kiss on her ankles, moving even higher to touch lips to the soft skin of her inner knee.

Shivering more from suspense than the cold, Sigrid closed her eyes. *He was so good at this.*

“She managed to gasp out as he reverently spread her apart, the chill making gooseflesh stand out on her thighs. “I've...erm...noticed that you seem to like, uh, going down on me.”

His quiet laughter teased the tender skin of her folds as he opened her wide. She nearly fell off the sleeping furs as he gave her a long, slow lick. “What gave me away?”

“Guh.” Damn it, she would voice this thought. Even with her rapidly dwindling capacity for speech, as he did something with his tongue that had her yanking his hair in her fists. “Stop that. I'm trying to talk to you about...oh fuck... something important.”

Sighing, reluctantly he pulled her knees together, down and folded his arms upon them. Laying his chin atop his arms, his cool grey eyes fairly twinkled with wickedness. “I'm all yours.”

Every deliberate exhale he made brushed the sensitive skin of her belly. Feeling her nipples tingle with the sensation, Sigrid tightened her fists against the resulting coil of lust that pooled inside her. “Me too. Ugh...how do I say this.”
“You...make me feel so good. I want to return the favor, and um. I've been wondering, since you are
way more experienced than me, if there is anything we haven't done that, er, you'd like to do.”

He gave her a pointed look. “I seem to remember a few Shouts of yours that proved your superiority
long ago.”

Sigrid felt a full body flush creep down from her neck as she remembered that
night. The night she
thought she was going to her death, and had chosen to be brave.

It was a different bravery she required now, she decided as Vilkas waited for her to respond. Nearly
tongue tied, she watched with bated breath as those husky-pale eyes slowly darkened, hungry with
the knowledge of how the night would end.

Without breaking eye contact, he slowly rubbed his smooth shaved cheeks along her stomach. His
tongue darted out to taste the curve of her hip.

Before she gave up and gave in to the throbbing demand that had lain so unsatisfied for weeks,
Sigrid gently but firmly pulled his hair again. “Don't distract me. Are there, um, any kind of kinks
that you...or anyone else in Skyrim, really...enjoy that I wouldn't have a clue about?”

Easing down, Vilkas smoothed the flesh of her hips as he buried his nose in the soft curls of her
womanhood. “You're trying to kill me, aren't you woman. Trying to talk about sex acts after so long
apart. Fuck , let me just do them, and I will wipe away all worry from your mind.”

She ached as his tongue lapped at her slowly. “Look. I'm... oh please, yes there... completely out of
my depth here. I've never...um...had anal sex, much less anything exotic that you have probably done
forever.”

She felt more than heard him laugh. “I've done that. But you'll be disappointed if you think I find
only the unique and...kinky to be erotic.”

Noticing her look at him pleadingly, he pushed himself to rest once more on her lower abdomen, a
bit higher this time. His weight was reassuring, and she squirmed slightly as she felt the heavy heat of
him, hard against her thigh.

Vilkas heaved a put upon sigh. She might have thought he was irritated, had she not been transfixed
by the warm regard he held for her as he spoke. “Maybe for someone like you who has had...what?
Two lovers? Feeling pressure to...to perform might seem intimidating.”

He made a thoughtful sound, still looking at her. “When I was a young man, the fires of lust burned
overly strong in me. I was thus chosen to participate in a midsummer ceremony honoring Dibella,
goddess of beauty and love.”

His hands squeezed her hands, reassuring her as her breath caught. “I don't remember much. It was a
fertility festival, so you might imagine how we spent our time.” His lips quirked in an almost
imperceptible smile.

She slowly eased down, tension slipping away as she listened. His thumb began rubbing her
knuckle, back and forth. “They gave us...some sort of drink that was meant to lower our inhibitions.
The better to serve Dibella, I would wager.”

“I think in the ritual I fucked and was fucked by a number of men and women alike. I awakened,
arse brutally sore, absolutely shit faced, and wrapped in the limbs of an orcess, a Dunmer and a
goat.”
Sigrid burst out laughing, feeling him shake with the same emotion as well. Their laughter reverberated against the ice, making her feel almost warm.

Oh, this was just too goddamn ridiculous. Why was she so worried? She had never been this...anxious in her previous life. Then again, she thought with an almost instant sobriety, she hadn't had quite this situation to deal with either.

Realizing that Vilkas was waiting with arched brow for an actual verbal response, she grimaced. “Bryce hated cunnilingus.”

Seeing him grow instantly tense, as he did whenever she mentioned anything pertaining to her past, Sigrid plowed on. “He adored blowjobs, and don’t get me wrong. The sex was great most of the time, but…” she blushed under Vilkas’s scrutiny. “...he didn’t like the way I tasted. I would scrub and scrub, use all this flavored...gunk, and shave. But nothing was good enough.”

She slumped, feeling depressingly unappealing even in memory. “As the years went by, I ended up getting off with a vibrator...Bryce joked about it being my power tool, oh hell it would take too long to explain...and that would be it.”

Huffing a breath, Sigrid felt vaguely uneasy. Like she was being disloyal.

She stared at the vast icy ceiling. Vilkas remained silent. “Kiss, blowjob, flip, insert dick. We had a pattern. Not a great one...I had a really difficult time orgasming without at least fingering...but we loved each other, and it seemed like, like it was enough for how damn hard it was to be regularly intimate with eight boys running around -”

-He cut her off with “...Now that is a load of hairy mammoth shit.”

Stunned at the interruption, she looked down at him. His jaw was set, and she could see him struggle, before he began to speak. “Wife, you have the most fucking delicious cunt I have ever tasted.”

“...clean, unspoiled. You are always so goddamn fucking wet for me. It drives me mad with want, even thinking about it.”

Her hand, still held tightly in his, was pressed hard as he gripped her tightly. “It is bad manners to speak poorly of the dead. But I promise you now,” he spoke slowly, enunciating each word as he caught her in his gaze.

“...you won’t ever lie awake unsatisfied with me, wife.”

With that, he rose over her, pressing against her as he took her mouth in a stolen kiss.

After a declaration like that, the kiss left her feeling lightheaded. Almost dazed, as with liquid fast movements, Vilkas stripped himself of his clothing, throwing it almost on top of their fire, blowing flaky ash and smoke all over their supplies. Their half full bottles of ale spilled into the seawater.

Neither of them noticed. Mouth dry, she watched him with full attention. Hardly daring to move, much less draw breath, as those smoldering silver grey eyes shut tightly, then opened again, nearly on fire.

“I want you very badly, Sigrid.” He rasped, his face caught in a kind of agony she was just realizing she had inflicted upon him.

“But if you lie with me tonight...I’m going to take my time. You will know…” His hand palmed her,
drawing one slick thumb through her curls, against the slit of her opening “...that I do it…”

- couldn't hold back, she moaned loudly, the sound echoing in the isolated chamber “...out of love. Not lust alone, or for erotic sport.”

Cupping her face in his hands, she gladly parted her knees for him, shaking with the need as with his next uttered words he slid fully inside of her, flesh against flesh.

“...but because I love you.”

*********

They made love twice that night, the second time with her on her knees beneath him, gasping in surprised delight as he brought her to her climax with his hands as well as his cock, in what felt like an eternal rush of pulsing joy.

Time was difficult to tell, within the glacier. They awakened to take care of bodily needs that waited for no man; both of them laughing as they had nearly been glued together with the actions of the previous night. And then fell promptly asleep again, wrapped in furs against the bitter cold, next to a dying fire.

The thin high wails of the Thalmor warship horns woke them abruptly, as the ice cavern cracked and crumbled in great chunks and slabs, crashing into the icy waters.

*********

It had been over before it began.

Blinking awake, Vilkas felt muzzy and thick headed. Nearly stupid from the massive blow he had taken to the back of his head.

Forcing himself to look past the swollen stinging of his bruised cheeks, he focused blearily on Sigrid, chained next to him in what appeared to be the groaning, tilting Oblivion of a ship's brig.

He noticed with instant worry that her eyes were closed. That she hung limply from her wrist cuffs, a filthy looking gag stuffed into her mouth, banded with a length of rusty chain.

They were both still naked, as they had been when they had been so brutally awakened.

He recalled with increasing clarity how beautifully she had fought the oncoming ship with its crew of stealth mages. Speed, violence in grace. But no matter how many Thu’ums she shouted, the black robed Altmer blown away, drowned or crushed were replaced in a never ending round of destruction.

He had wrapped a length of chain from their pitifully small boat around his hand, preparing to take down as many as he possibly could to reach his blade when the lightning struck. Shattered, helpless to do anything but scream, he realized Sigrid was wrapped around his inert body, trying to block the chain lightning from reaching him. Her throat visibly swelling with the effort of using her last weapon around her own unending shrieks of pain.
No Shout could stop the implacable storm of lightning rained down from the bowl of the elegantly curved ship. Hauled aboard as the ice cracked and shifted above them, Vilkas remembered the speed of their passage away from the glacier ruffling his hair as they were forced to kneel, twitching uncontrollably, before three Thalmor.

Two were male. He dimly recognized Ancarion. The ignorant young historian was looking markedly more terrified than last time they had met.

The other High Elf he did not know. Tall, grass green slanted eyes, a mage's robes...it was anyone's guess. But judging by his wide, horrified gasp upon the sight of his naked wife, Vilkas wasn't sure if he gave a flying fuck.

The elf woman front and center was slightly shriveled, like golden apples cut and left to dry in the sun. Oldest of the three, she was oddly pallid for an Altmer.

He remembered just before a blow had rained silent blackness upon him, his wife's furious reaction.

Recoiling with a hiss of disgust, Sigrid had spat out, “Elenwen. I knew you were a sick twisted bitch. But I never thought you'd stoop so low to join Harkon as one of his blood sucking lackies. You lose your pride with your cushy house?”

-And Elenwen had smiled, stretching an almost lip-less mouth over brilliant white fangs. Her eyes turned up, a secret glow almost making them light with an unholy fire.

“Dragonborn. You have no idea how I've longed for this day.”
Someone would miss them.

The boat they had taken fishing had not been accounted for. Someone, Baldor perhaps, of the Skaal, would notice their missing vessel had not been returned, and start looking for them.

And the ridiculously oversized ship they were unwillingly taking a trip on was far too noticeable for an anonymous journey along Skyrim’s Sea of Ghosts.

Someone would notice. They had to notice.

Had to.

******

They first thing she noticed was the redolence of something long dead.

Well, she thought, as her spit coated the nasty scrap of rag currently blocking her mouth...it tasted like something had died near it. Some mixture of old blood, rot and the pungent sweat of fear.

The next thing she noticed was Vilkas shackled next to her, perking up as she crept closer to something resembling wakefulness.

“We’re not alone,” he mouthed when she managed to look squarely at him, as he tilted his head towards the cracked door.

They were still naked, damn it. Did Elenwen care if they survived the passage to wherever the hell she was dragging them? Bilge water slopped against their ankles, dripped down the timbered curves of the wall. With deep unease, Sigrid realized neither of them was shivering anymore. Pleasantly numb, she could see Vilkas's lips had already turned blue with the cold.

Damn. If the Thalmor skank-turned-vamp didn't off them, the hypothermia certainly would.

Hanging in their chains, they shared a look of miserable unity. This fucking sucked.

And then the ship yawed heavily to the side, causing Sigrid to messily heave up everything she had eaten earlier that night.
It wouldn’t have been such an issue, if the Thalmor had not gagged her with the sewage flavored hanky, bound with an iron linked chain. Choking on her own vomit, she saw lacy black cobwebs appear in the borders of her sight as a tight panic squeezed her chest, clawing her toes deep into the mucky bilge as she struggled, desperate for air. Somewhere, slowly growing more distant, Vilkas was calling out for help.

Sudden, instant relief. The weight of the chain gone, rag pulled out as she spat, choked and coughed until she could draw a raspy, precious breath. Never had the dank, briny stink of the brig tasted so refreshing.

Vaguely she realized someone was patting her back, rubbing in soothing circles as she struggled to regain a rhythm of *inhale, exhale* that didn’t sound like she had just completed an Iron Man. She hung heavily by the wrists, working her mouth with the sudden freedom of movement. Her breath was incredibly foul, but *yes*, she could breathe again.

And given a moment to slow her heart from galloping like a horse, she could *shout*.

“Stop *touching* her, elf!”

“I just saved her life, you couthless barbarian. Some gratitude would not go amiss.”

Wait. She knew that cultured voice.

Lifting her head, she felt the overhanging mass of hair be swept to the side by long fingers, allowing her vision to take in her surprise savior. “Ondolemar?”

The Altmer wizard looked haggard. And decidedly grim. His robes had clearly seen better days, the embroidered edges ragged and faded, the long dandelion yellow tresses tied back in a messy tail. “We meet again, Dragonborn. Under more honest introductions this time, I believe.”

Sigrid choked out a garbled laugh of disbelief as Ondolemar lifted a damp rag to clean her face. As he washed off the sick he seemed to study her, bloodshot emerald eyes lingering on her breasts and hips until he flushed at her inquiring expression.

“...*What the fuck is he talking about?*” Vilkas hissed, nearly lunging out of his handcuffs.

“Er.” *Awkward, meet uncomfortable*. “Vilkas, meet Ondolemar. Remember the...uh, *special dress* I wore to sneak into the Thalmor Embassy for Delphine? Yeah. Meet my victim. The one I seduced, then paralyzed and left tied up, so I could get their top secret dossiers.”

She’d never actually seen someone’s jaw drop, but Vilkas made a decent stab at the impression. Ondolemar hnnmphed, tapping his folded fingers on his robes as he tried tearing his eyes from Sigrid’s nudity. “Thanks to *that* little stunt *Helga*, I was demoted to and shunted off to the paperwork division of the judiciary.”

Opening his mouth, then snapping it shut, Ondolemar frown deepened as he took in their appearance. “This will not do,” he murmured. “A moment.”

Leaving in a sweep of black fabric, Sigrid had just enough time to shrug at her dumbstruck husband, when the Altmer returned bearing armfuls of supplies.

Unlocking Sigrid’s wrist restraints first, he helped ease her down squarely upon her feet, pushing a robe and some tin of what looked like an emollient upon her. “Dress quickly, the two of you. I would not recommend attempting an escape just yet, *Sigrid*.”
Continuing to unlock Vilkas, who returned Ondolemar’s actions with a scowl, the mage daintily stepped out of the wet muck pooling around their feet. Wrapping themselves in the warm, dry robes, they followed cautiously as Ondolemar cast magelight. Glowing nearly green in the summoned brightness, his face appeared almost carved from bone as he looked back at the two trailing him in the dim hall of the ship.

“Elenwen sleeps during the day, warded in the captain's cabin. But her followers of the sanguine persuasion are hidden everywhere. Be on your guard.”

He led them to what appeared to be an unoccupied room. “There.” With a flicker of his fingers, flames burst into the horn sconces, revealing two beds, a chest and a set of cupboards holding several potions and volumes of books. “Hmm. One last thing…”

Ondolemar grabbed Vilkas by the wrist. The Nord nearly took his head off, cocking his arm back for a swinging haymaker until Sigrid pulled on his other arm, shaking her head no, pleading silently with her eyes.

Stilling, he gritted his teeth as Ondolemar lifted a thin brow, observing the two. “Curious. So the rumors are true, after all.” He sucked in a tight breath through his teeth, appearing to be thinking very hard about something. Finally, the Altmer’s face fell. “This may be more difficult than I thought.”

“What in Shor and Dibella’s love child is going on here?” Sigrid demanded in a strident whisper.

Shaking his head, Ondolemar laid his hands upon them both, the golden gleam of a healing spell sinking into their skin as he muttered under his breath about the stubbornness of Nords.

Gods, it felt good to be free of the insistent, throbbing pains of her raw wrists and sore, sandpapered throat. Looking over, she sighed with relief as the swelling and bruises on Vilkas's face slowly faded away into nothing, leaving his face an unmarred thundercloud of suppressed fury.

“Can't possibly inform you of all the plots and subtleties set in motion with the time I have.” Tearing at his hair, the Altmer nearly paced the room, looking everywhere but at the man and woman he had just freed.

Seeing Sigrid fold her arms with a huff, he suddenly smiled. “By the Eight, but I am glad I reached you before Vingalmo did.”

“Why are you helping?” Shouldering her behind him, Vilkas fixed a death glare upon the elf. “You captured us. Why go through this charade of healing and a better room if we are not free to leave?”

“A just question.” Hearing footsteps pound into the wooden planks down the hall, Ondolemar spun quickly, his face like yellowed parchment. “Quickly! Lie down upon the beds and pretend to be asleep!”

Giving him one last baleful look, Sigrid beckoned for Vilkas to do as the Thalmor asked. No sooner than she had laid down and closed her eyes, she heard the sound of a stranger’s voice.

“Ondolemar, is it? What are you doing away from your post?”

Soft shuffling. Then came Ondolemar’s whispered reply. “I thought that as Lord Harkon's esteemed guests, the Dragonborn and her husband should be housed in decent quarters. A reflection of the generosity of your lord...and in turn, upon you.”

“Hmm.” Sigrid could hear the faintest whisper of the stranger's approach. “Well done. Perhaps I might find some use for you, should your leader choose to...resign.”
Rustling, as folds of cloth slid against skin. “I would crave nothing more than to join my brother mer who walk in the night, Vingalmo.”

“See to it that they remain undisturbed by Elenwen.” A harsh cackle nearly sent Sigrid jerking off her bed in surprise; the stranger was so close. She smelled old, decayed blood and aged silk. “It would be...such a shame, for this rare vintage to be wasted on the young.”

Silence, as the footfalls disappeared into the distance.

Opening her eyes, Sigrid saw Ondolemar’s sharp face hovering overhead, tight with worry. “Any further questions?”

Vilkas swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Yes. Why are you helping us?”

Standing near him, she shivered at the insanity of their situation. “Please, Ondolemar. How did they know where we were, and why does Elenwen want us so badly?” She would worry about the references to Lord Harkon later. Guess Serana wandered home after all.

Motioning for them to stand back, the mage uttered an incantation. Looking around, Sigrid half expected the Psijic Order to pop out and join the party.

Noting her awareness, Ondolemar hastened to explain. “Further warnings upon the perimeter around this chamber, to warn me if anyone approaches. I have already laid down a basic shield and ‘don’t-look-here’ spell.” His shoulders sagged, and Sigrid could almost see the exhaustion waft away from him. He spoke softly. “Perhaps, I may save you yet. I cannot stand to see myself fail any further.”

Vilkas and Sigrid shared another, more weighted glance, as Ondolemar sat upon the nearest bed and buried his face in his hands. Then, as Vilkas surreptitiously searched for weapons, Sigrid sat next to the Altmer mage as he slowly, haltingly told his tale.

**********

It had begun long before the Moot. But the Moot had set a course that would change his perception of his homeland, his native pride in the Aldmeri people forever.

He had stood at the back of the assembled Justiciars of the Aldmeri Dominion, in disgrace after being found en déshabillé in the recent company of a human woman. And of course, the perversion of desiring such a bedmate had brought public scorn raining down on him. As though it were one of the worst things a mer could do, he thought acridly, memories of the burnings and executions he had unwillingly attended over the years still bright in his memory.

The more he aged, the less elderly Ondolemar felt, compared to the joyless superiority of his peers. As the Jarls droned on and on, he scanned the gilded faces surrounding him.

Stick figured, shriveled up prudes. He couldn't remember the last time he had lain with a female of high elven blood. Truly, an Altmer woman of sufficient youth and a favorable disposition was like the fabled chimæra; impossible to find, unlikely to tame. Skyrim was the last place he would ever hope to find a traditional elven bride. And he had been stationed here for twenty seven years. Far too long for his breeding and high marks, really. If only his personal habits had not become quite so public.
To be sure...there was no end to the supply of Dunmer company. Trickling in since the eruption of the Red Mountain, he rather despised the air of desperation that sent them to his bed. It smarted still that gold, rather than pleasure or novelty, would push so many to open their legs. He had grown bored in mere decades with ruby eyes and grey flesh.

No. It was not until a chance visit took him to Haelga’s Bunkhouse that he had encountered a whole new world.

Human women.

Feeling a sneer tug at his thinly sculpted lips, Ondolemar affected a thin veneer of patience as the Moot wended on. Humans and their preposterous rules. They barely lived long enough to see what stability they had wrought survive, for good or ill. Their lives were a never ending descent into the grave...fucking, birthing, raising the new generation...all to die again in a span of years that seemed rather insignificant to the Altmer. What could such a race have in common with Mer who lived for near millennia?

But it was that very fragility; the zest for life that humans sought for, basked in every breath that had made him feel, as though he were not every one of his three hundred forty nine years.

Young Haelga had seen true, with those oddly rounded sky blue eyes and blunted features. Had seen the painful tension that coiled him up as he stalked the streets of Riften pursuing his rightful prey. Elenwen had been wise to limit Thalmor presence in this place...it fairly reeked of Stormcloak sympathies. Everywhere he turned, sullen and angry faces followed, their hatred a miasma that dimmed the rightness of his cause.

The rule breakers, blaspheming worshipers of Talos...all were levied and punished far worse than they might have been, had he taken the time to pursue the company of flesh that did not soil his soul...did not rankle with the dreary submission of the bought and paid for.

Haelga had seen his need. Had taken his hand and led him, glancing coyly behind, to her room where they had remained occupied for a full day and night.

He had shuddered in her leather binds. Felt the drip of the honey, the slap of whip and glide of tongue as though for the first time. Old as he was, he had learned such new ways of obtaining and giving orgasms that he emerged feeling almost...enlightened. Renewed.

Ondolemar no longer shunned the companionship of Nord, Imperial, Redguard or Breton women. He craved it.

Began to see the beauty of the imperfect, the temporally frail and fragile. And nowhere had that urge been more apparent than with the doe-eyed temptress who had neatly slung him into bed, that fateful party in the Thalmor Embassy.

He had been laughed out of his position, once he was found tied in silken cords upon his very own bed. The rumors alone...the mer gnashed his teeth at the very thought of the damage control, the favors called in and promises made to avert the political disaster his career seemed to tip further into every day.

Barely registering the catastrophic results of the Nord Moot, he had followed Elenwen and her enraged party of sycophants to assist in packing up the embassy and setting sail. Back to the Summerset Isles, he imagined, with rather more indifference than was warranted.

Fleshy limbs, full breasts. Skin of all shades, from moon pale to dusky cinnabar. He would find
nothing of the sort in the shimmering forests of home.

But the great ship had not landed at the sunny port of Lillandril. The frigid keep of Castle Volkihar had proven to be a much colder reception for the nervous throng of Thalmor, bunching inside the dark foyer.

No. It was not until Ondolemar saw with horror the slaughter, the indiscriminate death of High Elf and Nord cattle alike, as they had been set upon eagerly by the vampires of Volkihar that he really understood.

Blood ran red and liquid wet down undead throats, no matter what shape of ears the unlucky soul happened to be born with.

Ondolemar realized, when he saw Elenwen accept the gift of Molag Bal’s corrupt blood and rise triumphant, grossly winged and deformed to Lord Harkon’s left hand, that humans were no longer an inferior race. How could their lives be inferior when he felt such pain at the waste of their deaths?

The glassy eyes of Nord and Imperial women spread out nude upon tables to be fed upon mocked him. A travesty of his own hunger, this gruesome feast.

Finally, he saw all along what so many of the old skalds and soothsayers had tried to tell him.

When one closed their eyes and held another close, what mattered their lineage or ancestral name? A poor substitute for the comfort of another's warm skin against his, of lips tasting, fingers touching.

In all this waste of death, he could not abide.

*****

“...Ancarion, the young fool, had the misfortune to write your names and descriptions in his report. Thorough to the last minute detail. Once we received word that you were holed up in Solstheim it was a matter of days at full sail to reach you.”

He breathed out a sigh, seemingly calmer after his confession. “You should know Ancarion feels regret at having been the means of your capture. Had he paid more attention to the standard reports, he would have know that all Thalmor agents are required to be vigilant for the whereabouts of Sigrid Farstrider, Dragonborn. To capture her and her associates by any means necessary.”

He picked at a scrap of lint on his shoulder, not looking at her. “This perversion of the Thalmors noble purpose into...into a brute squad and blood source for the Volkihar does not suit me. And so, I have gathered all like minded mages carefully... secretly to my cause.”

Sigrid gawped at the mer. He blushed a florid rose gold at her stare. Vilkas was studying him with something almost approaching respect. “Elenwen now serves none but her own ambition. That was apparent to anyone, when she sacrificed the majority of us to Lord Harkon.”

Stretching his fingers, Ondolemar chuckled bitterly. “Eternal life....feh. I hope she chokes on it.”

Such a startling spin on a character she had found pedantic and boring in game. In this remarkable
twist of fate, a Thalmor Justiciar had a change of heart….

No. No visions. I do not need to see what could be. Only what is. Shaking her head to dispel any rising thoughts of possible futures, she focused on Ondolemar, who was currently twisting his robes between his fingers.

She smiled wryly, recognizing the sign of anxiety for what it was. “It seems I owe you a rather large thank you for our lives.”

“Don't thank him yet, love.” Leaning against the corner of the wall where he had an excellent view of the room and the only door, Vilkas folded his arms. “Let's hear how you plan to get us out alive.”

Turning her ivory bracelet, Sigrid thought hard of all the possible ways to escape. Overpowering however many unknown Thalmor and vampires would be unwise, given that that was how they had ended up electrocuted and chained in the brig. Neither of them were remotely skilled at stealth. Not that they could out sneak a coven of vampires at any rate.

Where were they? She remembered that Castle Volkihar rested at the far western edge of the frozen seas, accessed by port or by brave swimmers only. There would no doubt be quite the welcome party. Running away from armed guards at the gargoyle gates, into the water and the uninhabited wilderness with no weapons or supplies...it would be a suicide run.

Elenwen was after...something. Remembering the cold eldritch light in those glowing eyes, Sigrid shivered and moved closer to Vilkas. She would rather not find out what Harkon or Elenwen desired of her, but it seemed an audience at the castle was now their unalterable destination.

Tapping his chin in thought, Ondolemar paused, then held up one elongated finger. “I may have an idea.”

Turning to Sigrid, he canted his head and smiled strangely. “You wouldn't happen to have any rather...intimidating Shouts, would you?”

Vilkas whispered in her ear as she looked mildly puzzled. Then, slowly they both broke out into wide smiles.

“Going for shock and awe eh? I may have just the thing.”

**********

Elenwen had swept the great ship four times in the two weeks of sailing to Volkihar Castle before admitting to herself that she had lost the prisoners.

Some intrepid mer had been meddling where they ought not to. Someone would find themselves prey, this night.

I should never have placed my trust in Vingalmo, she thought sourly. The old one had been Thalmor, once. A single report had been found in the recesses of her desk while cleaning. The faded parchment had detailed the search for a missing agent, lost to the frozen wastes far northwest of Solitude.

Elenwen had seized upon that strand of hope, after compiling and sorting the facts to reveal the truth.
She had one last powerful ally here, in this forebodingly inhospitable place. One whose powerful associates could turn the tide. Bring back her former might and knit together the tatters of her reputation.

The Dominion had not been pleased at the results of the Nord Moot and their loss of influence on their most northerly frontier. She would show those sneering naysayers just how wrong they had been, to question her skill at the game.

It did not hurt that such power came with additional benefits. Feeling the last finger of the sunset light sink into darkness, Elenwen stretched; awake and far more aware than she ever had been as a living mer.

Speaking of the undead...there he was. Flanked by two of her former soldiers that had also elected to take on the blood. Lesser sacks of meat and blood, easily discarded. Another boon to offer her new Lord.

“Ah, Elenwen. Your preparation does you credit my dear.” He tittered in delight. “Our Master Harkon is waiting for us. Come. You be enjoying his favor for now with that marvelous appetizer, but fortune is ever fleeting.”

Falling into a steady pace beside the ancient vampire, Elenwen tried to ignore the sudden rush of venom in her mouth as she passed a quaking Mer. The woman’s body, wrapped only in a slight loincloth, already bore the marks of countless fangs. She shrank from the company as they approached, trying desperately to hide in the shadows.

It could not be helped. The soldier had served her well, back in the embassy. And would now so serve her and her new allegiances in life, as well as death.

Perhaps beyond the grave, she noted in amusement as two undead Thalmor thralls swayed in place, opening the doors of the deck in sudden fitful jerks.

Ah. There he was.

Elenwen would never admit it aloud, but the progenitor of her bloodline was handsome, for a Nord. Long, silken black hair was pulled into a tight band. He wore a neatly trimmed beard; eyes glowing like the sunset as he waited statue still with his entourage for the presentation of the Dragonborn.

She had clad herself in the stylized armor and viciously clawed gauntlets worn by the members of his undead court. In her peripheral vision, she could see Vingalmo, Ondolemar, and Sifrilien lead a shaking Ancarion out by the wrist. All her surviving Thalmor, dwindled to a bare handful who were still mortal.

But not for long. Or they too would join the cattle that milled about in the dank dungeons below.

Ondolemar approached, head bent low in respect. “Mistress, here they come.”

The living fidgeted, unable to match the silence of the dead. Moments passed as they waited.

Then the double doors opened once more.

Even with her enhanced sight, Elenwen did not recognize the naked puny thing she had bowed into submission as the dynamo of power currently striding towards them in forceful steps.

The court, unused to feeling surprise, whispered amongst themselves. Like the scratchy rustle of autumn leaves in the wind, they watched as the Dragonborn, wreathed in trembling light, was
followed by her husband. Someone had found him a sword and a cloak. He strode close behind the flaring aura of his wife, his face set in a menacing scowl.

There she stood, almost translucent arcs of mana snapping and crackling around her form as she stopped a fair distance from Elenwen and Harkon.

The Dragonborn’s voice vibrated the stone bridge, causing chips of gravel to rattle and shake. “Drem Yol Lok, Lord of the Volkihar.”

The blazing eyes which had turned ebon black with the shifting hues of her Shout fastened upon her. “Elenwen.”

“Ah, Sigrid Farstrider. Welcome.” Spreading his arms wide, Harkon stepped forward with a cool smile. “Long have I awaited the hero who rescued my precious daughter. Welcome indeed.”

Furiously trying to think of when the Dragonborn might had encountered the vampire princess, Elenwen maintained a calm mien as Sigrid laughed, the echoes rumbling through all assembled. A nimbus of energy shifted, mimicking the sweeping wings of a dovah. Hadn’t the Dragonborn turned dragon in truth for some time? Or was that a rumor spread by fanciful bards?

“I fail to see how my assistance to Serana permitted your...associates to attempt to take me by force.” Her man hovered behind, fingers grasping at the pommel of the heavy double handed blade. Grey eyes shifted constantly, weighing the dangers as the silence lingered.

Harkon chuckled. Almost, Elenwen thought warily, with a thawed warmth. “Oh, my dear one. We do have so much to discuss, you and I. Please,” The vampire gestured to the peaked gates of his castle. “Enter, and be welcome. You and yours are guests here.”

The Thalmor ground her fangs together audibly as the Dragonborn shifted, the robes she wore swirling around her legs.

“Then I invoke the ancient law of guesting rights. Long held sacred in your kingdom. No one may harm me or mine while supping at your table, Lord Harkon. Or,”

-and here, her eyebrows lifted over those dark, night-black eyes.

“...Your life and honor are forfeit.”

Harkon slowly grinned as his court murmured complaints at the bold request, whispers like the rattling of bones. His smile minded Elenwen of a great fish she had once seen pulled from the south seas as a girl...the wicked curved maw lined in razored layers of teeth.

A predator to the core.

“Of course, Dragonborn. For I seek knowledge that only you can provide. Please. Enter.”

Motioning for her husband to be at ease, Sigrid stood still as the umbra of dragon power dimmed, revealing a wary Nord woman garbed in what appeared to be a spare robe. Holding herself like a queen, she took Vilkas’s proffered arm and strolled up to Harkon, unflinching. “Lead the way. Wouldn’t like to tread on anyone's toes, here.”

Elenwen saw the flat, frozen faces of the vampires and mortals alike, knowing her own face reflected stunned amazement. That had been a far cry from how she had envisioned presenting the Dragonborn and her paramour to her Lord.
She would have kept the chains and the gag.

But, she mused as she silently followed the dark throng inside, she still had a few cards to play, yet. Elenwen was no fool like Sanyon, to be overwhelmed by a barbaric tool-wielding snowback and a mere chit of a girl barely three decades old. This Dragonborn and her elusive knowledge would be hers and hers alone.

And, she reflected with increasing calm as they approached the great dining hall, once she had picked the Dragonborn’s mortal mind, she would drain her bone dry, until not even her face was recognizable in her dessicated corpse. That end would suit her, for the meddlesome girl.

All things came full circle, in the end. But Elenwen would be the one spinning the hoop at the end of it all.

Or all would be ashes.

Either way, she would win.

Chapter End Notes

I have had the most HORRID time trying to fix and post chapters! Then my phone went ahead and ate my next two chapters, so I have to try and see if I have any backups anywhere/rewrite them from memory. Boo.

So forgive me, if there are line breaks or misspellings. I am trying my very best to keep this ball rolling. Vampires ahoy.
They entered like shadows, spilling around her like an overturned pot of ink.

Only the eerily glowing eyes gave them away, as Sigrid kept her back ramrod straight. Vilkas stood tall next to her, only the occasional twitch of his arm revealing his terse unhappiness at their surroundings.

Castle Volkihar was a decayed masterpiece of a gothic dream. The high balcony of the entryway spun off into two descending stone staircases that led to the spacious main floor of the dining room. Chandeliers sputtered overhead, dripping wax from elaborately carved gargoyle mouths holding the candlesticks. Despite the flickering lights, the gloom was oppressive. If she looked straight ahead, she could feel eyes upon her, watching unseen in the darkness.

Up ahead, the room was dominated by three thrones, the middle one the most impressively grand of all. Long tables flanked either side of the hall, covered with cups, bowls and plates as well as what appeared to be four women lying supine, wearing only scraps of small clothes.

The entire place seemed to be made of carefully stacked giant blocks of blackened stone. Long, slightly raveled red velvet rugs had been carefully laid upon the floor before the thrones and tables, with smaller curios and bookstands decorating the edges of the room. Further away, dark openings revealed further corridors and spaces. As she looked, three more sets of glowing eyes appeared, unblinking as they took in the new visitors.

As they drew steadily nearer, following the stately pace of Harkon, Sigrid could see more details...such as the multitude of vampires seated at table. The silverware and platters were smeared with blood and gristle, stringy bones littering the bare areas between the bodies. Every now and then, thralls would whisk away the detritus and bring new, steaming plates of offal; racks of ribs, bloody mammoth snouts, a suspiciously humanoid platter of hearts. The new food was demolished in moments, the remaining bones strewn about once more.

She saw what she thought had to be the black blurs of death hounds, resting beneath the table. One perked up, its hollow eyes fixed upon her as she beheld the lipless mouth panting around canine fangs. Every now and then, a vampire would lean over the table and bite delicately at the scarred groin or elbow of the women, lapping at the upwelling blood.

The women made no sound; no noise of discomfort. Jarred out of her enforced calm, she realized that while the two furthest from her were still breathing, chests rising and falling shallowly, the Imperial she was currently walking past had died sometime ago. The limbs had contorted with rigor mortis, gums receding with the drying air.

Brown eyes wide open, jaw slack. She looked just like Carlotta.

“Forgive me for my lack of hospitality, Dragonborn. I am unsure what to offer you in my humble
hall. I take it that though you are of draconic instinct that you do not prefer blood as your beverage of choice?”

Hissing laughter greeted their lord’s witty repartee, as Harkon seated himself in the tallest throne. Vilkas and Sigrid stopped and stood, paces away from the center of the room.

Quiet rustling surrounded them as the Thalmor and others of the court filed into the room down the stairs, flowing to fill the emptiness.

Sigrid allowed herself one single swallow as a sop to the prickling fear. Feeling Vilkas’s hand squeeze hers on his arm, she took courage and lifted her chin once more. “I don’t mind a bit of blood, Lord. But allow it to be from a cut of beef, if you please. I’m no follower of Namira.”

He laughed, delighted. “How civilized. Yes. Let us begin over dinner.” Clapping his hands, a vampire suddenly appeared at his elbow. “Provide our guests with what they have asked.”

Ondolemar appeared to her right. “This way, my lord and lady.”

The Altmer’s face was a picture of oblique serenity as he led the two to a hastily set up table in between the main trestle tables bearing the women being dined upon. They sat cautiously on wooden stools brought to them, as Harkon clapped once more and music began to play. Lutes and woodwinds played a merry jaunt of a tune, which to Sigrid’s ears seemed vaguely sinister. Like a child’s playtime melody. Not really suitable for Dracula’s ballroom at all.

Gradually, the hall began to fill with other sounds of conversation, like a dull rumble of waves seething upon rock. Occasionally Sigrid could hear a scream punctuating the music from somewhere deeper inside the fortress. The vampires carried on blithely. Only Ondolemar and Ancarion, she noticed, winced each and every time. Kyne’s love, I hope I don’t find out what is causing that godawful sound.

Amusing herself by imagining Harkon in the lumpy white wig that Gary Oldman wore in the Ford Coppola horror film, she bit back a giggle. The Thalmor, led by Elenwen, were being seated at the long table to their left. Keeping her narrowed eyes fixed on the Dragonborn, Elenwen whispered to one of the undead servers, who nodded and promptly ghosted away down the hall. Ancarion, surrounded by the dead and soon to be deceased, merely picked at the roasted potatoes and leeks placed before him on stained serving plates.

She couldn’t really blame him. The atmosphere was pungent enough with iron rich blood and mildewed rot that the thought of eating made her stomach flip flop in sudden queasiness. Ondolemar sat down next to Ancarion, never looking straight at the Nords seated amidst them all, yet seemingly aware of every movement as his left ear twitched with Sigrid’s fidgeting.

Two platters were born before them, the servers bowing as they poured what smelled like a good Skingrad red into their waiting goblets.

Daring to look at what the court deemed decent food for guests, she was pleasantly surprised. They had both been given a hefty flank of beefsteak, grilled rare with the blood seeping onto the jazbay grapes and mashed gourd.

Trying to block the view of vampires feeding from her view, Sigrid focused on cutting a slice and lifting it to her mouth. She realized after the third bite that Vilkas was staring, lips tight, at Harkon.

“Eat it. We need the stamina. For later.” She whispered as quietly as she could manage, smiling through a bite of beef at Harkon, who lifted a glass lazily in response.
“I don’t eat things that are still bleeding.” He muttered back, grey eyes darting around the room quickly. Was he counting the vampires, Sigrid wondered as she tentatively tried the wine.

Not tainted with blood, thank the gods. Even though it bore a definite similarity in hue.

“I’ll make you bleed in the afterlife if you die on me in this castle. Eat.”

Sighing almost imperceptibly, Vilkas popped a grape into his mouth and chewed as slowly as he could, eyeing the almost raw meat askance.

*Right. Previously a werewolf, bad memories.* “Excuse me.” She raised a hand, flagging down the vampire server who hurried over, his fangs glistening as he smiled.

*Eesh. Creepy.* “Can I get this steak a bit more well, dead? Grilled until it is seared black for my husband?”

The vampire’s face twitched, remaining in that polite mask. “It will not taste as fine, my lord. Do you wish for something else?”

Vilkas’s lips pressed thinly together. “No. Seared until it is blackened, if you please.”

Whisking the plate away, he remained stiffly seated as the wet sucking noises of feeding continued all around them.

She couldn’t enjoy this. Placing her fork and knife delicately down, she wrapped her hands in her lap and raised her head to see Lord Harkon studying her. “The dish was quite satisfactory, but I find myself...impatient, Harkon.”

“*Lord* Harkon, Dragonborn.” Tilting his goblet until the blood within roiled, a droplet leaking onto his thumb, the vampire lord smiled mirthlessly. He moved the goblet to his other hand, raising his hand to lick at the spilled drop, golden eyes fixed upon them. “Without our titles and bloodline, we’re no better than the common rabble my dear. Please.”

He stood, the sounds of chairs scraping stone floor echoing as all seated did the same. Sigrid and Vilkas stood hastily, pressing their sides against each other.

“..If you would follow me. Elenwen has taken the liberty of providing companionship for your husband while we talk. Privacy, you understand, is of the utmost importance to me.”

Footsteps sounded, sharp and resounding until they became muffled by carpet. Sigrid saw a darkly complected woman wearing the barest spill of a silken gown, held on by hope and what must be fishing line alone. The revealing garment almost showcased the scars, criss crossing in faded and nearly healed bite marks decorating the arms, neck and visible portions of breast. She crossed over to the Thalmor’s table and knelt, whispering in Elenwen’s ear.

Vilkas suddenly clasped her hand tightly in his. Looking up in concern, she saw his face in something akin to pain. “*Saadia,*” he whispered.

So it was. Sigrid *stared,* having difficulty reconciling the quiet Redguard, onetime barmaid of the Bannered Mare, with Miss Sex on Legs before them. She sauntered forward to Lord Harkon’s side as the undead man glided over towards them, unabashedly staring at Vilkas.

Forcing her face to snap back to something more grim than gaping, Sigrid looked only at Harkon. “My husband stays with me. There are no secrets between us.”
His laugh lifted the hairs on the back of her spine. “How fortunate for you both. Alas, I have not felt such trust in an era. I’m afraid I must insist.”

Reluctantly pulled away by a smiling Saadia, Sigrid watched him disappear...swallowed up in the blackness of one of the many corridors leading away from the main hall. She turned back to Harkon. “Come. We will retire to my private chambers for this discussion.”

Thinking quickly, she could see no reason to circumvent this turn of events. What choice did she have at this point but to follow as well? He did not offer to touch her, thank all that was holy. Vampire and Dragonborn walked in a single file out of the hall, the whispering increasing as they passed from sight.

Walking up a flight of stone steps, she adamantly refused to look back.

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Harkon’s bedchamber looked like a cross between a sadomasochists’ dream dungeon and a Bronte romance novel.

Heavy tapestries, faded with age, decorated the wall space left between towering bookcases stacked with creaking books, rusting weapons and blood potion vials. A velvet lined coffin sat propped upright, providing the focal point of the room.

She sat down upon a sleek wooden chair, fingering the screaming mouths carved into the armrests as Harkon sank into a more plushly lined seat. Covered with what must be ermine, she thought. White fur with black streaks. Hadn’t seen that before in Skyrim.

Only a few torches lit in their sconces provided any light. The attempt at a cozy, dimly lit atmosphere came across as sinister in her mind, as she tried not to think about what was happening in another part of the castle where her husband was being ‘entertained’.

“Dragonborn.” Her attention fully his, Harkon leaned forward. “Surely, you must know why you are here.”

Seconds ticked by as she picked through the various responses that came to mind. “I have an inkling. But despite what you may have been told, I’m no seer.”

Those gleaming orange eyes flashed with what looked like triumph. Damn that Elenwen. “I must admit, the thought of one who can provide prophecy at will does make me heady with elation. But no. My first news of your peculiar...talents came born by my daughter Serana many months past.”

She swallowed. Picked at a burr on the robe covering her knees. “So. You have the Kel - the Elder Scroll - in your possession.”

“Yes.” Feeling his scrutiny, she bit her lip and looked up. Harkon seemed to be counting her eyelashes at this point. “Dragonborn. What do you know of my history?” He waved his hand, sending a ripple of air that flickered the torchlight. “And do not prevaricate. Lies do not become us.”

Trying to recall what had passed between her and Serana over a year ago at least, Sigrid sucked her lip fully between her teeth. He waited expectantly, so still that she had to remind herself he didn’t need to breathe. “I know about the source of your power. Molag Bal. You...you sacrificed
thousands, to obtain the power of the Vampire Lord for yourself and your wife and daughter.”

“I know that you want more than what you have. That being held prisoner by the sun frustrates you.”

He began leaning back in his chair, templing his fingers as she unwillingly recited all the dry, bare bone facts of his existence. “I know that you seek the means to block out the sun. To hunt during the day as well as during the night.”

“I know that Valerica - your wife - disagreed. She...she ran away from you, taking Serana and the scroll. Hiding her deeply, where you could not find her for centuries. Millennia. How long has it been since Cyrodiil became an empire? Whatever. A long long time.”

“But you know all of that already. What you really want to know…” she leaned forward in her chair, her braid falling over her shoulder as she fixed Harkon with a flat look. “...is if I will serve you. Help find you Auriel’s bow. Fabled weapon of Akatosh and all that, capable of piercing the sun. Since I seem to have already delivered you your daughter, Serana, who has to be somewhere around here, you think I can get the job done.”

“...But I can’t help you.”

Harkon’s face became animated with expression at last. A single upward curl of his lip, revealing a yellowed fang. Slowly, the vampire righted himself in his chair.

She felt herself almost unconsciously slide back, as those burning eyes latched onto hers.

“Can’t…” he spoke quietly, lifting one curved fingernail, stained black, to push back a strand of hair that had fallen into her wide eyes. Breathing faster as she tried desperately not to recoil, she smelled his breath.

Musty. Like copper pennies.

His other hand raised up to grasp her throat. She bared her teeth defiantly, as his thumb rubbed the pulsing vein that throbbed with life, beating a wild tattoo.

“...Or won’t?”

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“My, my. It has been quite some time since we’ve shared company, yes?”

It took considerable willpower for Vilkas to remain standing at the doorway of the lushly opulent room as Saadia flopped down on the wide, fur strewn bed. She turned, smiling with that come-hither grace that had captured his interest, once upon a time. “Come here.”

“I don’t think so.” Giving in to his desire, almost a need at this junction to find and protect his wife, Vilkas turned to leave.

“Uh-uh. Not so fast, handsome.” The door slammed in his face; a gust of dry smelling death revealing the vampire guard he had not noticed before. Trying the latch, he could hear it lock just as the door handle was about to give.

Fuck.
Hearing her footsteps pad closely behind him, he closed his eyes. Soft fingers trailed over his shoulders, raking down the sides of his spine.

“Come on,” she purred. Taking his hand, she pulled him further, unwillingly into the room. “It’s not so bad, here. Face it, you’re safer with me than any of the other bloodsuckers out there. Trust me on this.”

Allowing her to push him onto a chair in front of the fireplace, he blinked at the unexpected heat. Flames crackled brightly over the well built blaze, tidily piled firewood stacked almost to his head on either side of the stone pit that was big enough to roast a bear.

Saadia sat opposite him, smoothing her gown with practiced gestures. In the fireglow, he could see more clearly the mass of scar tissue that marred her once beautiful face. One elbow looked as though a death hound had nearly gnawed it off before it had been hastily healed, a patchwork of raised, bumpy flesh.

Noticing where his eyes lingered, the Redguard smiled wanly. “It looks bad. But this has all been for the best. Honestly.”

He cleared his throat, trying to ignore the way she was studying his crotch. “How did you end up in this place?” See. He could make polite conversation. He only wished Sigrid was here, so that he could prove that he was capable of mindless small talk; not just sex jokes and battle tactics.

Gods. He just wished they were anywhere but here. He could feel death closing in around them like a vise.

“I had been tricked into being escorted by an Alik’r bounty hunter, back to Hammerfell.” She laughed silkily, raising her hand to pull back the waves of ebony hair that had grown, almost to her waist. “Huh. It has been...forever, really, since I have used my true name.”

Vilkas watched as the woman unconsciously scratched a healing bite on her neck. A trickle of dark blood leaked out. She didn’t notice. “I am Iman, of the noble House of Suda.” Smiling at his startled movement, the Redguard fluttered her eyelashes. “Surprised? So were the Thalmor, when I handed them the city of Taneth on a silver platter.”

“Not that it worked out quite the way I had hoped,” she mused aloud, staring into the fire. “Hiding in that smelly tavern for years, always looking behind my back...hmph. Not the glorious reward those smug piss yellowed elves promised me, so long ago.”

Looking up at him, she smiled alluringly. Vilkas thought he could almost detect the edges of her mask; the facade cracking, ready to be peeled away to reveal her true nature.

Cold and calculating. A snake waiting to pounce.

He shifted in the chair, noting the weight of the furniture. These chairs had potential as a physical shield. Was an axe used to chop the firewood that was supplied, here? He looked around, noting the lack of windows. An axe, he could use to dramatic effect.

Just give me a fucking axe.

“So, Saadia. How did you end up out of Alik’r hands and into Elenwen’s crowd?”

The woman pouted a bit, her shoulder dropping to artfully allow one of her sleeves to fall down further, revealing a curve of brown breast.
“You never used to want to talk. Well.” Running fingers through her hair, she began to twist it into a careful knot at the back of her head.

Vilkas swallowed, aware of her eyes tracking his response to her movements as she arched back, pinning her hair with a bejeweled stick. Uncomfortable.

“Like I said; I got lucky. Elenwen and her minions just happened to come across Kematu and his gang forcing me across the tundra towards the trade roads. It was an easy decision to make.”

Flipping a single strand to dangle next to her dark eyes, she cocked her head. “Death by beheading in Hammerfell. Or...service to a known power, with a bit of blood play my price for the life of luxury I deserve.”

“How nice for you.” Feeling his foot start to jiggle with impatience, he stalled it, allowing his hand to twitch against the armrest instead.

There had to be something he could use to wedge the door open, when inevitably someone opened the damn door. One way in, one way out.

“Yes…” Saadia pursed her lips. “Quite. Only…” she leaned over, exposing a rather expansive dip of cleavage that almost fell out over the burgundy silk. “I’m bored.”

Vilkas sneered at the naughty look she shot him. “Well, it's true. Elenwen drinks from me about every other night, which is fun and all. But she won't let anyone else touch me, after an unfortunate mishap.” She shivered, a flash of fear darting across her face before she smiled again, more charming than before.

Reaching out, she touched his shoulder. “So. Play with me. Like you used to.”

He batted away her hand, turning from her. “No.”

“Vilkas. I'm doing you a favor. You don’t want to know what happens to those who lose their usefulness, here.” Running her tongue over her lips, she grasped him this time on the knee, dragging her hands to his groin.

“I said no.” Standing suddenly, he began pacing the room, looking for anything, any possible tool he could use to craft a weapon, to subdue the vampire outside.

Saadia - Iman - whoever she was, could rot in this prison of her own making.

“Is this about that other woman...the Dragonborn? I had heard some rumors…”

Vilkas heard her stand. Take a few steps toward him, only to stop as he tightened his fists into knots, the tendons standing out like cords against the muscle in his arms.

He heard her scoff. “Marriage, for one. Like you’d ever settle down. But could it be true that the plain scarred little thing out there tamed you into being her obedient follower? Is that why you're being so damn stubborn?”

He sighed, feeling a pang of longing for his wife. Sigrid didn't play these twisted games. She asked, begged outright for what she wanted, holding nothing in reserve. He loved that about her.

Not this charade, this slow torture. Like a Khajiit toying with a skeever. *Had he really found this woman worth bedding once?* He was done. So very done.

Vilkas heard her huff in disappointment. “Well... I can see you will need some more time to see things my way. I'll let you cool your heels in here for now. You Nords like the cold, right?”
Lunging at the door as the Redguard woman was ushered out, the vampire delivered a swift kick to his midsection that had him gasping for breath as the door closed.

He heard the lock turn, a very final sound. Hunched over, wheezing, he hung his head. The fire snapped and crackled, his only companion in this small square cell.

Could he climb up the fireplace chimney, through the flue?

_Damn._ As he ran his fingers over the mantle, hoping for a fire poker, something, _anything_ ...he heard a high shrieking wail of despair.

Close. Hmm.

Methodically searching the room, he peeled off the bedding and shook the furs and sheets, hoping for a dagger to fall out. He would exhaustively search his surroundings, he told himself firmly. He would _not_ wonder what Sigrid was doing, if Farkas had reached Jorrvaskr safe and sound. Whether or not he could break the heavy, reinforced door with the bedframe, if he hefted it over his shoulder.

More screams, muffled by walls. A rattling sound followed soon after. He felt only sympathy for the poor bastard, trapped like him.

Well. At least he wasn't alone in Oblivion.

*********

The gown they had laid out for her today was a deep plum silk slashed with a rust umber velvet, overlaid with a fine web of amethysts hung in copper netting.

Sigrid hated it.

_Would it kill them to hand her a sturdy wool dress? A set of moldy armor? Even a stupid chainmail loincloth?_ Sigrid thought with a mental snarl of irritation, trying to fasten the fussy straps as the brightly polished stones cut into her fingers.

She had become a doll at the court of Harkon, a purely decorative piece that was occasionally allowed to speak. Do tricks even, she thought in self recrimination, viewing herself with disdain in the massive, cracked mirror of antique glass.

To amuse herself more than the undead throng, she had taken to displaying a single Shout at each evening meal, just to break the monotony of her days. Never allowing herself to display more power than was necessary, she chose the simplest of Thu’ums. The vampires oohed and aahed, clapping for her like she was a trained monkey. At least when they were clapping, they weren't ogling her veins.

Last night, she had become an ephemeral spirit with _Feim Zii Gron_. Walking through the tables, she wished she could drag them all away to escape this place.

All of them. Vilkas, Ancarion, Ondolemar - right through these solid walls, out into the foaming whitecaps of the Sea of Ghosts. They would walk along the sandy seabed, insubstantial, free to frolick amongst the curious swimming salmon and waving fronds of seaweed until they reached the wilderness. Free from the entrapment she was slowly sinking deeper in, day by day.
She only ever saw Vilkas at dinner, as Saadia led him to the same front and center table they had sat at the very first day in court. It was the sole moment of true peace she felt, every evening as she grasped his cold fingers in hers and squeezed, feeling the pressure of his hands returning the only embrace they were allowed. Over all too soon.

Every day was the same.

Wake up. Eat the breakfast tray that the silent thrall brought promptly at dawn. Or whenever dawn was; she hadn't seen the sky in what felt like ages.

Exit the ostentatious sleeping chamber (unlocked for her after she had been given her tray) to see what monstrosity of a gown they had laid out for her to wear that day.

Every day, Ondolemar waited for her outside in the main hall. The Thalmor mage was swiftly proving to be indispensable, offering whispered gossip and cautious overtures of hope as he escorted her to the main chambers where they spent much of her time.

Each morning, he would make fun of the elegant ensemble she had by dint of much elbow grease forced herself into. And she would let him, adding hushed comments of her own as they tiptoed through the dark halls.

A friend, where she had never thought to look for one. Ondolemar pretended by night to toady up to Elenwen and Vingalmo, mingling with the other vampires and would be vampires in hopes of being gifted with ‘the Blood’ (she only ever thought of it in caps mentally, what with the emphasis it took in repetition.)

But during the brief precious hours of sunlight, he followed Sigrid as they explored, quietly telling her stories of his childhood in Alinor. Sharing tales of patrolling Skyrim for the last few decades, relating how it had changed. Those he had loved. What he regretted.

Sigrid told him bits of her story in turn, and in their daily banter took in far more information about magical theory, daedric religion and the politics of the Dominion than she would have learned reading any mere book.

An avid student, she soaked it all up, offering suggestions and pointed remarks about Thalmor rule and practice that had him stuttering in anger. As the days turned into weeks, gradually they came to an unspoken agreement to avoid the subjects of torture, Talos worship and racial supremacy. Those topics were not something they would ever completely agree on.

But as they explored the laboratories filled with dusty alchemy tomes, enchanting equipment and even a fully functioning smithy, she found a strange sort of solace in his company. Even if it could not ease the aching emptiness in her chest at the absence of her husband.

********

The vampires of Volkihar did something akin to sleeping during the day. There were coffins just about everywhere, lined up in rooms, stored in cupboards. Even the kitchen housed the coffin of the thrallmaster; an odious hairy Nord of a vampire who tended to the human flock that kept Volkihar fed.

She had toyed with the idea of freeing the ‘cattle’, as they were called, those first few days of
wandering the keep. The men and women, some barely old enough to be considered teenagers, were kept in the poorest of conditions.

Starved, barely clothed and fed, they shuffled in their stinking cages littered with piles of feces...smelling to high heaven of body odor and the rot of bodies yet unremoved. Every other day or so, the thrallmaster would cast spells on them, renewing their cow-like obedience, their lack of willpower to fight.

She could save them. She had to believe they, as well as she, could leave this forsaken place and find warmth, once more. It was so very cold.

Ondolemar had taken her to the dungeons at her insistence, wondering at his reluctance. Until she saw the stacks of dried bodies heaped like firewood against the far walls.

Towers of them, reaching into the vastness of the undercroft. Too many to count. Centuries of prey stored like so much tinder.

The smell...she could not have blocked it, even if she had stuffed her sleeves down her nostrils. It followed her that day like a tainted...thing given form, that no amount of scrubbing could erase. It lingered on in her mind, sharpening her focus as she plotted escape with her fellow captive Mer.

Sigrid had also discovered (and nearly torn apart the cages housing the human cattle, as she shook the bars with her raging fury) the smaller stacks of dessicated children and babes, tiny dried limbs frozen like sticks. Faces shrunken, eye sockets empty, with open mouths that seemed frozen in silent screams. One long, eternal scream that she felt echoing the grief in her heart.


He was a dead man.

Well. Dead-er.

She would see him collapse into a pile of fucking dust, when this farce had reached its inevitable conclusion.

How long had she been kept here, she wondered that night as she was dragged away from Vilkas as dinner ended, the plum gown tripping her as she struggled to hold onto his hand as long as she could. Three weeks? Four? The scratch marks she made every night in the wall behind the door was approaching the fourth row of ten.

Yes. Something like a month. Not counting the two weeks of sailing from Solstheim.

Feeling the same sense of curling dread she squashed every evening, she followed Ondolemar and Elenwen up the tall flight of stairs, turning left down the hallway with four candlesticks and the frumpy portrait of a beady eyed Jarl petting a wolfhound...all the way to Harkon’s private chambers.

Every night, she was escorted here to an audience with the Vampire Lord. And every night, he asked more or less the same questions.

Oh, he was clever enough to couch them in different ways. How did her visions work? Did she premeditate upon her Sight, or did it come spontaneously? Where had Serana been kept all those centuries, and how did Sigrid manage to free her from the most notorious of Dark Brotherhood assassins?
She deflected his questions with ever growing exhaustion, night after night. Her gowns changed colors, from sun gold to leaf green. Ice blue spattered in tiny twinkling diamonds. A dark, almost blackened teal, with stylized stitches of whales and waves dancing on the hems in silver thread.

The plum dress was the most gaudy by far. And the heaviest. Taking her chosen seat at Harkon’s idle gesture, she tugged at the tight bodice. Her breasts were fairly spilling out of this one - whoever had owned it before her was far less endowed. Ugh. She didn’t want to think about whoever had previously worn this vast assortment of finery.

It had better not have belonged to Valerica.

It was so tight, her breath came almost in a pant. Quite undignified. Sitting as straight as she could manage with the corsetted bodice, the Dragonborn reached for the goblet, lifting an eyebrow as Harkon smiled courteously, leaning over to pour them both some wine.

Every night he did something that threw her off. After that first night where he had nearly eclipsed her throat with a single crushing hand, she had almost snapped at him, a Shout threatening to break free. Which apparently amused the old bastard. He let her go free, that night...warning her that he would not relinquish his honored guest just yet.

Not until his questions had been answered, to his satisfaction. So far, they hadn’t. And he found an excuse to torture her, every evening after dinner.

*Guesting rights. No harm to me or mine...until one of us breaks truce.*

He was very punctual, she thought in sour rancor. Couldn’t he have maybe skipped a night? Given her just one day to spend with Vilkas, to reassure herself that whatever Saadia and Elenwen were doing to him wasn’t permanent?

She didn’t like the lost look in his eyes at dinner, as he sat holding her hand so tightly. Like he’d fall apart, if she let go.

If the union of Volkihar and Thalmor had broken faith in the fragile agreement of peace first, she would *rip Harkon apart*. If Vilkas was harmed in any way, if even a slight scratch injured the man who held her heart...there wouldn't be enough of him left to fall into dust.

Once, Harkon’s selection of wine had born a strange, metallic flavor. She had promptly spat it out, right onto the billowing skirt of the ruched pink nightmare they had given her that day, the rosy pearl beaded frou frou slowly stained purple with the spilled vintage.

Oh, how Harkon had laughed, those flashing incisors glinting in the ever dim light of his rooms!

*Arrogant. Overly confident. But sly enough to warrant the superiority.* That had been *his* blood mixed in with the wine, he related as she gave into the urge to grimace. He had wanted to see how a *Dragonborn* would possibly have been affected by the mighty Blood of Molag Bal.

Later, as he had released her, shaking, into the waiting arms of Ondolemar the male Mer had watched in open concern as she had retched up all the dinner. Every superbly roasted chicken leg, bread roll and compote of vegetable ended up in her chamberpot, along with the remnants of that wine.

Now, as the light shimmered on the copper netting, catching fire in the amethysts that dotted the silly excuse for a garment, she sat in suspense. Waiting with bated breath for Harkon to make his move.

He was in fine form tonight, she thought as the vampire lord nearly sprawled in the cushy chair.
Harkon didn't sprawl. Not ever, and it raised her inner warning radar to defcon five, as the Volkihar patriarch observed her... eyes nearly pressed into orange slits, over the rim of his goblet.

“You have not encountered Serana in your exploration of my castle, have you Dragonborn.”

Since it wasn’t a question, she remained silent.

He stood, scraping the chair away as he beckoned for her to follow.

Curious, she gathered the weighty folds of silk bunched in both hands and tried very hard not to trip, as Harkon pressed an indent in the stone wall that only he could see.

Abruptly, the wall shuddered, creaking slowly to the side as a cobwebbed tunnel appeared. She could see nothing but the broad form of him, emblazoned with those burning eyes.

“Follow me.”

Picking through the rubble that littered the sloping ground, Sigrid felt them descend as they walked for what felt like about two minutes. Finally, they emerged into a massive chasm, filled only by a single slab of unpolished stone.

Harkon stepped into the room, apparently deep in thought. “Have you ever had children, Dragonborn?”

Not in the way you seem to enjoy them, you demented bastard. Aloud she replied, “Yes.”

He made a noise that sounded like affirmation. “Then you are aware of how utterly vexing they can be. I have but one daughter. She is my pride. And yet…”

A rough echoing pounding suddenly shook the stone slab. Feeling it through the soles of her useless thin cloth slippers, Sigrid stared in horror at what she saw was no mere rock.

It was a tomb.

“...I find time outs to be rather instructive, don't you?” A terrible smile of victory stretched his lips as the pounding continued, accompanied by girlish screams. The sound of what must have been torn fingernails scraped inside the sarcophagus lid, screeching in horrid symphony.

“...let me out LET ME OUT NOW! Father! Oh, Da, don't do thissss….”

The screams devolved into dry sobbing, as Sigrid stood frozen, an unspoken understanding finally bridging them as Harkon pierced her with his now unsmiling, hard gaze.

Give me what I want, she could almost hear him say, as Serana beat her fists against the lid of her stone tomb.

Or this will be you, Dragonborn.
The gown they had laid out for her today was red.

Not just any red. The silken spill of crimson was bright red. Vivid, hearts-blood red, flowing into a long, dragging train. The top clung to her skin, thin ribboned straps accentuating the paleness of her curving bodice, ghastly white after so long indoors.

Just the thing for an appetizer to wear at a vampire’s banquet hall.

“Are you sure this is the right gown?” She called after the thrall, limping away down the corridor. No response.

Not like she expected one, anymore. After five weeks of struggling to make headway in communicating with the brain dead servants of the castle, she figured the spell damage must be permanent.

They never replied...never so much as reacted. Not even when Sigrid had waited stark naked, erupting into her best werewolf howl...clawing the air with exaggerated sweeps and lunging at the blank faced man as he unlocked the door the previous morning.

*Vilkas would have been so proud.* The male thrall had been less so, dropping off her tray like an automaton and shambling back to wherever he lurked without a word.

Sigrid sighed, eyeing how her veins popped out, stark blue against the milky pale of her neck and the ruby glory of the bloody red gown in the mirror.

Oh dear. Wasn’t today going to be fun.

***********

“Ah Sigrid...can you *oh merciful Auri-El.*”

The Dragonborn twirled, causing the vibrant silk to flare around her. “Yayyy, I’m dinner,” she drawled, watching with amusement as Ondolemar turned several shades of puce and rose, finally settling on a throttled greenish shade.

“...You can't wear that!” He choked in a kind of amazed fear as Sigrid stomped off down the corridor.

“Well, it's this or I go starkers. And it's *waaaay* too cold to streak around this damn icebox. So, red dress of doom it is.”

Hurrying after her, Ondolemar hissed through clenched teeth as Sigrid slid down the banister with a whoop. “*What is wrong with you today?*”

Falling in a heap of silk at the foot of the stairs, Sigrid blew stray hairs out of her eyes. Come to think of it, she *did* feel a bit strange. Bloated, maybe. “I think whatever the cook did with those chicken livers last night didn't sit too well, urghthp-”
-and she threw up, all over Ondolemar’s robes and boots. *Little bitty chicken livers, all brown and slimy, god I hope they were chicken-* she heaved again, holding her belly tight as she narrowly avoided splashing vomit all over the damn dress.

“…by the Eight Divines…” the Thalmor grumbled, hauling her away as a thrall stumbled forward with mop and bucket. “Take this as well,” Ondolemar hefted his soiled robe at the drudge, pulling Sigrid by her underarms to the empty laboratory as she blew raspberries at him.

“Heyyy, you’re chesty,” she slurred, almost hiccupping as she laughed. How funny. The Altmer didn’t have a scrap of body hair to his name. Just a bare chest of goldenrod hued skin, pulled tight over muscled abs that didn’t have a spare ounce of fat anywhere.

"Something is definitely amiss here,” Ondolemar muttered, searching through shelves of assorted potions and elixirs. “Have any of the vampires punctured your skin with their nails, or scratched you by mistake? Think, Sigrid. This is important.”

Wiping her mouth with the ragged towel he absent mindedly offered as his attention was fully occupied by the potion rack, Sigrid felt sudden tears fill her eyes. Quivering, she felt the almighty ugly cry face coming on.

“Oh. Oh no.” Salty tears trailing down her cheeks, she grimaced at the taste of sick. Dabbing her tongue with the cloth, she looked miserably up at the great height of Ondolemar’s exasperated face. “What is wrong now?”

“Your boots!” She wailed, trying to scrub them clean as he stepped hastily away. Sniffling, she felt her empty stomach roil angrily as she held the soiled cloth in her fists, water staining the silk of her bodice.

“This must be serious,” he sniffed, grabbing two different potions with one hand, consulting a textbook and flipping pages with the other. “Hold still. Of all the times to catch ill, you little minx…”

She tremulously swallowed down bile as he lifted a hand, casting spells under his breath as he continued reading.

Placing the book back on the shelf, Sigrid swayed with nausea as Ondolemar placed both hands on her shoulders; peering down at her with an unusually serious look in his emerald eyes.

She felt a warm tingling sensation rush through her. Almost like a ray of light appearing from behind a cloud. She smiled at it, only to stop grinning in uncertainty as Ondolemar blanched a whiter shade of yellow than she had ever seen him.

“Sigrid. Dragonborn, you…” he sat down in the chair next to her with a broken cry.

“Oh, this is a disaster!” He rested his head in his long fingered hands, his eyes wild.

Scooting across the floor, Sigrid awkwardly sat up on her knees and patted his bony back. “There, there. It can’t be that bad. I’m just a bit loopy. Probably due for my...my-”

Blood.

Her *period*. Oh.

Counting back on her fingers, Sigrid licked her lips, suddenly feeling an intense desire for sour pickle juice. Vogelson pickle juice, hand bottled at the county fair with homegrown dill. She would eat entire *jars* when she was...
Oh motherfucker. She was-

"...You are with child, Sigrid. About a month along." Ondolemar whispered softly, face smooshed against his hands as his words came out slightly mumbled.

Sitting there, she felt peculiar. As though several things which had previously made no sense had all of a sudden coalesced into one great big truth. Like missing the punchline of a joke, to finally laugh a week later. She was pregnant.

“Oh my god, I have to tell Vilkas! He’ll be-” biting her lip, she sat back down as nausea rushed back, pounding into her brain like a forge hammer banging steel.

“Ohhh,” she whimpered weakly, grabbing her head. “Oh, shit.”

Our Lord loves the blood of babes most of all.

“Yes, shit! Shit, fuck, blast it all, woman! Could you try to be slightly less fertile the next time a tyrannical vampire overlord captures us for his tea?”

Ondolemar slumped back, blowing in great gusts of air as his queer, yellow skin fluttered over his ribs as he hyperventilated. Subdued, Sigrid sat there for a moment, taking it all in.

Pregnant. With Vilkas's baby.

Vilkas, who was trapped by Elenwen and Saadia doing gods knew what to him this past month.

“...you have to help me tell him.” Turning fully, she tugged on his pants. Ever the gentleman, Ondolemar in his shock still managed to hand her a waterskin while holding onto the alchemy table for support.

She made a face as her own stale, bilious breath of chicken livers and morning gruel came back to haunt her. Phew. Swigging most of the water, she tugged at him again. “I mean it. I don't even know which hidden corridor they've taken him to. And believe me, I've looked. Please.”

It was her turn to slump to the floor, falling backwards as the water sloshed in her emptied stomach. The mood swings. Irritability and nausea. Cravings. No...she had thought it was just a particularly bad case of PMS. Chalk it up to hormones, separation issues and the goddamn stress of imprisonment, right?

“...are you sure this isn't just my...my womanly courses happening a bit late?”

Looking at her with tired eyes, Ondolemar leaned over and took her hand in his. She almost twitched away at his touch; prior experience in the castle had changed her to a more cautious being. Touch was bad, here.

But doggedly, he held on. Placing his other palm on her lower belly, he pushed gently, a look of concentration tightening his face.

There. A warmth, barely noticeable. But she had felt it.

“That is the sensation of life within you. A child. Gods, Sigrid. You are either the most lucky woman I know. Or the most unfortunate.” The Altmer released her with a sigh.
Vilkas had told her once that her stubborn perseverance was one of her best qualities. Straightening her dress, Sigrid stood before the Thalmor Mage. Ondolemar...her friend. One of her only friends, in this godforsaken castle.

He looked at her, exhaustion written all over him. She felt a burgeoning sense of purpose fill her.

Time was no longer her ally, if it had ever been. And she had yet another life to look after now. To save.

“Ondolemar. You know roughly where Vilkas is being kept? Which vampire is on duty?” She questioned, making her voice calm and soothing.

He nodded, scrubbing at his eyes with his palms.

Sigrid smiled brightly. “Marvelous. You know...I think I owe you a favor, after the fiasco at the embassy.”

Wandering over to the chest that contained castoff and spare robes for messy alchemists, Sigrid began digging industriously. Ondolemar trailed over, still looking shell shocked. “What...what are you talking about?”

“I hope you like Redguard women...” straightening her back with a slight pop and a grunt, Sigrid handed him a vivid silken robe in aqua blue. “Nice. This will remind her of the sea. Goes well with your coloring. Oh yeah...”

Settling the robe around his shoulders, Sigrid felt almost motherly as she looked Ondolemar over, his baffled face making her grin. Wow, but that color really did bring out the clear jade of his eyes. His golden skin fairly glowed, sleep deprived as they all were. Perfect. Bitch wouldn't know what hit her.

She cleared her throat, adopting a stern expression. “You, my dear Mer, are taking one for the team. Prepare yourself. Bring a book of seductive Breton poetry. Ooh, and some oils.” Grabbing a leather thongs from a nearby table, she gave it a quick experimental snap, watching with glee as Ondolemar’s eyes widened.

“...because you are about to get laid, baby.”

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“...I still don't see how a hawk could bring down a mammoth. Pawn takes knight. Your move.”

“Probably because you have never hunted for dinner in your entire life. Castle takes queen. Checkmate.”

“You know, I don't think I like your tone.”

Saadia (Vilkas refused to think of her as Iman, too confusing) was a sore loser. Scowling prettily, she flounced away from the chessboard, grabbing two bottles of wine from the chest near the fire.

“And I fail to see how a tall Nord tale has any bearing on your current situation. You know, I'm the one calling the shots here.” Tilting a hip, she affected a coy look. “Sooner or later, you will give in.
All men have needs.” Saadia swiveled her hips with a mocking kiss as she turned to find a corkscrew for the wine.

Aye, you call the shots. For now. Vilkas thought in dark amusement.

In the child’s tale, the hawk took down the mammoth by tearing out its eyes. Blinded, the great beast toppled into a hot spring and drowned. Its death fed many nests of hatchlings.

What Saadia didn't know was that he was the fucking hawk.

She had better guard her eyes, he thought restlessly as the Redguard woman sauntered over to hand him an opened bottle of wine.

It was the fifth day of the second month of his captivity. And it had been nearly unbearable, thanks to the constant prattle and unceasing sexual taunts of his former lover.

His only contact with Sigrid, fuck, his only chance to leave the room that grew smaller with each day was the evening meal.

Every night, Saadia tugged at him as he permitted her to hold his hand. Allowed the woman to pull him along, flanked by the ever watchful guards, both vampire and mer, as he walked willingly to the one bright spot in his dreary days.

Sigrid would usually be seated already, waiting with a ready smile, hand already extended to grasp his before he could sit down. She always looked beautiful to him, but in a bizarre show of courtly etiquette his wife now showed up in a different, more elaborate ball gown every night.

He wouldn't complain. Certainly not tonight as he not-very-subtly eyed the heaving breasts nearly popping from her purple bodice. Shor's balls, what with the absolute dearth of sex lately, it was all he could do not to drag her off in a dark corner somewhere, vampires be damned.

To tear that flimsy fabric apart and free his wife’s glorious bosom. See if she still tasted the same beneath the frippery, after all this fancy finger food and constant, unending anxiety…

No.

He was master of himself. No one held power over him, to force him to do anything. Except perhaps his wife, but unlike some she would never abuse her power.

Reflecting on recent events, Vilkas bit back a surly invective. The Redguard traitor, on the other hand...

Every other night, there would come a knock on the door.

Every other night, Vilkas would prepare for the inevitable struggle as the undead guards assisted the Thalmor in shackling him to the cuffs nailed into the stone wall. He had almost made it free once, bowling over his captors and skidding down two hallways before they overwhelmed him at a dead end.

Now, they afforded him no chances. He was cuffed and well trapped when Elenwen arrived to feed on Saadia.

He was forced to watch the show, gaining a neck ache from his effort to turn away from the spectacle that was laid before him.
Vilkas was no stranger to rough bed play. But as he unwillingly beheld Saadia moan in practiced tones as the vampire crone bit into a naked thigh or breast, all he could feel was pity.

Pity, for a past love who had fallen so far. For the scars that bore proof of her desperation to survive, at any cost.

Not like his Sigrid, to whom terrible events had happened without just cause. His wife had overcome every obstacle, survived horrors. He had all the faith in the world that she would guide them through this dark nightmare. Somehow.

Saadia welcomed the pain with open arms, in what looked similar to sexual bliss as Elenwen often lost her tight fisted control in the ecstasy of feeding.

It had been novel the first twenty minutes perhaps, of watching the two females grind and moan together in sexual pleasure, the Altmer orgasming violently with ripping fangs and bucking hips. Saadia came much more seldom; a raw deal for the amount of damage inflicted, in his mind.

Whatever. He often lost interest, keeping track of the two women in his peripheral awareness just in case they decided to turn on him. They never did, although he had to deal with Saadia’s increasingly crude overtures the more he ignored her.

With carefully concealed amusement, he reflected that the Redguard was not used to men, or women for that matter, paying her no heed. She had been beautiful, once. A shame that her loveliness had only extended skin deep.

As the days passed, Vilkas came to welcome the nights spent chained with a macabre sense of expectation.

When he was contained, he could not pace restlessly, constantly on guard for ways to escape. His inner guilt at having failed Sigrid, simply by not showing up at her side, was assuaged by the knowledge he could do nothing more, lying against the wall with the steel biting into his wrists.

He would often take his mind to other, happier memories then. Ignoring the vampire and her blood donor, Vilkas lost himself in the feel of the brisk mountain air of the tundra outside Whiterun.

Remembering the good times, the best parts of his youth. Fatherly Kodlak and gruff Skjor taking him and Farkas out hunting.

Aela and the pranks he had pulled with her, nights spent hunting mammoth and counting the stars. The sister he had taken for granted.

That warm night he and his twin had gone off to get tattoos, giggling like children with the flush of pride at being admitted to the Companions inner Circle.

Vilkas revisited the Midsummer Festival when he had carried the amulet of Mara, nervously checking his pockets as he danced, waiting in happy expectation for the right moment to ask the woman to be his.

Ah, and she had accepted him with arms wide open. Never mind what had come after.

Truly, he thought in a pleasant daze as Saadia shot him an ugly look, half concealed by the feeding vampire above her...there were so many more pleasant places to be than here.

“...kas. Vilkas! Hello?”
Jumping in his binds, he realized Saadia was sneering before him, nude and bleeding from three fresh bites.

Elenwen reclined abed, pruny mouth sucking at a finger dipped in blood. “Where is your mind, Nord?” The vampire mer chuckled. “My girl has a proposal for you.”

Tightening his fists, he felt a pulse of fear move through him as the Redguard stepped closer.

Her dark eyes were cold. “Say yes.”

Vilkas stiffened. “...No.”

“Oh, for the love of Mara!” Saadia exploded, dealing him a blow that bounced his head hard against the stone wall. He saw stars as the woman continued to rant.

He vaguely caught the gist of what she was saying. Saadia wanted a man, and what she wanted she had been promised. Blah blah, all the better if the Dragonborn suffered. Blah.

He was more occupied at the moment staring down Elenwen, who had become instantly focused on him the moment Saadia’s blow had caused his nose to bleed.

Caught in a staring contest, he was unprepared for another punch, this one taking his eye with the impact. He gasped at the shock, having no chance to steel himself against the onslaught as the Redguard began to use him as her own personal punching bag.

He estimated he had broken about three ribs as well as his nose, when Elenwen stopped Saadia, gripping her straining fists with hardly any effort.

“Remember the guesting rights, girl. Enough. He must be whole and unblemished, the following evening.”

The old Altmer cocked her head, studying him as he struggled to maintain eye contact. Predators respected eye contact. If it worked for sabre cats, then surely it worked on vampires.

He felt instant relief, nearly moaning as a healing hands spell coursed through him, righting his cracked ribs with a meaty pop.

Saadia stepped forward, her face twisted in fury. “You bastard. You never refused me before! You just wait,” she curled her lip, almost snarling at Vilkas as Elenwen dragged her away.

“I can make you hard! Force you to enjoy me, Vilkas! My Elenwen can bespell you until you wouldn’t remember your own name! Just wait!”

He watched them go with mingling pain, worry and happiness. They were leaving him to sleep in chains, tonight. It was going to hurt. Hurt a lot, in fact...the sharp metal edges were already boring into his skin.

But they were leaving him alone. He feared that Saadia was right. Sighing as he watched the fire slowly burned low, he prayed it would not die out completely, leaving him in the dank cold of the keep with just this light tunic and threadbare pants for warmth.

Could he hold out against a vampire’s gaze? Fight, with all the willpower he had, against the illusion spells of the undead?

He supposed he would find out, soon enough.
One month and five days, going on six.

He hoped Sigrid and Ondolemar had hatched a damn good escape plan. Or he might find himself in thrall to the Redguard bitch after all.
A hoarse scream.

Ancarion blocked it out with the written word.

“*They said it was impossible. They, not me. I knew! The book knew. It knows all. And I know all. All I need to know. To fly! They laughed. The others were afraid. Don’t even try, they said. They said it was impossible. They, not me.*”

Another scream, somehow farther away. Somewhere deep in the castle. A pounding reverberated through the floor of his cold stone chamber.

He ignored it.

“*The book fills me. With knowledge. Secret hidden knowledge. My knowledge. I must hide the knowledge. Hide it away deep inside. I will eat the book. A page at a time. Slowly. Slowly. I will become one with the knowledge contained on its pages. In its pages. In me! The knowledge of flight. They said it was impossible. Ha!*”

Ripping, agonized screams, ending in wet slurps and sucking noises. By the Eight and all that is holy ....Ancarion slammed the strange diary shut and stood, trembling as he took deep, even breaths.

Never. There had never been any mention of this. The book Immortal Blood was a bard’s tale; everyone knew that. Undead Nords reaching out through the ice, snagging unwary travelers…

There had been no tomes that the archaeologist had seen written on the massively sprawling Volkihar castle, hidden in fog and rock.

A knock came at the door. He gladly welcomed the distraction. “Come in!” Ancarion called, hating how his voice wavered slightly.

Ondolemar entered, sweeping into the room in a garish blue robe that looked like a Mara’s Day card.

Ancarion nearly gaped at his superior as the older Mer walked straight to his bookshelf and began methodically pulling off healing potions and stamina mixtures, tossing them into a knapsack that also contained an assortment of scrolls and soul gems. “What...what do you think you’re doing?”

Turning to Ancarion, the Justiciar’s mouth was set in a hard, determined line. “We. We are going to be doing something we should have accomplished weeks ago. Now, follow.”

Pausing at the door as Ancarion stood stock still, feeling his chest seize with fear, Ondolemar sighed heavily. “I won’t ask again, young man. The time has come. Follow.”

One step. Then another. *He could do this*. No. No he couldn’t.

“But the...Elenwen!”

Ondolemar scoffed, adjusting the knapsack on his shoulder with a shrug. “…she is no longer Thalmor. Not in any sense of the definition. Do you still follow her? Even after the first night?”
Oh Auri-El. “No! Don’t talk about it! Don’t—” Almost immediately, Ancarion’s mind was filled with savage recollection. The wailing of desperate high elves, keening as they were set upon by the horde of the undead. Arms reaching for him, desperately clawing at his robes as he was dragged away to safety. Sifrilien, her lovely wide amber eyes panicked, as she hauled him up to the spare cage that was open and waiting...only for Ondolemar to lock it tight and brace against the sudden onslaught of ravenous vampires. “Cover your ears! Do not look at their eyes!” He heard the Mer yell, as they followed his example, trying to block out the pitiful shrieks of his brothers and sisters being devoured alive.

He blinked back sudden tears, silently scolding himself for displaying such weakness. Sifrilien had taken the blood days ago, her once striking eyes taking on the glowing hunger that haunted his dreams. “No.” His robes swirled around his legs as he turned away from Ondolemar, focusing on a rather hideous tapestry of Sheogorath doing something unspeakable with a goat and a wheel of cheese.

“I...I can’t. I’m of no use to you.”

Feeling a hand grasp his shoulder, Ancarion looked up at the stern, sad visage of the only Mer he could trust.

“One way or another,” Ondolemar spoke softly, not letting go, “...we must leave this place. Certain events have conspired to force my hand, tonight. Come.” Releasing him, Ancarion reactively caught the spare pack thrown at him.

“But...where? Where are we going to escape? By the Eight, we’d need an army to storm the gates!”

Tugging at the blue collar of his robes, Ondolemar smiled viciously. “Yes...an army.”

Ancarion blinked as he was shoved towards the cabinet that held magicka elixirs. “We are bound for the dungeons, so bring sure to wear a warmer robe than whatever that is.”

“Also...how good are your renervation spells, young man?”

**********

Bored.

Iman was so fucking bored.

She had released the stubborn bastard sometime after her leisurely breakfast and a well deserved nap. Strolling in after a long, frustrating evening of watching a vampire orgy from the sidelines...unable to join in...she had discovered Vilkas passed out, bleeding sluggishly from his wrists as he hung in his shackles.

It really was a pity he was bound for the cattle cells, Iman thought plaintively as she looked him over. The Companion was a fine specimen of manhood, despite his growth of beard and deep bruised shadows beneath those incredible eyes.

She shivered, recalling her first encounter with him years ago. She had just arrived in the bleak, backwards community of Whiterun, far enough from Hammerfell that she felt safe, and was learning the ropes of serving mead and meals. Having been raised in far more luxurious climes, the newly
christened Saadia had been kept hopping by a stern Hulda, running back and forth until her poor feet and back fairly ached from the strain.

The Companions were at the Bannered Mare that night, toasting the newest additions to their hall. Saadia had sidestepped carefully around the foot stomping, singing warriors pounding their mugs against the table, wincing as mead sloshed onto the floor. She’d have to clean that up later.

Nearly tripping over armored boots, she felt a hand steady her as she bit her lip against the pain. “Steady on, there. You must be new. Haven’t seen your face before.”

...And looking up, she was startled to find herself helped up onto her feet by a young man wearing wolfshead armor, a heavy battleblade strapped to his back.

Younger than her, certainly. That freshly scrubbed face so carefully decorated in black woad - he had to be one of the two Companions they were feasting tonight.

“Thanks. Yes, I’m new. Just trying to stay awake...Hulda sure knows how to run an inn.”

Those icy eyes narrowed. “Hmm. I know a place where you can rest your feet.”

Saadia had swallowed, feeling a hot twist of lust pooling in her belly as the newest Companion slowly sized her up. “Interested?” The young fucker had smirked, those grey eyes spark- ling evilly in all that warpaint.

She had nodded, speechless. Later, as she had sneaked hand in hand with him behind the Bannered Mare, she could still hear the Nord warriors singing as her breath caught...faster and faster as she came hard, twice as he fairly pounded her against the stone wall with every exhilarating thrust. She had rested her feet, all right...wrapped around his back.

It had been the highlight of her first year, pleasantly revisited as she learned that Vilkas, newly of the Companion’s Circle, truly enjoyed sex in all its flavors. Like some Nord connoisseur of fuckery.

Yes. It was a shame he no longer liked to play. “Wake up.” Slapping his face, Iman was gratified to see him blearily blink at her, as she unfastened the shackles that held him spread eagled against the wall.

She turned away to refuel the smoking embers of the fire as he dropped heavily to the floor. “You should have accepted my offer, Vilkas. Ungrateful...” kicking the last log into the pit, Iman straightened up to fasten her best glare upon him. “...and foolish.”

His heavy pant of pain her only response, fanning the flames of her ire. *We could have kept each other alive.* “You’re going to regret making me angry, tonight.”

Vilkas was struggling to stay alert, she could tell. “Saadia, don’t.”

“Don’t what? Beg?” Sliding off her latest order, a confection of tiny golden chainlinks meshed into a glorious drape of a gown, Iman stood bare before him. A nagging irritation flared even brighter as she saw that he kept his eyes trained upon hers, never dropping to take the rest of her in.

Men had fought duels; had fallen upon their scimitars for the sight she willingly bestowed upon this bastard. *How dare he ignore her!*

“What!” She barked furiously as door suddenly opened. “I thought I told you, I do not wish to be
The Redguard was thrown off her feet as Vilkas lifted and tossed her - like a sack of grain - onto the bed, where she bounced once, momentarily senseless as he scrabbled for the door.

As she hissed in righteous fury, righting herself upon the bed she heard the door lock with a rasping snap. “What the...who are you?” Iman spat imperiously at the tall Altmer who had locked her prisoner out.

_Damn it all, Stendarr take him._ Elenwen was not going to be pleased. “And what do you think you are doing in here?”

Feeling the cold chill tighten her nipples in the open air, Iman stood up, holding her ground as the tall elf lazily perused her naked body. Then, he smiled - a beautiful smile, in that sharp golden face. Blue-green folds of silk swirled around his legs as he slowly stalked towards her.

“Elenwen has been very pleased with your dedication of late.” His voice was low, refined. An older Altmer, then. It was hard to tell sometimes, Iman thought, what with the lack of obvious wrinkles. Only the truly aged of the mer ever showed silver hairs or the other markers of long life. This one’s glass green eyes were hard, focused on her as she unwillingly took a step back, against the bed. Then another.

“What is that to me! You’ve just allowed her prize prisoner to escape. And I’ll be the one to take the blame, not you. Not her Thalmor spy!”

“Takes one to know one, I suppose.” Unwrapping something from around his wrists, Iman frowned when she saw the length of leather thongs he dangled, almost teasingly towards her. “But I’m not here to punish you. Much.”

“Who sent you?” She demanded, quashing the sizzle of excitement she had felt as the mer’s eyes fairly embraced her curves. Now, _here_ was a man who could appreciate a woman.

“Elenwen. Like I said....” Leaning over from his great height, strands of his blonde hair tickled her face as she stood still, hardly daring to move as his nose glided against hers. “A reward,” he whispered against her lips, smiling as her tongue darted out to taste him.

“...for a job well done.”

Abandoning her annoyance at his intrusion, Iman felt herself carried up in strong, lean arms and deposited onto the bed. Far more pleasantly than the first time, she could admit.

Oh, well. It wasn’t as though the castle was totally bereft of guards. Vilkas would no doubt be caught - again - and end up right where she wanted him. For now, she would enjoy this new development while it lasted.

She only put up a token struggle as she felt binds carefully tighten around her wrists, pulling her tight against the bedposts. Writhing against the soft furs, she could hear him gasp softly.

The male elf loomed over her, emerald eyes nearly slit shut as his breath came faster at the sight of her spread before him. “My reward. Truly.”

For the first time today, Iman allowed herself a cautious smile.

And for the next few hours, she was no longer bored.
Launching himself from the door, Vilkas was nearly blinded by the frantic need to escape as he crashed into someone waiting outside.

Swinging wildly, his fists were caught by none other than Ondolemar. Forcing himself to relax, Vilkas bit his tongue as the Altmer let go, holding a finger up to his lips in the universal gesture for silence. Arching an eyebrow with a smile, Ondolemar let himself into the room, shutting the door with a heavy creak.

Too tired to figure out the why, he stiffened as a red blur fastened itself upon him. “Vilkas! Shh! This way!”

Hardly daring to believe it, he followed Sigrid down the hallway. The crimson gown she wore fairly glowed in the shadows, a light in the dark. Feeling her small fingers clasping his, he smiled, hardly caring that his wrists were throbbing anymore. He noted a pile of shimmering dust that his wife heedlessly tracked through. Remnants of his guard, perhaps?

Gesturing for him to accompany her, she pressed a stone in the wall. The wall shuddered, sliding slowly away to reveal a dark tunnel. “Come on.” Nudging the wall, it closed solidly behind them.

It was so black he couldn’t see her, though her breath came in short puffs against the bare skin of his arms. “Oh my god, did they hurt you? Those bitches....”

Feeling her hands trace over his face, his neck, he lifted her in a tight embrace. Burying his face in her neck, he sighed. She smelled like flower water, with the slight staleness of vomit. “Sigrid, were you sick? Are you alright love?”

She trembled in his arms. “Vilkas, honey. I have so much to tell you.”

They stilled as the sound of footsteps rushed past, outside the tunnel in the hall. He could hear her whisper, softly. ‘Yo!‘ - and blinked, as a torch bloomed with light, revealing her heart shaped face.

“Not here. Let’s go further down. Then we can talk.”

The tunnel seemed to wind, deeper and further down as it leveled out after fifteen minutes of walking. Nearly stepping on the red silk train of her gown yet again, Vilkas finally moved to her side as he looked on in surprise.

A chasm, sinking into an empty black pit. The jagged stone walls seemed to melt into the foundation stones of the castle, a rough rectangular block of stone occupying space dead center before them.

Sitting atop the stone, a vampire he gladly recognized sat. Bobbing her foot, she tilted the bottle of what he assumed was potion all the way up, draining the last drops into her waiting mouth. Serana, Vampire Princess was literally blockaded by stacks of weapons and armor. He could see steel, glass, elven and ebony in a mish mash of designs and eras; stolen no doubt from the vampire’s hoard. Stepping forward, he picked up a wicked looking daedric broadsword and felt the edge in awe.

Glowing sunset eyes blinked at him as the vampire smiled, tiny fangs stained red. “I see you’ve
found your misplaced husband, Dragonborn.”

“Yes. It only took forever.” Reaching in the travel knapsack he somehow hadn’t noticed before, Sigrid handed Serana another bag that clinked. “Here you go.”

“Well.” Uncapping another potion, the coppery scent of blood wafted over to Vilkas’s nose. “Now that he’s here, we can begin. The cattle are restless.”

“Not quite. Give us a few minutes. It’s been weeks, remember?” Tutting at the oozing scabs on his wrists, his wife gently grasped his shirt and pulled him to a quiet corner of the room, further from the chasm where Serana contentedly sipped at her drink. He pulled on a cloak, almost as an afterthought as he followed Sigrid. It was even colder here in the bowels of the castle, and he could feel himself shivering.

Pulling him down to the ground, the red silk billowed around her as she sat. He drank in the sight of her, almost quivering with the elation of finally being free. “Sigrid. You,” he swallowed, suddenly dry mouthed in her presence. “They didn’t do anything to you, did they?”

“No. Not like you.” Reaching into her bag, she handed him a waterskin and watched him in concern as he almost choked, drinking too quickly. As he leaned forward against her, savoring the feeling of being so close, he felt her rub some salve on his wrists.

The look in her hazel eyes…”Saadia doesn’t deserve what she’s getting, not right this second. Uppity twat. Hope Ondolemar makes her work for it.”

He laughed hoarsely. “I can say this for sure. I’m damn glad you sprung me before tonight. Not sure what would have been left of me, after she threw her little temper tantrum.”

She hmmed in response, still apparently thinking dark thoughts. For the first time since stepping foot inside Volkihar castle, Vilkas felt himself relax, just the slightest bit.

Moments passed this way, as she finished smearing the healing balm on his cuts, covering them with clean strips of linen. “Why not just Shout?” He finally wondered aloud, watching the small changes in her face as her emotions played out. *Gods. Wasn’t he the luckiest bastard?*

“...I’m not sure how far our voices carry here. The chasm acts like an amplifier - remember how we could hear Serana’s screams all the way through the castle? Yeah. I’m not sure what a shout will do. So we whisper, and pray Harkon doesn’t find out I blocked the entrance through his chambers until after nightfall.”

Lifting his hand to cup her cheek, she closed her eyes and pressed against him. Pain flitted over her features as he studied her. “Sigrid. What's wrong?”

Her pale throat swallowed. “Don’t...just don’t freak out, okay?”

Vilkas felt his eyebrows pull up in surprise. “...freak?”

She waved a hand dismissively. “More slang from my world. Sorry. What I meant was, ugh.” Settling herself away from his side, Sigrid faced him and took his hands in hers.

Inhaling deeply, she blew out a breath in what looked like nervousness.

“So. I’m pregnant.”

Feeling like someone had reached into his chest and tightened their grip around his heart, Vilkas just
looked at her. “...What? Sigrid...is it mine?”

Her lip quivered as she laughed, tears making her eyes bright. “Of course it’s your baby, you dork. What do you think I’ve been doing these last few weeks?”

Sitting there, he marvelled at how such a simple statement changed...everything.

“How are you feeling?” Damn. That was probably the wrong thing to say. What should I say?

Tears continued trickling down her cheeks as she scrubbed her eyes furiously. “Scared. And happy. I can’t predict how I’m going to feel now...it’s those hormones I told you about. Now that—”

Almost without thinking, he moved closer, cutting off what she was about to say. Placed his hand on the tight flatness of her belly, as if he could feel the life within by merely willing it.

“How did you know?”

She smiled beautifully. “Ondolemar ran some tests. I’m about a month along, now.” Arching an eyebrow, she gave him a lascivious look. “...I think it was during that ice-cave date. The one where you tried to kiss me with fish breath. Must be something to eating roe, after all eh? An aphrodisiac?”

Laughing, he felt a bubble of tension pop, leaving him with a floating warmth that he prayed would last as he held her even closer, rocking her in his arms as she tightened her grip in return. Feeling his tongue twist around everything he wanted to say, but couldn’t... he merely looked at her with a smile that almost hurt, it was so wide.

Sigrid sniffled. “Ugh, hold on. I have to blow my nose now. Stupid dress.” She cleaned up her face with a spare linen bandage, then sighed as he began peppering her with small kisses, finally ending on her lips.

He didn’t care if her breath was slightly sour, or that his probably tasted awful. She kissed him back regardless of how they both smelled. It was...enough, just to be together at last. With his child growing in her, a bridge between them. Family.

Felt her smile, as he tucked her head into his neck and looked at Serana, who was definitely trying to ignore them as best as she could and failing.

“Congratulations,” she mouthed, fangs flashing as she grinned.

Chapter End Notes

I always picture Vilkas as looking a bit like Michael Fassbender in Centurion.


Well. Not the most flattering shot ever. Maybe this one?

https://i.ytimg.com/vi/AGDTT2Rn1xw/maxresdefault.jpg

And I'm not gonna lie...my inspiration for Sigrid's red leather armor earlier in the series came from Mord Sith designs in the Seeker of Truth series.
http://tonycampagna.deviantart.com/art/Mord-Sith-005ews-383952987

Boo yah. Fassbender is sooo fine.
Oh, so when I was writing that scene last chapter with Vilkas basically throwing Saadia out of the way and running like a bat out of hell - I was totally thinking of this moment from Centurion. Since Michael Fassbender in that flick is basically how I see him. :p

Run, Vilkas RUN! She gonna git you!

There you go! Some levity for otherwise a very dark chapter for our heroes.

Elenwen awakened at full sunset, the blackness of her coffin reassuring.

Another day had passed.

Another day she had survived.

A day filled with nightmares she could not recollect, come fall of night. It was for the best...the ones she did recall were rather unpleasant. Particularly the one where that scrap of an upstart, Ulfric, had traded places with her in the Room of Questioning. She winced, nearly feeling the agony of pincers pulling and sharp instruments slicing as she had shrieked, helpless to free herself from the smiling, savage man.

_Hah_. Like she, a superiorly bred Mer with a lineage that trailed back before Tiber Septim, would have been captured by a mere man. A Nord barbarian, no less...the brash snowback had been a downright simpleton when it came to manipulation.

The stupid human deserved all the misfortune that had befallen him. Delicately tonguing the dryness of her fangs, she pushed the lid open to reveal her chambers, still undisturbed. The wards she had placed for protection were still intact.

_Good_. There were many who wished her ill, at this point in her careful preparation. Vingalmo, Orthjolf. Even Ondolemar, of whom she had been so certain, had been slipping the past few days in his obeisance to her.

A shame, that. Feeling very thirsty indeed, she ensured her armor was securely fastened and opened her door, resetting the wards to inform her if anyone meddled with her things.

Not that she needed armor, Elenwen reflected as she flowed silently through the vast halls. Elenwen could lie for days, stark naked on the icy floor and not feel more than a slight chill. Further benefits of being what she was.

Ducking her head into the last room of the corridor, she allowed herself a frown. _What was Ancarion up to?_

The studious young thing had survived, much to her surprise that first night when she had made the
offering of her Thalmor followers to Lord Harkon. She had to applaud the ingenuity Ondolemar had shown, saving nearly three of his comrades from the hunger of the night-children. *Who was it, that had been torn apart and passed through the bars of the cage?*

She shrugged, uncaring. It was enough that Sifrilien, Ancarion and Ondolemar had endured as useful tools in her arsenal.

Sifrilien had taken to the blood like a slaughterfish to water. Now, it would be Ondolemar’s turn.

*Where were they?*

She came upon her Lord as he strode out from his chambers. “My Lord Harkon. How was your slumber?”

He did not respond, but continued moving down the hall towards the main ballroom. Smarting at his dismissal, Elenwen followed silently behind as the Volkihar patriarch quickened his pace down the stairs.

Elenwen’s boots skidded in grit upon the stone flagged steps. “What the...where are the thralls?” *Where were all the damned guards?*

Turning her head left, then right, the Altmer vampire’s eyes widened when she realized what awaited them in the massive ante-chamber.

The Dragonborn stood, no longer wrapped in delicate silks and velvets. She wore a full set of rare stalhrim armor that fairly gleamed in the dim light of the candelabra above head. The helm almost obscured her face, revealing only fierce eyes and a stern mouth. Two blades were held at the ready in her fists; a longsword of the same enchanted ice, and an elegantly curved elven blade.

Her companions were similarly armed to the teeth. Elenwen’s eyes *bulged* as she took in the sight of Ondolemar next to Sigrid, holding a furious and gagged Saadia against his lean form. The traitorous elf actually smiled at her. Elenwen almost stepped forward, blinded by the burning *need* to end him and take back her girl.

*End the Mer,* whose blood was so very sweet. A unique, rich taste. Her other soldiers had not lasted nearly long enough before they had expired. But Harkon, finally moving, barred her way. She dared not pass her lord, his eyes fixed stolidly upon the figure clothed in ice.

Vilkas, the Dragonborn’s husband, stood at her right. Where the foolish girl stood pale and shining, he burned darkly. Daedric armor covered him from head to toe, wicked-looking spikes jaggedly emerging from gauntlets and knee guards; ready to rip and tear. He carried a daedric blade nearly as tall as he was, easily hefting it in one hand.

She could barely make out the shivering form of Ancarion, nearly hiding behind the others. The rest of the space was entirely filled with (Elenwen’s teeth *ached*) humans.

Nearly a hundred, by a rough accounting.

The human cattle. Reinvigorated, awake and aware. Carrying a variety of weaponry that ranged from butcher blades, axes and maces to net and chain, they had been outfitted as well, in decidedly less fine accoutrement. More leather and ironwork than the ringleaders wore.

Their faces varied in expression, from anger to fear to horror, as she imperiously scanned their faces, committing them to memory. Their preparation would not save them.
Every one. Every single damn one of them would die this night. Their blood would become her own. Their lives in the palm of her hand.

“...Gone!” Vingalmo suddenly flashed into view, hovering as close as he dared to their Lord, who was still silent, also viewing the motley rabble assembled before them. “All gone! The thrallmaster, he... all dust!”

Shifting her boots against the floor, she dared to look about her. Dust. Slightly shimmering, grey dust...unnoticeable if she hadn’t strained to see it layered thickly upon the floor, ground into the red carpets in great soiled stains.

Vampire dust. Enough to account for the lack of unlife, replaced by the hot, quivering smell of the living.

“Dragonborn.” Harkon’s voice was pleasant, as if he were discussing the possible menu for dinner. “You have broken my hospitality.”

“You and yours broke it first.” Raising the stalhrim blade, it glinted diamond sharp as the warrior pointed it to Elenwen. “Broken these many nights past, as my husband was kept from me...beaten, damaged and nearly spelled in thrall to that bitch and her blood bag. Don’t bother denying it.”

Sibilant hisses echoed from the vampires. Elenwen bared her fangs in defiance, her confidence restored as shadows of other vampires crept forward. Within moments, Harkon, Elenwen and Vingalmo were surrounded by six others of the blood. Two death hounds also stalked forward, growling in sepulchral tones as their hollow eyes fixed upon the mortal challengers.

Movement. The humans shuffled, some of them fleeing to the back of the herd. And then, one figure strode forward that truly stunned the old Mer. The Dragonborn and Ondolemar parted, the latter with a quirked brow and another infuriating grin as Serana walked forward.

Wearing the royal crest and armor, even after all this time. Envy pooled the venom in Elenwen’s mouth as she swallowed bitterly. Stopping still a few paces from her father, Serana’s porcelain face was a mask of hope and suppressed agony. “Oh, Da. Why did you let it go this far?”

“All might be well yet, if the Dragonborn but cooperates, daughter.” His eyes resembled flaming embers more than any organ, as he fastened his gaze upon them all.

Lord Harkon lifted his arms, sweeping them around the room. “Surrender, and you will be spared.”

“Lay down your arms, and I will welcome you with open arms into my coven.”

A few twitched. Elenwen looked on in disgust as a few waveringly stood forward, despite the pull of arms beckoning them back with whispers and cries.

Wrinkling his nose, Ondolemar fairly shoved Saadia towards the no man’s land in the area before the stairwell. “Here’s one I know wants nothing more than to be one of you.”

The spy turned, black eyes furious. Whipping her head back and forth between the two opposing factions, Elenwen’s cold stare finally punctured the Redguard’s bravado. The woman wilted, cowering from the undead as she removed the gag. Slow steps brought her to her rightful place, next to her side. Elenwen smiled in triumph at the sadness she beheld from the Dragonborn; shock and pity from Vilkas and others.

"You have done me a great service in returning my child to me. I have...enjoyed our past conversation, these many nights."

He took a step forward. Almost without thought, Elenwen followed, noting how Vingalmo and the others echoed her as they flanked their master.

"...And now you must be rewarded. There is but one gift I can give that is equal in value to the Elder Scroll and my daughter."

Once more, the Volkihar raised his hand outstretched. The Dragonborn made no move, remaining in the same defensive posture. "I offer you my blood. Take it, and you will walk as a lion among sheep. Men will tremble at your approach, and you will never fear death again."

Shaking her head at something she found amusing, the Nord smiled broadly. Her voice was light as she replied. "To die will be an awfully big adventure. I'll pass."

Shaking her head at the audacity of the girl, Elenwen allowed lightning to sizzle at her fingertips. Thank the Eight the Dragonborn had refused her lord’s all-too generous offer. Soon. This loose end would be disposed of, her position assured.

She could see herself sailing home, her flock expanded like sands of the sea to rain upon the shores of the Summerset Isles. How the councils of the Dominion would bow, in view of her might!

Almost losing herself in the imagining, the Mer smiled dreamily as Harkon took a moment to respond.

"...Then you will be prey, like all mortals. I had thought you different, Dragonborn. Perhaps the blood of a dovah does not compare to the might of Molag Bal that I wield?"

The warrior Vilkas stepped forward at that, blade raised and grasped in both hands. "Raise the gate, beast! Let us leave, us and all our kind...or we end you now!"

Serana took a step forward. "Father." She shook her head sadly. "You know why we're here."

Harkon laughed, a rough mocking sound that repeated, echoing with the sibilance of his vampiric court. They moved silently, seeping into the corners and shadows of the grand hall as they surrounded the flock. Serana, the Dragonborn and her accomplices shuffled slightly, becoming even more tense if it were possible.

"Of course I do. You disappoint me, Serana. You've taken everything I provided for you and thrown it all away."

The prodigal princess laughed, a choked sound. "Provided for me? Are you insane? You've destroyed our family. You've killed other vampires. All over some prophecy that I barely understand. No more. I'm done with you. You will not touch these people."

Feeling the claws lengthen and stretch the skin of her hands, Elenwen played with a ball of ice and electricity as she grinned at the humans, who shrank at her approach. Not long now. Her Lord was fairly vibrating with fury.

And the fear - oh, the terror was a sweet spice to her appetite.
"So, I see this dragon has fangs. Your voice drips with the venom of your mother's influence. How alike you've become."

The Dragonborn continued smiling, the knowing gleam in her eyes driving Elenwen to shudder, barely held back in her desire to leap forward and gouge them out.

“Dragonborn...Perhaps you still need convincing? Behold the power that I offer! Now, make your choice!”

*********

Not long after the Volkihar Lord made his gruesome transformation (even more batlike than in game; those stretched hide wings were huge) the two sides collided in a merger of sound and violence.

Sigrid desperately tried to fight at distance, as she had promised Vilkas multiple times before making their stand. It was damn difficult, what with the fluid speed of their opponents. Shouting was a chancy proposition. It was so dark in here; the guttering chandeliers had begun swinging after her first Fus Roh Dah, and now shadows were bouncing all over the place. Shadows of the dead and dying, shaken in the dancing candlelight until the stone walls resembled the darkroom of a funhouse.

And fighting with two swords was an experiment all in its own; tracking where each blade landed while preparing to guard her other side kept mind fully occupied. Grateful, really...this way she didn’t have to mentally freak out about the poor sods dying left and right.

They had been too malnourished for too long, those sad humans that had been prey not long ago. She took the time to guard what looked like a family; parents who were bodily blocking their teenaged daughters from harm. And for the space of a moment, her bladework kept them safe.

It didn’t last.

“...You dare defy your father?” His monstrous wings beating against the stale air, Harkon gestured with one long taloned hand towards the dark stairwell that led to the dungeons. “Fools!”

A cold wind surged through the room, nearly visible as it disappeared in an aquiline streak down the stairs. Heart in her throat, Sigrid held her sword at the ready and noticed Vilkas looking her way. His face was completely covered by his helm as he gestured wildly at Harkon.

Shaking her head in confusion, Sigrid had just enough time to draw a breath, to try to Shout when Saadia came out of nowhere and pushed her, hard.

Stumbling with the weight of the stalhrim armor, she heard screams behind her as Elenwen’s face filled her vision. The long, yellowed fangs were bared in a cruel smile, white ropes of hair flaring about as the vampire grabbed her. Gnashing teeth snapped close to her throat as she leans back, desperately trying to put some distance between them.

-and nearly falls with astonishment as Serana, that lovely pale face twisting beneath the skin into something obscene, slashes at Elenwen with razored claws. Sigrid sees the old Mer’s face howl in fury as it bleeds into grey dust, the suddenness of it bewildering. Nearly numb with the violence of it all, she stand here like an idiot as the swirling remains of Elenwen fall to the floor. Serana nods at her. Then, stretching the filmy membrane of her newborn wings, the Volkihar takes to the air in great, gusting flaps that make Sigrid cough.
The Dragonborn turns, only to find the bodies of the family she had so desperately guarded now limpid and dead; blood oozing from multiple cuts as vampires feed upon them. Forcing herself to look around the room, to move aside as an ice-bolt flew towards her, to strike her down... Sigrid pants as she takes in the course of the battle.

Serana and Harkon are fully transformed now, grotesquely spinning around one another as they cast spell after spell. She cannot hear what they are saying to one another, but judging purely by the mutual expressions of hatred, she can guess.

Ondolemar and Ancarion fight back to back, elemental spells coursing from their fingertips as they fend off death hounds and swift blurs that solidify into vampires, testing their guard as they snap and snarl. Burn marks and electricity score the ground and walls all around them, a blast of wind filled with that glittering grit of dead vampire blows past her face.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Saadia stalk up behind Vilkas, face determined as she holds a garrote wire. He doesn’t see her, fending off two vampires who disappear like mist only to reform paces away. Their high giggles bounce off the cold stone. Sigrid feels time slow to almost nothing as Saadia leaps for him.

"Dovah Strun Faan!"

Legs pumping with the wild strength of fear, Sigrid sees him turn to face her with the rumbling echoes of her Shout, narrowly avoiding the slice of wire around his neck. The Redguard falters, hesitates. The entire castle convulses, both Harkon and Serana looking up as a mighty pounding weight crashes against the roof.

Once. Twice, again.

Suddenly, a flaming boulder breaks through the wall, the heat of its passage nearly searing as Sigrid stares in awe at her handiwork. The wall crumbles even more, allowing a glimpse of the dying light of the sun, forge-red in the west easing into black as stars twinkle above them.

Sigrid feels something lift in her chest at the sight. The sky.

Damn. Well, at least we might have another way out besides that gatehouse. A vampire rushes Vilkas as he swiftly decapitates it with one blow and in the same economy of movement pushes Saadia to the side with a booted kick. Wriggling like a beetle put upon its back, the woman rights herself...that dark face bent in a rictus of rage as she comes for him again.

Hell no. A blood curdling shriek sounds in the air, and vaguely Sigrid realizes it is coming from her. Not more than a moment, until those dark eyes wide with terror focus on her.

A matter of seconds before her stalhrim blade finds the traitor’s heart, piercing easily through the ribcage.
And then the undead came.

***********

“I need more magicka potions! Hand me that - augh, no! *That* one!”

“*Sovngarde*! Skyrim belongs to the Noooords!”

“...gut you like a horker!”

Vilkas felt exhausted, as he continued swinging the daedric war sword up and down.

In and out, a never ending flurry of movements burned into his limbs with years of repetition.

He could keep this up for maybe twenty minutes more, he estimated as he turned away from the sight of his wife. His Sigrid, pulling that ice-white sword tipped red free. A sucking sound, as Saadia opened and closed her mouth like a fish, face still furious as it eased into the loose blankness of death.

Couldn’t think about that right now. He finally finished off the other mistborn vampire, dust pattering against the grooves of his armor as he bent over, catching his breath. It was like some realm of Oblivion, with massive flaming boulders born of Sigrid’s last shout hammering the castle. Another hole was torn into the ceiling, the cart sized meteor smashing into some unfortunate humans. Also, he noticed with a start of glee, entrapping Vingalmo with an enraged squeal. The High Elf vampire would not be getting out from under that any time soon, with only his head visible beneath the crushing stone.

He took off his helmet, taking the time to wipe his eyes from the warpaint running with sweat as he counted how many of them were left. Sigrid had left his side to hover protectively over the remaining humans. Only forty left, their dead scattering the floor, tripping Ondolemar and Ancarion as they stumbled towards him.

“Move! Get to the door, *now*!” Ondolemar nearly pushed Vilkas over in his hurry to reach the gatehouse entrance, Ancarion nearly glued to his back as he looked behind in fear.

The air was thick with ash and dust and smoke from spellwork. Wondering *what the fuck* was going on now, the Companion tightened his fists around the pommel. Forced himself to look around carefully and then-

He saw it. Them. Lurching from the stairwells, pouring into the room. The sound of their passage like the rustling of dead dry branches in winter. The rattling of bones as those stick-thin legs moved in gruesome animation.

The dead. All of them, mumified in a crude caricature of the draugr he had faced, none wielding anything remotely close to a weapon.

But they still had teeth. And he watched in horrified consternation as the husks that had once been
people fastened themselves upon an unwary human, ripping with those gaping skeletal teeth. Pulling with skinless bony hands. A pitiful wail was soon cut off, as the undead thralls began to feast, lipless mouths dipping into the red wetness.

And above it all, through the earthshaking roar of the boulders that continually hammered at the castle, Harkon’s roar of triumph. “Only now do you see, Dragonborn! Your doom is upon you, for you and your pathetic followers cannot hope to match my legion of the dead!”

His wings pumped, pulling him away from another crashing boulder soaring through the roof. The screaming winged thing that was Serana was clipped by it, dragged down to the floor. “You should have joined me when you had the chance!”

Dodging the meteors and jumping over bodies of the fallen, he feels a calm come over him as he rushed towards Serana. Trapped by a boulder, he saw a flash of white as Sigrid moved to help him shift the weight.

There have been other, similar battles where he just knew - he knew that death was near. A strange serenity he couldn’t explain. Vilkas sucked in a breath, hacked and coughed on the ash particles.

Only a small space of time before the slowly welling dead from the undercroft overcame and consumed them all. There were simply too many.

They were badly outnumbered.

“Go, Sigrid!” He yelled as she drew nearer, looking confused. Grasping her upper arm, Vilkas nearly shoved her towards the elves who are watching the dead approach in stunned shock. “Get out of here while you can, woman! All of you. Go now!”

“...Not without you!” She screams back, fighting for control as he steps faster, conscious of the hungry damned who were slowly shuffling forward.

Plunging downward like some great bird of prey, Harkon grips Serana and lifts her, shrieking, to the holes in the roof. Tracking the dark forms as they rose, silhouetted by the starry night, he could see Harkon visibly toss his daughter out over the roof, into the sea far below.

Not daring to linger further, Vilkas continues pulling his wife along, assisted by Ondolemar on her other side as she cries out to Serana, begging them with sobbing pleas to help her. To help her friend.

The Nord and Mer share a look of understanding, as Ancarion rattled the gates, searching desperately for the lever that would lead them to freedom.

It was all over now. One way or another, as the dead painstakingly climbed the stairs, some crawling with sheared-off limbs, moaning in that dry dusty rattle. He flexed his fingers around the grip of his sword.

Not long now. Serenity flooded him with righteous purpose.

He’d see her free. His wife, carrying his child. Then...he would make his assured passage into Sovngarde absolutely lethal for his foes.

“...It won’t budge!” Ancarion cried, slamming his fists against the door.
“Off!” Sigrid finally managed to free her arms from the men holding her captive. “Enough, guys! 
Snake! Cut the head off the snake and the body dies! We have to get that bastard before those dry 
guys get us!”

A dark, baleful laugh...nearly noxious with the poison in it...surrounded them.

Harkon stood suspended behind, grey wings idly beating the air he observed the survivors. At some 
point during the battle he had lost his crown, the bejeweled necklace and decoration stripped away to 
reveal only vampiric flesh stretched taut over ropy muscle.

“Charming vernacular, as always, Dragonborn. Was my company truly that heinous, that you’d 
prefer them?”

That voice nearly clotted with overweening condescension blistered his ears, as Vilkas winced at the 
proximity of Sigrid’s wrath right next to him. Ondolemar and Ancarion fell back, hands covering 
their ears at the loudness of her Thu’um swelling in the air, shaking the walls.

She was preparing for something god damn amazing. Feeling a grin stretch his face, Vilkas almost 
shook with the adrenaline of the moment.

But before Sigrid could Shout, Harkon’s spindly hands had grabbed her, puncturing her armor with 
sharp cracks as his claws dug deep, winging into the air. Vilkas thrust the weight of his broadsword 
into the bobbing leg of the demon, shutting out the mindless babble of his mind reacting in fear.

Harkon screamed as the wicked daedric spikes tore into the meat of his calf, those black eyes 
catching him with fury as he continued pumping upwards, ever higher.

Sigrid’s sword clattered to the ground as Ancarion bravely threw fireballs that scored both of them in 
burning heat. The rasping growls of the dead were now so close; and Vilkas was forced to begin 
slashing, just to keep them off the small landing they all had crowded upon. Desperately trying to 
keep in sight the two figures lunging ever higher, disappearing into the cold night sky.

“No!” Ondolemar cried out, throwing one last bolt of electricity towards the two. It hit the Vampire 
Lord’s other leg, and the ever shrinking blur of them stuttered as he howled distantly in pain again.

“A masterful hit, teacher! Come on, we’re free!” Pushing the rusted lever with a grunt, the gate to the 
doors of the castle slowly creaked upward as Ancarion grabbed Vilkas, nearly earning a beheading 
from the wild eyed Nord. “If we get out this way, we can trap the dead here and perhaps save her! 
Hurry!”

Ondolemar cast ‘detect life’, the violet aura of the spell coursing through the ballroom. Shaking his 
head, the Mer looked at Vilkas with a sag of his shoulders. “None left alive, Companion. Come.”

Rushing to close the gate behind them, it was up to the Nord’s strength to push the lever down with 
all his weight, as Ondolemar and Ancarion cast destructive blasts of fire at the snarling, snapping 
undead striving to get through to them. Finally, it slammed shut with a metallic groan.

The three were too tired to run. Nearly stumbling in their fatigue, they raced along the bridge to the 
rocky shore.

There. Vilkas lifted his head, his breath clouding the air as he beheld the tiny figures of Harkon and 
Sigrid locked in battle, so far above them.

“...Why doesn’t she Shout him down?” Ancarion wondered aloud.

“Too high up, no... she won’t make it unless she can wear him out. Force him lower.” Ondolemar
panted next to him, green eyes fixed upon the two.

Vilkas didn’t dare to speak. Only watch as his entire self focused utterly on the battle above.

-And in a sudden maelstrom of imploding darkness and dust, the vampire disappeared from sight. Leaving Sigrid to fall.

...so slowly she fell in a moment that lasted an eternity. Fell into the sea, so far off shore. The water accepted her body with nary a splash, swallowing her in its heaving bulk.

“No, you fool... stop -” Struggling to wade further into the roaring breakers, Vilkas barely noticed the arms of the mer as they strained to hold him back.

-and then he arched, gasping as a bolt of electricity expertly applied to his neck fairly cauterized the wounds he had taken, blazing white against his retinas as he fell to his knees.

The last thing he saw was the wet, alien eyes of Ondolemar right above him, mouth moving soundlessly as everything dissolved into torpid gloom.

Chapter End Notes

"To die will be an awfully big adventure," is an iconic line from J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan.

I think that even though the concept of vampirism (like in Interview with a Vampire) makes for fascinating character arcs, it is REALLY unbelievable to write a 'good' vampire. I'm looking at you, Stephanie Meyer.

Essentially a vampire is selfish. It is stealing life from someone else for its own existence. No matter how you slice it - that's evil. Vampires fear death so much, they'd rather be trapped in a horrid sort of unlife, feeding from others and trapped away from the sun, than face the music of whatever afterlife they believe in.

Or none, if your beliefs run more to the Sithis and the Void atheist persuasion. :)

Anyhow. More coming soon. Don't hate me.
"Come back. Even as a shadow, even as a dream."

—Euripides

A hand pressed onto his shoulder. “Time to go. It’s been long enough, friend.”

Vilkas paced the wet sand of the shoreline, eyes fixed upon the horizon. Teldryn Sero remained behind him, his presence a silent comfort as the Companion kept his vigil.

It had been three days. Surely, the tides would have washed the body to shore by now.

He couldn’t go back to Whiterun alone. Not without her mortal shell, carefully wrapped and stowed in a wagon. Ready to burn on the pyre of the Skyforge. Properly mourned by shield brothers and sisters, by the friends and family she had wrapped around her these past years.

As the Dunmer gently nudged him along the road, away from the sea he took one last, lingering look at it. The pewter grey swells had held his attention for so long, he had memorized their patterns. The currents and riptides, white capped waves branded into his mind in the days spent searching them, following the sacking of Volkihar Castle.

The damage had nearly totalled the old crumbling ruin. Ancarion had managed to venture to Solitude for help, leaving Ondolemar nursing Vilkas in his grief. Through the listless shield that coated his mind, the Companion could tell the Mer was trying to help in his own way. Tried to encourage him to soldier on, telling him that time would pass on as it always had.

He didn’t want it to. Why couldn’t time stop, just stop in the chasm where he had held her, trapped in the burning joy of finding her...knowing he was to be a father?

Vilkas had come violently awake on the beach mid morning of the day after the battle, nearly walloping the mage who had promptly shocked him once more into a stupor. Had then neatly tied him up and lectured the warrior on the risks Sigrid had taken. All the measures undergone, to prevent what had come to pass. How her last thoughts before their reunion had been all for him. Him and their child.

Such preparations. He had swallowed, again and again, blinking back tears he refused to let fall as the Mer quietly told him that he had swept the shoreline. Had cast numerous spells, only the dim forms of sea life had flared upon his senses. Nothing...no sightings, no proof of his woman. Not even a body.
Reluctantly, Vilkas agreed. Sigrid had...hit the water, from so high with such force that she must have fairly fallen apart upon impact.

No. She was gone.

The knowledge had left him curiously detached. If he thought overmuch about it, he would say the pain, the fucking loss of it was worse than it had been when Kodlak had been taken.

Kodlak had been old, had known his time had come. But, his Sigrid was so young. Young and alive, filled with so much hope despite all the shit she had been through. New life that had been taken, as well. He felt a sharp stab of grief for the little one he would never know. The son or daughter, unspared by the last battle of the Dragonborn.

Two days had passed this way, alone with the Thalmor Justicar on the beach. No other survivors made it out of the castle. They had peeked inside, only to see the dead heaped against the walls like so much firewood, mingled with the freshly dead of the former human cattle. Raw holes torn into the palace had further crumbled back, revealing even more of the sunlight pouring in. Sun veiled by the ever-present clouds.

Vilkas was strangely glad of the shifting weather; comforted by the patter of rain upon the rough tent they had rigged on the shore. He grieved, gods, his heart was a jagged hole in his chest. Why shouldn’t Kynareth mourn as well?

And the goddamn dust. Shimmering grey vampire dust so thick, he swore he could see it glisten with his eyes closed. It was slowly being blown away as the coastal winds gusted inside, lifting the grey grit into the air and whisking it far away.

He had refused to eat, completely uninterested as Ondolemar proffered the oysters and seaweed he had scraped from the tides. Later, the elf had found a battered cauldron washed up and had started some type of sea stew that he scavenged for; throwing bits and pieces of mudcrab and clam. Joking about the overwhelming salt flavor, only to receive an indifferent shrug from Vilkas.

It was not until Teldryn Sero was seen, trudging behind a breathless Ancarion, that Vilkas had been bullied into drinking and eating once more. The Dunmer had taken it upon himself to look for them after their sudden absence in Solstheim. His use of couriers to obtain the newest information (just as Sigrid had done) netted him Ancarion and his blustered explanation of events.

Teldryn was relentless, dry eyed and practical. It had taken shouting and repeated slaps before Vilkas somberly agreed to at least choke down a bit of stew. If they were going to search for Sigrid, he would need the strength. The older Dunmer called upon the others to trek all the way around the castle, even picking their way along the craggy spires where seabirds roosted, searching for any trace of the Dragonborn.

Nothing.

And now they were leaving. Heading home once more.

Vilkas followed, a lump immovably wedged in his throat. He would have been content to stay by the sea, if only to maintain that closeness with her in her last place of rest. To remember her.

Another sea, with sand of glistening white instead of the murky grey.
“It’s a bikini.” She twirled on the white beach, her feet leaving soft imprints in the damp sand that filled as the tide rushed in. “What do you think?”

Let him remember her just a bit longer. Alone.

But Teldryn, expressionless behind that damned chitinous helm, had insisted. They would mourn her among friends, even without a proper grave or burning pyre. Better to be home, to tell Farkas and Njada and Athis in person. To write Aela. To carry out the last will and testament that she had written so long ago, before flying off to Skuldafn.

Gods. He was so sick with the despair of it all.

Let him stay. Let him remain, he had begged to no avail.

He was so god damn tired.

***********

The assassins attacked them in the dead of night, as they slept in the Winking Skeever’s second story rooms.

He had lain awake still, listening to his companion’s heavy breathing as he recalled the last time that he had visited the inn with Sigrid. Had nearly lost himself in the pleasant memory, until the sudden draft warned him. The windows had slid silently open, expertly greased on their hinges by gloved hands.

It was only the work of a moment to grip the dagger he always slept with. To stab at the assailant easing stealthily over him, feeling the wet jets of arterial blood spurt on his bare chest as his dagger found purchase in the leather wrapped throat. Reptilian eyes blinked their last as the Shadowscale slid heavily off of Vilkas, the others awakening in a roar of shock and sound as they dispatched the other three assassins with a wild jumble of hastily fired spells.

Magelight revealed the grim mess they had made, as Vilkas searched their pockets and Ancarion threw up noisily in the corner. Finding something, he motioned to Teldryn Sero and Ondolemar.

Their faces grew steadily tighter as he read aloud, his voice rough with lack of sleep.

“As instructed, you are to eliminate the one known as Dragonborn, Sigrid Farstrider, Harbinger of the Companions. If necessary, you are also authorized to end any associates you find travelling with this individual.

Stealth and guise is what I pay you most handsomely for. Return with news. A further bonus of gold will be offered if you retrieve the victim’s body and possessions. I will write to your superiors in great praise if you can accomplish this task in secrecy. Don’t bother showing your face if you are caught.

I await your triumphant return.
“...She’s already fucking DEAD, you bastard!” He found himself screaming, kicking the armored Argonian’s body until his feet bled. For the third time that week he found himself zapped senseless by Ondolemar, the mage’s thin lips pressed tightly together as he dazedly looked up from the floor at the brooding elf.

“...What in Oblivion is going on here?” Ancarion was dispatched to deal with the understandably incensed innkeeper, as Ondolemar began healing Vilkas, righting his broken toes with a pop as he bent over him.

He seethed in a rage, the first real spark of feeling he had allowed himself since the night she had fallen, as the Thalmor’s breath wafted over him.

“...do not make the mistake, Nord, of thinking you are the only one who feels this loss.” The Altmer whispered, those glass green eyes narrowed as Vilkas stared back unrepentant.

The Mer sighed.

“How old are you, young man? Thirty? Thirty five years?” The Companion grimaced, striving to move against the deadened numbness of his damaged limbs as Ondolemar settled down on the floor next to him.

The Altmer’s face looked distant. “Nearly ten of your lifetimes have I lived, Nord. And never have I felt such kinship with a human as I have with your departed wife.” Coming back to himself, Ondolemar fastened his gaze upon Vilkas once more. “I will travel with you, to mourn her at your Skyforge. If anyone deserves a proper ceremony, it is she. Then…” he tapped his long fingers against the blood soaked floors.

“Then I will go, with Ancarion. Back to Alinor. And tell the Aldmeri Dominion all that has transpired.”

“Perhaps,” he continued softly, thoughtfully. “...yes. Perhaps all this will not have been in vain, if we can turn the tide of opinion. Avert the war that surely stalks the shores of your homeland. I will do my best, my young Companion, to see this through.”

Vilkas tightly shut his eyes, willing the tears that seemed ever-present to disappear. He felt a hand rest itself upon his head.

“I am truly sorry for your loss, friend.” A cleared throat. “Truly”

-And failed to keep them back, as they leaked down his cheeks with the Mer’s next words.

“...she would have been a wonderful mother.”

********

In the first week of Frostfall, they celebrated the life and death of the Dragonborn.
Though the pyre burned nothing but boughs of oak and pine, there were wreaths strewn atop it, all around it. Bards came forward through the crowds of mourners, singing a high wailing dirge of her accomplishments. How the Dragonborn had killed Mirmulnir. Taken the heads of the Glenmoril hagravens.

The drums beat ceaselessly, like a heartbeat as skalds took over. The Companions stood, grim faced, as the skalds intoned the records of her achievements. The Silver Hand. Alduin, the Dark Brotherhood. Miraak. The Volkihar. All slain by her blade and tongue. Skyrim’s hero, who had brokered lasting peace amidst civil war... laid to rest in an empty bed of embers.

Lucia had not stopped crying since they had arrived bearing the bad news. Tilma and Carlotta were not far behind her in the sporadic episodes of weeping. Even Farkas appeared to age nearly a decade, his eyes threaded with new creases since Vilkas had roughly spoken the words that had cast Jorrvaskr into an uproar. News had spread swiftly, and soon many of the townspeople had come to share condolences. As Teldryn introduced the Thalmor mages to his wary shield siblings, Farkas had embraced him tightly. Almost cracking his newly healed ribs with the strength of his grip, as he said nothing. Just held him.

That had been the final push that triggered the release of Vilkas’s tears. He had been wavering between a depressed apathy and a nearly scalding rage for so long...it felt strangely freeing to openly weep against his twin’s shoulder. Safe among friends, there was no judgement here. There was not a dry eye to be had anywhere. Even Njada sobbed quietly, cradled in the arms of a despondent Athis.

And now here he brooded, back in the hall of his youth. An untouched bottle of mead in his hand, as he slowly fingered it, taking in the singing and talking of townsfolk who invaded his domain. The never ending prattling of people eager to network, to gossip. To gain something from the carcass of the fall of Skyrim’s hero.

He fucking hated them all.

It was only when Carlotta, gasping against the pain of her slowly strengthening contractions, had been ushered away to Breezehome that he felt any sort of warmth penetrate the ice that had taken hold of his heart.

A day later, as Farkas led him through those same doors, he had felt a further tickling thread of...something, as Tilma laid one of the newborn twin girls into his waiting arms.

There they sat, Farkas and Vilkas together before the fire in the comfortable carved chairs. Each holding a swaddled infant in quiet contemplation. Carlotta slept above them in the master bedroom, as Tilma quietly cleaned up the afterbirth and hauled off the linens to be washed, offering a wrinkled smile as she quietly closed the door.

His shield of apathy cracked, the smallest bit, as the newly named Gydda fussed, the tiny face scrunched in sleep as he carefully cradled her in his arms. “They look so delicate. I’m almost afraid to touch her.”

Farkas yawned, lifting Fjora up to examine a tiny foot that protruded from the swaddling cloth. Poking the appendage back in, he tucked the cloth in tighter around the newborn. “Yeah. Know what you mean. They came early...weren’t supposed to be born until Evening Star. Guess the shock of...Sigrid’s passing did it.”

“At least they made it. Both of them, hale and whole.” Vilkas craned his neck, peering into the
corners of the home he had bought. He had made a gift of it to Farkas and Carlotta upon his return, after learning that they had been living in it near constantly. The sale of the Imperial woman’s old, shoddier home had gone through, and Farkas had informed him that they were saving up for land of their own.

Breezehome had a small garden that abetted the short stretch of wilderness behind it, before the land hit the stone wall that encircled the entirety of Whiterun. It had taken no time at all, once he had stepped through the door with a sinking drop of remembrance, to give the cozy dwelling away. The memories, both good and bad, were too raw at present.

Rocking the newborn bairn in his arms, he studied the tiny rosebud mouth as it suckled, even in dreams. “I can’t stay here, Farkas.”

His brother looked up at him, concern creasing his brow. Vilkas thought he detected threads of silver in his twin’s long mane. He wondered if he bore similar proof of the strain they had all been through. “Where will you go? And why? We need you here. Sigrid made you Harbinger in her absence. Don’t go, brother.”

Swallowing, Vilkas felt a guilty shiver course through him at the sound of her name. “I’ll help settle her affairs. She had...quite a few things she wanted done. Money donated, possessions passed out. But I’m not Harbinger. Not yet.”

As his twin blinked, startled at this statement, Vilkas rushed on to explain. “You want a real farm? Remember, I told you about our old home my...Sigrid fixed up for - damn it all. For my wedding gift.”

Tracing a rough fingertip against the silken smoothness of the baby girl’s cheeks, he didn’t look up. “I need to do something constructive. Something useful, that doesn’t remind me of her everywhere I look. She’s...she is everywhere here in Whiterun, Farkas. I can’t escape her here.”

“So you’ll...what? Spend the winter doing carpentry?” The bass rumble of his brother’s voice held a tinge of incredulity. “Didn’t know you were a builder.”

“I’ll hire helpers. I can learn. Falkreath is not far.” Rising up, he carefully placed Gydda in Farkas’s open arm, tucking in the fur bunting with special care. His brother continued studying him, eyes like warm hearthstone.

“So, there’s nothing I can say to keep you here, then? Not even to help with your nieces, huh?”

Vilkas nearly stumbled against the carpet, as he gripped the bookcase. The rasp of wood against his fingers helped to ground him in reality. “Farkas...she was with child.”

Hearing an indrawn low gasp, he shook his head. “We...I found out. Right before we took down those bastards.”

He slumped against the wall, feeling his strength drain from him as somehow, the words made it feel more real. More painful than it would have been, before holding his brother’s child.

He felt a twinge of sick jealousy that he hurriedly tamped down upon. Useless fucking emotion.

“Can’t stay here, Farkas. M’sorry.”
The wind moaned through the eaves, pulling at the curl of smoke from the firepit. “I understand. I'll do my part to hold your place. Keep Jorrvaskr going.”

"Just...come back when you can. We miss you."

******

As he left two days later, heavily burdened by winter weight furs and supplies, the snow began to fall. Winter had always been his favorite; the golden eaved roofs of Whiterun blanketed in white always reminded him of his childhood, as he and Farkas had chased Aela around the Wind District pelting one another with snowballs.

Hefting his travel pack up onto his shoulder, Vilkas refused to look back.

Chapter End Notes

The title points to Robert Frost's poem that I'll share below, as well as the golden scales of Sigrid's dragon form, Sonahsod. I like the juxtaposition of the poetry's meaning, in relation to the chapter.

Nature's first green is gold, 
Her hardest hue to hold. 
Her early leaf's a flower; 
But only so an hour. 
Then leaf subsides to leaf. 
So Eden sank to grief, 
So dawn goes down to day. 
Nothing gold can stay.

-Robert Frost
Rubbing at his sweaty forehead with a scrap of linen, Vilkas stepped back to survey the progress he had made so far.

Lakeview Manor stood solidly in the snow, framed by tall pines and spruce. The small clearing was redolent of tree sap from the felled wood, as well as the salt-metal steam hissing from the active forge that Bolund was currently pounding a new batch of nails upon.

The surly Nord had been a welcome companion and teacher in the past few weeks. Vilkas leaned over the workbench to examine the layout he had drawn for expanding the east wing. Hmm. A kitchen, perhaps. They had already finished the final touches to the expanded bedrooms of the west wing. The Companion smiled a bit, thinking of the twin child-sized beds he had lovingly sanded and carved with mountain flowers and vines. Fjora and Gydda would not be old enough to sleep upon them for some time, but they would be ready for his nieces nonetheless.

The master bed he had argued with Bolund upon; the obstreperous craftsman sneering at the thought of a traditional sleigh-back bed. A four poster with curtains would be far warmer. And after one subzero night in which Vilkas had awakened to find all the buckets of drinking water rimed in ice, he hastily agreed.

The bed was a thing of beauty. After moving the older more traditional bed upstairs, Vilkas had taken the time to carve spiral grooves into the posts, topping them with wolfshead knobs and carving a pack of the same lupine beasts to chase an elk upon the headboard. A family, wolf pups trailing their parents in the hunt, forever etched in the wooden bed frame his brother and sister in law would share.

*Gods sake, stop thinking so hard*. Wincing as he rubbed his neck, Vilkas forced the memory of Sigrid laughing, with tears in her eyes as she informed him of her pregnancy, back down into the corners of his mind.

What had she called him, that night? *Dork.*

It probably meant something rather unflattering, knowing his dead wife’s sense of humor.

The first few days after arriving at the boarded up home in a depressed funk had been, well...rather pathetic.

He had lain on the furs of the carved marriage bed and drowned himself in drink, until there was nothing but wrecked shards of the mead, plates and cups he had shattered in his drunken rages. One night he almost set the damn house on fire, as he stumbled ass naked into the snow, scooping it in a bucket and tossing it onto the furs of the bed and the rugs that were burning, due to his inebriated neglect.

Then, at his most humiliating low, when all the drink was gone he had cried like a boy in the smoke-filled room. Holding his wife’s cloth of gold wedding gown tightly, breathing in its burnt-lavender scent that was slowly fading every night he slept with it. A poor substitute for the woman who had somehow become such a part of him.
Childish. You think you can summon her from the beyond, like some necromancer? Light a fucking candle, you pathetic bard.

Later, as he swept and cleaned the small cabin, he scolded himself for indulging in such trite waste. All alone in the backwoods, there was no telling how long he might have to stretch his supplies. A wild animal could attack, at any time. Opportunistic bandits, a stray giant. Even those wolves he still bore fellowship for would be hungry enough upon smelling cooked food in winter to attack a lone man. A fool thing to do, to seek oblivion in the bottom of a bottle.

And so he had taken himself to Falkreath, to seek assistance in the rebuilding of his childhood home.

Solaf of Grey Pine Goods had been cautiously interested in Vilkas’s generous offer. But the store took up so much of his time, the Nord had explained. He had ended up with Bolund instead.

Despite their initial dislike, based on their past spats (hadn’t he been the one to point the Thalmor in Sigrid’s direction?) the lumber worker agreed to at least visit Lakeview and give him a rough estimate of what needed work.

A week later, and Bolund had thrown himself into the project with enthusiasm. The Nord’s reticent personality had been an added bonus, as he managed to instruct the Companion in how to measure, saw and hammer planks of wood without being overly verbose. The relative silence of the woods was soothing; the wind whistling through snow covered pines only punctuated by grunts as they heaved and measured, hammered and sanded.

Having some experience at a forge like most of the fighters at Jorrvaskr, Vilkas had very little experience at actually building anything. He gladly soaked up all the knowledge that Bolund offered, feeling a pleasant ache as muscles that had become accustomed to swinging a blade gradually learned to saw wood and wield a hammer.

A courier had arrived a week ago, inviting him to the celebration of the Dark Day. Midwinter. It had rolled in his head like an echo of a bell he had nearly forgotten the sound of, as he tried very hard not to remember...

Those lips, so full and slightly parted as she breathed. He could feel the passage of breath, proof that she was alive as he bent over her. Curled his arms protectively around her, as his bearded cheek lay against the smoothness of her skin.

“Wake up. Please. Wake up, woman."

Filled with yearning, he turned his neck to press his lips against hers. Tasted the sweetness of honey, with the bitter burn of elves ear and blisterwort.

Her mouth parted beneath him, drawing the very breath from his lungs.

If only he could have found her. He remembered hearing of a specific technique used to coax drowning swimmers back from the grave...could Sigrid have survived her fall into the sea? Been brought back to the shore, as he breathed life back into her once more?

Last Midwinter had been...much different. There had been reasons to believe she would pull through. He had been hopeful.
He felt nothing remotely close to hope now. Vilkas sent a negative response, hurriedly scrawled as Bolund scowled at the delay, with a short note to his brother inviting the family to come and stay, once the worst of the storms had blown over.

There was only the work for him now. And when that was done…

Shor’s hairy ballsack. Merely thinking of being idle made him itch with anxiety, like that time he and Farkas had rolled as boys in the fields outside of Whiterun and come home smarting with hives. He would find something to occupy his time. He had to.

Who knew? Perhaps there would be some job at Jorrvaskr. Some dank clanking Dwemer ruin whose centurions would prove to be too much for him, at last. As he sawed at the massive trunk of a sprawling tree with sure, practiced movements, he gave the idea some serious thought.

He would not seek his own death. Not even now, when he honestly could see no end to the dragging days that he furiously filled with activity, drowning the thoughts that cluttered unwelcome inside his own damn head.

But Vilkas felt certain, as he and Bolund dragged the log off to begin the laborious process of building a stable, that should he die, he would not be bereft of company in Shor’s realm.

Would Tsun welcome him across the whalebone bridge, into Sigrid’s arms?

Had he been valorous enough in life to deserve that privilege? To see his parents, a mother and father whose faces he could not recall, once more in the hallowed halls?

Suicide was suicide, no matter how he circled it with different arguments and reasoning. With an ache that went beyond the honest pains of hard work, he bid Bolund goodnight with a nod of his head as they turned in for the night.

Gritting his teeth, he laid upon the massive four poster bed and closed his eyes. He pictured Lakeview Manor in his mind. Completed, with a fully furnished kitchen and cellar. The dance of the aurora in the skies above framing the home he had worked on for so long, beautiful in its simplicity. He could see a storage room occupying the space he had been so indecisive about using. Not wide enough to justify a spare room, but well suited for a root cellar. Yes...perhaps a place to store farm implements, pantry goods. That sort of thing.

He drifted off to sleep imagining fields of ripe wheat, touched the full heads of grain with his hands. Sunlight shone full and warm on his back, as laughter of children playing sounded in the distance.

Peace, at last.

*******

He was a blooded warrior. He should have known that peace was ultimately fleeting.
“So,” Ysolda laughed awkwardly, tucking a strand of her red hair back behind her ear. “This is awkward.”

Sitting in the Bannered Mare, Vilkas shifted mutinously as the server brought their drinks. Some new version of Honningbrew mead that an entrepreneurial soul had decided needed some jazbay. The mixture was sickly sweet, and he tongued a cold sore in silent misery as Ysolda downed hers, apparently with enjoyment. Athis and Njada waved at him from across the room, the latter giving him an encouraging smile.

So very wrong. When this travesty of a set up was over and done with, he would have words.

Fuck, he would kick their asses all across the yard, until the thought of setting him up with anyone ever again never dared cross their minds.

“Well. It’s not like we don’t know each other, at least. So,” She sat up, primly folding her hands in her lap and giving him a charming smile. Her teeth, he noticed, had a gap in front.

He had once found it cute, years ago. Now he could only pick out her flaws. How flat her breasts were. The way her nostrils flared when posing a question. All the ways she fell short of his wife.

“...Anyway. What have you been up to, these last couple of months? Haven’t seen you around Whiterun.”

“Been working out of town.” He managed to get out, pushing the disgusting excuse for mead a bit farther from him.

“Oh my! That sounds exciting. Kill anything I should know about?” Her eyelashes fluttered, displaying her lake blue eyes to their best advantage.

He stared incredulously at her. “No…”

“Oh.” Deflating, Ysolda picked at the bread that had been sliced and placed before them. “I see.”

They sat like that for another few minutes, only shifting when other bar patrons nearly stumbled over them. Mikael was in fine form tonight, playing a melodic, gentle piece of instrumental music on his lute. Hulda had placed them in a dark corner by the fire, in what he imagined the mistress thought to be a cozy romantic spot.

And as he glanced at Athis pleadingly as Ysolda took another sip, he could almost grasp the Dunmer’s palpable sympathy as Njada made a face at him, gesturing for him to do...something.

Should have known this was all her idea.

“Well. This has been fun. See you round.” Sliding out from the table, he shot Sigrid’s favorite rude finger signal across the bar to Njada, whose mouth dropped open with the insult. Athis hid a smile under the guise of drinking his mead, as Njada began muttering furiously to him.

“Oh gods. Wait!”

Vilkas didn’t wait. Crunching out into the snow, he exhaled a misty breath into the chill, silently praying the ambitious merchant wouldn’t follow him out.

She followed. “Vilkas, wait!”
Waving his hands in sudden, intense irritation Vilkas rounded on her. “What, woman? Nothing is going to happen, alright!!”

Her blue eyes glistened in the lamplight, snow laced wind whipping through her short hair. “You don’t know that. We were good together once!” Stomping her feet down the steps, she folded her arms and pouted.

“You’re not even giving me a chance. Njada said you were ready to move on, and...and this is your idea of moving on? Shor’s bones, you look like a wreck!”

Nearly swallowing his tongue, Vilkas raked a hand through his hair. A niggling sense of shame spiked through him at her words.

He had grown up with Ysolda. Had pulled her braids when they had been children. Teased her when she had pulled that same pout as he and Aela ran away, leaving her behind as they went off to prank someone more reactive and less prone to tattle on them. She deserved better than his misplaced angst.

“Vilkas.” Keeping the rising snarl from appearing on his face was difficult, but he managed as Ysolda touched his cheek. “I’m not going to pry. But you really need to take care of yourself, alright?”

He scoffed. “I’m fine. Really. Just...tell Njada to fuck off, yeah? I’m not interested in any more of her tricks. Or yours.”

Ysolda lifted an eyebrow. “Well. That message was received loud and clear.”

He reluctantly smiled, ever so slightly as she poked his chest. “Really, though. When was the last time you shaved? Or bathed? Or ate something besides meat?”

Rolling his eyes, Vilkas raised his hands in surrender. “Aye, I get it. I’ve lost my wife, and now you’ve all decided I’m in desperate need of a replacement. Or a mother.”

It was her turn to scoff, as Ysolda crossed her arms again. “Like you’ve ever let anyone push you around. We’re just...worried, is all. You never smile anymore. I know it has only been a few months, but...spring is coming.”

Oh, he despised the look that crossed her face next. Pity. Always the fucking pity card that got played, as her winsome eyes shone in the moonlight. Begging him unspoken for more than he could give. “You’re not getting any younger, and neither am I.” Ducking her head, she grimaced. The expression looked more real, somehow, than any of the brightly pasted smiles or alluring glances she had previously worn.

He cocked his head, amused despite himself. “So that’s your argument, then? Hey. You and I, we’re single. Let’s have a go?”

“Yes,” Fluffing her hair and adopting an exaggerated pose, Ysolda cracked a silly grin. “It’s like my Ma always said. See a fine man who doesn’t mind working, and what has all his limbs? You lock him down, lass! Lock him down good and tight!”

Vilkas snorted softly as she laughed, a deep belly laugh that make her entire frame shake. He couldn’t remember the last time he had laughed like that. It was a sobering thought.

“Just-” she poked him again, this time further in the middle of his chest. She had to stand on tiptoe to do it, due to their difference in height. “Go to Jorrvaskr. **Strangle** Njada if you have to - it was all her
idea. Not that I needed much coaxing, yeah? But get some sleep. You look like shit.”

He stared at her nonplussed as she flounced down the snow covered street to her residence. Standing there in the snow, he let the cool flakes pile up on him as he stood there, thinking about it.

Ysolda would be pissy. She would tease and nag. Probably with a large measure of guilt.

But she wouldn’t turn him away tonight, if he went to her bed. It had been just him (and his hand) these last few weeks that had somehow turned into months. It was almost Sun’s Dawn, for Kyne’s sake.

He was setting all kinds of new records for himself, this past winter.

Hmm.

Nope. Still not interested. Turning on his heel, he walked up the streets to Jorrvaskr, feeling somewhat lighter in heart.

New goal: Find and freeze all of Njada’s underthings out in the practice yard overnight. He would give himself a damn pat on the back if the newbloods noticed before she did.

Njada favored Breton style underthings, all trimmed in lace and frothy ribbons. Who knew? They made quite a pretty flag, all hung out on a laundry rope, slowly freezing from the dip in the well he had given them.

He admired the view, Athis chortling next to him as they snuck silently to the rooms on the lower level to their rest.

As the morning dawned and he calmly sipped at his tea, reading ‘A Tragedy in Black’ at the table, Vilkas almost smiled as panicked shouting reached his ears.

Athis mouthed ‘here it comes’ as the cacophony followed her in when Njada slammed the doors open, nearly frothing at the mouth.

“Who had the fucking nerve to steal my smalls and hang them IN THE TRAINING YARD?!”

And as the whelps all gaped in abject terror, he saluted her with his mug of tea; savoring how her lips pulled back in wordless fury as she sputtered.

“Oh, so you don’t like your personal laundry aired out in the presence of others? Fancy that.”

Let’s see if she ever meddles in my private affairs again.

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“Th-thank you, Mister! I’ll put it to good use! I promise!”

“Don’t thank me, girl.” Hitching his backpack further up on his shoulders, Vilkas stared down at
Sissel of Rorikstead. *Can check this one off, at least.* “This was all the Dragonborn’s doing, not mine. Take care.”

_That_ had been the last donation of septims on her will. Sigrid’s chicken scratch handwriting had taken weeks to pore over, but now Vilkas was fairly confident of it. He had delivered the last of her boons to this young lass who apparently had the Sight, as well as a bright future as a mage.

Sigrid had given her six hundred septims, to put towards books and purchasing travel fare all the way to the College of Winterhold when Sissel reached the cusp of adulthood. Generous.

Too generous, really, he thought with an inward roll of his eyes as the girl’s sister scoffed and made a grab for the heavy sack of gold. The children’s shrieks quieted as he took the time on the road south to enjoy the delicate warmth of First Seed.

The mud sucked and pulled at his boots as he gratefully took to the firmer stone of the old Imperial roads once more. Still cold enough to warrant heavier traveling furs, he pulled his topmost layer off and sighed, enjoying the refreshing breeze.

Lakeview Manor had been completed to his full satisfaction. There was not much more to be done, at least that he or Bolund could think of. It had every comfort imaginable.

Vilkas had taken the time to carve new patterns in the wooden beams of the main hall; fanciful etchings of bears, eagles and even dragons now decorated every major broadbeam and mantel. The original, one room cabin had now been expanded into a main hall that branched into separate rooms, with a massive stone fireplace and sturdy table and chairs. The kitchen’s oven had been fired up a week ago, all cupboards fully stocked and the bedrooms prepared with linens, clothing and toys for the arrival of Farkas and his family.

The Companion found himself strangely looking forward to their reactions to his work. His twin, especially, would remember more about their early years in what had once been Windfell farm.

Vilkas had managed to carefully plant wildflower starters in the window boxes and on his knees out in the front of the house. Had investigated the apiary, cleaning the rough spools of metal and making a mental note to look for books on beekeeping when he got back. Ploughing the surrounding farm ground had been a task he had struggled with. And sowing the wheat…

Well. He hoped Carlotta knew what she was doing, or there would be a pitiful harvest this year. He’d leave it in her capable hands.

A shadow passed overhead.

Drawing his sword, he looked around wildly for whatever had cast such a massive blur upon the tundra.

_Dragon._

He sheathed his sword cautiously as it continued winging far above him, swooping up and down on the current seemingly for the joy of it. Didn’t seem like this one wanted to attack anything, though he could see the cattle that roamed near Rorikstead were bunching nervously, lowing as the great black shadow passed over them to the east.

Vilkas recollected what it had felt like to actually ride the dipping, swerving beast in the cold high air
and shuddered, vaguely nauseated at the thought of it.

Somewhere far up, a feminine voice screamed. “Wheeee! Let’s do it agaaain!”

His heart leapt into his throat.

No.

No fucking way.

Waving his arms, he called out. “Hey! Stop! Dragon, you...argh!”

Suddenly wishing very hard that he had learned some of the guttural Dovahzul language, he took off, still shouting at the dragon and what had to be its rider.

They were too far away, and no matter how fast he ran on the mud of the road (churning it underfoot, damn he nearly twisted an ankle), Vilkas could not catch up to a fully grown dragon soaring full winged on the wind. The beast grew smaller as it disappeared into the eastern horizon towards Whiterun.

Shit shit shit... his heart fairly pounded with nerves and exertion as he stopped, blowing out his breath in the middle of nowhere.

He could have sworn it even sounded just like her. Who else was crazed enough to ride a dovah?

Taking a drink from his waterskin, Vilkas set his jaw and began running down the road. He hadn’t ran laps in months. Praying his stamina would still be enough to see him through until Whiterun, his chest began to ache once more as he furiously squashed the burgeoning feeling that had sprouted, like a flower in the muck of spring thaw.

Hope.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a nifty calendar for Skyrim that I use for a reference for time.

https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/ae/76/20/ae7620bddd7f3d5355509278b0576c241.jpg
Her fingers were so heavy; weighed down like a truck had rolled over on them and put on the parking brake. Couldn’t move, couldn’t stir anything. *Was she paralyzed? Move your big toe, dammit.* All her eyes could see, cracked open ever so thinly, was white. Even her lips were fairly immobile at this point, as she tried to speak. To beg for a drink of water. *Hell, at this point anything wet would do.*

*Heaven, right? There has got to be some tequila in heaven for me. Oh please.*

“Hey, you’re awake. Here. Drink this.”

She nearly did. God knows, not even the gamey scent of whatever fur covered thing that had been shoved under her nose put her off, at this point.

But a voice deep inside urged her to pull back, not to drink.

“Wh-what?” She couldn’t feel her lips. It was like someone had tried to give her a shot of novocaine and had OD-ed, making her feel like she had been the victim of a lip plumping experiment.

*Look out, Steve Tyler. “Warra oo-doing? Oo-rrr yooo?”*

A feminine sigh. “Don’t be difficult, Sigrid. Just drink the blood.”

*Blood.*

She managed to turn her head, feeling victorious as her neck *ached* with the motion. “O-noooh.”

As her eyes began focusing once more, the brilliant white glow that she had initially thought of as
heaven coalesced into walls of ice. With the pallid face of Serana, blinking those lamplike eyes of hers only inches away.

Serana spoke slowly, as though Sigrid were an idiot. “Listen. You took a fall. My father bit you...I saw it. I was hiding out there in the water. Once I finally got ahold of you in the riptide dragging you under, I bit you as well.”

“Look…” The vampire must have seen the shock dilate her pupils or something, because she held up her hands, stalling any further replies. “It’s not ideal, okay? I know it. But at least the...the portion of the blood, the infection running through you kept you alive this far.”

Trying to swallow against the arid sandpaper of her throat, Sigrid remembered.

-the sharp, tearing pain of his claws sinking into her skin as he lifted her, ever higher. Her stalhrim armor cracked as it finally fell completely off, only the knee guards still offering some protection. The men battling below her had shrunk into toy figures as she managed a deep gulp of night air, the freshness so sweet after an eternity of dank and damp.

Harkon held her tightly as he looked up at the stars with something akin to pain in his grotesquely deformed face. “Ah, that it has come to this, Dragonborn. It could have been so different. I cannot kill you. Not yet. Your knowledge, your Sight is far too dear to me.”

She struggled, carefully palming the elven dagger Ondolemar had strapped onto her belt minutes before they had made their entrance onto the ballroom floor. ‘Always have a backup’, he had chastened her gently.

Grateful for it now, Sigrid gasped in shock as Harkon’s fangs bit through the flesh of her neck. Feeling herself convulse, almost involuntarily, she struggled to push him away. Even if it meant her death, far below into what must be the churning tide of the cold north seas.

It hurt. It fucking hurt a lot. Screw all those fantasy romances where the bite was all...seductive and shit. There was a burning pain, almost like an epidural needle jabbed in wrong as his teeth hit a nerve.

Feeling woozy, she opened her eyes in a struggle to refocus, to remember the Shout that had seemed like such a goddamn brilliant idea on the ground. His black orb eyes were fastened upon her as he sucked, swallowed her life blood down.

Much more of this, and there wouldn’t be anything left for what she had to do. Gripping the dagger, she strained to breathe in against the weight of the rank, wrinkled undead thing supping at her neck.

Her Thu’um was a weak, trembling echo of what it could be. But it stopped Harkon right in his tracks. He went rigid against her, the obedience of the Thu’um ripping through him faster than she had ever imagined.

“Gol...Hah...Dov...you...fuckwad.”

-and the impact of the dagger as she slammed it home, straight past his sternum and into his heart rocked her, as he looked at her in bemused incomprehension. He still had her blood on his lips as he dissolved into a whirlwind of grey, shining ash and she fell.

She had time to think, as she continued to fall down. Could see the stars twinkling so bright above her, marvelous in their dance of light, framed by the green and violet sweep of the auroras.
A lovely night to die. She couldn’t Shout to save her life. The words of the Turn Ethereal Thu’um sighed upon her lips, unable to make it past the frayed wreck of her throat that had been gnawed at by the Volkihar. That last Shout had taken all she had left to give.

She felt a brief stirring of sadness for her tiny babe inside of her. So small...a month? A month and two weeks? About the size of a coffee bean then, from what her old prenatal books had said. Funny, what ran through one’s mind when one only had seconds to live.

And Vilkas.

Closing her eyes as she rocketed towards the waiting waves, she let her mind fix upon him. Seeing his handsome face light up when he had turned to smile at her, so long ago in Solstheim.

Let her last thoughts be of him, as she hit the water with a jarring crush that hurt, hurt HURT OH GOD -

“I don’t remember you biting me.” Sigrid spoke plainly, some days later when she had awakened from the sleep she kept dipping in and out of.

Serana hoisted her up more comfortably in her arms. They were currently sneaking through a dark, almost bioluminescent cave that reminded the Dragonborn of Blackreach. Tall swaying fungi gleamed green and blue, as psychedelic pink mounds of mushrooms and mold lit their way. Timid vale deer leapt away from the vampire and her cargo, darting into the darkness as their glowing stripes blended in with the crazy quilt of neon light.

“Of course not. You were almost dead. It’s been quite a task, fixing you these past few weeks.”

Allowing the vampire to tilt the waterskin (filled with water, not blood. She had learned to ask first) to her lips, Sigrid drank. Thirsty. She was always thirsty, now. “How bad was it? Did…” she swallowed again, dreading the answer.

“Did I lose my baby, Serana? Don’t you dare lie to me.”

Tightening her pale lips against her fangs, Serana shook her head. “No. As far as I can tell, there is still another life in you. It’s, well. It’s really small. But it’s there. Definitely pulsing with life, when I cast the spell.”

Sagging weakly in the vampire’s hard arms (unsprung, like her old mustang convertible had been. No stuffing at all) Sigrid closed her eyes and gave thanks to whoever was out there, looking out for her. Akatosh. Heavenly Father. The Blessed Virgin Mary. All Nine Divines.

She was thankful.

Later, as they made camp in an abandoned Falmer hut, she was not quite so thankful.

She bit back a scream of pain as Serana popped her hip joint fully back into place with a hard jerking snap. “Last one, Dragonborn. You’re lucky your limbs didn’t tear off when you hit the sea from that height. Bear up.”

Hissing quick breaths between her clenched teeth, Sigrid endured the agony of touch as Serana rewrapped her splinted limbs with what remained of the vampire’s cloak. She had broken both her
arms, one leg, fractured her pelvis. Her left cheekbone had hairline cracks that pained her when she smiled. Even a tooth had come loose, and she had begged Serana to fix it, almost shaking with relief as the vampire held it steady and healed it snug and tight. Back in her gums, where it belonged.

*Vanity, thy name is Sigrid*. Looking around at the queer, bone-webbed structure they were staying it, she voiced something that had bothered her ever since she had awakened. “So. Why do you keep pushing me to drink blood?”

The vampire princess sat completely still across from her, her eyes half shut. When it became obvious Serana was not going to answer her, Sigrid pulled herself up to a sitting position with a strained grunt of pain. “...Fine. Alright. Don’t talk. I’ll tell you my theories.”

She held up a finger, feeling dizzy as the blood rushed down from her head. “One. You want me to try vale deer blood before it’s too late. It’s a fine, rare vintage and you feel so sad, that I...your bestest friend in Mundus...don’t share your taste for exotic glowing deer. Would it make my pee glow too?”

Not a twitch. She’d have to try harder.

Shuffling closer, Sigrid placed a hand on her lower belly and bit her lip, wondering just how long she had been traveling here. Wherever here was. “Two. Blood is good for half Nord, half Dragon babies. You read it somewhere, in one of Valerica’s creepy texts maybe? You’ve always had my best interests at heart. How thoughtful of you. But you know, blood pudding might go down a bit better than fresh from the source.”

A slight movement of the vampire’s hand. Flexing, nothing more.

Reaching for courage deep inside, Sigrid fastened a peaceful, mild expression on her face as she peered at the statuesque woman seated calmly before her.

“Three. You’re lonely.”

*That* got a reaction. Serana’s eyes snapped wide open, her eyes twin pits of burning flame as she nearly snarled at Sigrid.

The Dragonborn grinned. “That’s it, isn’t it. Poor little vampire princess is sad, now that her castle and all her merry men have gone out to pasture. Don’t you think...” here, she leaned over, allowing her (sore, newly healed) fingers to drag in the dirt like claws. “…that becoming a sinister bloodsucker should be *my* choice?”

The vampire’s voice, when it spoke, was high and cold. “I saved your life.”

“And this gives you, what? The power to change me as you see fit? Would drinking blood finish the...the process of turning, or whatever you call it here?”

Shaking her head, Sigrid leaned back. That little power play had cost her. She could feel the exhaustion creeping in, ready to claim her once more. “Serana. I have a husband. And by some miracle, I still bear his child. Don’t you dare tell me your plans for companionship trump my right to live what remains of my life with them.”

“...and how long would that life have been, had I not blessed you with the blood?” Serana’s burning eyes bobbed in that moon pale face as she nodded. “Sigrid. You are a tolerably competent fighter and funny, for a modern Nord. I even find you attractive. Why do you fight me on this?”

Reaching out, Serana tentatively ran her hand down Sigrid’s broken and wrapped left arm. “I could
give you...and your child, if it survives the change...far more than he can.” That smooth face finally twisted in pained emotion. “Please. Consider it.”

Trying not to reach out and thump the stupid ass on her pretty little head, Sigrid drew a deep breath and counted to three. “Done.” Sigrid carefully laid back down, feeling herself shake with the effort of it.

“I don’t have to think about it, my friend. I’m flattered. Really, I am.” Turning her head, she could see Serana, still poised in reflective sadness. “But if you really respect me, you’ll respect my agency. Don’t do...what your father did to you. To make you a Daughter of Coldharbour.”

Serana recoiled, as though she had been slapped. “I would never-”

“You would. You did, when you bit me.” Blinking in the darkness, the Dragonborn could feel Serana shift awkwardly on the ground. “If you’re my friend, help me heal. Take me to Falion, back in Morthal. Take me to a shrine, to pray. Hopefully it won’t be too late.”

Sigrid grimaced, hoping against hope that Serana’s night vision didn’t extend to nuance of facial expressions. “I really really hope the bites - this infection - you and your father gave me didn’t hurt my baby. I’m super glad I didn’t drink any blood.”

“I can’t - gods, I can’t even think about it. If you had done anything to kill my baby...”

Her voice rumbled in the cave, quivering the Falmer hut as they paused in tense expectation, waiting for any enemies to show themselves. For the space of about ten minutes (though it could have been longer. Sigrid was even now slipping in and out of awareness) they lay there, both thinking hard on what the other had said.

“...there is someone nearby who can probably help you.” The words seemed to be pulled almost unwillingly from Serana’s lips, as Sigrid perked up, coming fully awake.

“Where are we, by the way? I’m guessing somewhere north. I’ve never seen the glowy...thingies before, outside of Blackreach.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been to Blackreach. Most humans end up dying there. But you’re special, aren’t you. Hmm.” Serana crept closer, silently lying down next to Sigrid.

“There’s this elf who lives not far, in a secluded place known as the Forgotten Vale. He-”

“NO WAY!” Sigrid practically exploded, slapping her hands over her mouth as Serana frowned at her in the dimness.

As the vampire got up with a sigh to kill the Falmer who hooted, alerted to their presence by Sigrid’s whoop of joy, the Dragonborn nearly giggled with the novelty of it all.

*Forgotten Vale*. Gelebor, Knight Paladin of Auri-El. Last of the Snow Elves, a freaking dinosaur with encyclopedic firsthand knowledge of Elder Scroll history.

She had so much to ask him! “Well,” Serana huffed, flopping back down in the dingy shelter as she wiped blood off her hand on a nearby woven mat. “You seem to know who he is. I killed his brother for him a while ago, when I was trying to figure out just what prophecy my father was after, exactly.”
“Block out the sun with Auri-El’s bow, with super amazing arrows dipped in your blood. Say goodbye to mankind as the world goes dark. Real smart, killing off your food supply...glad you decided it was a stupid plan.”

Sigrid could almost hear Serana roll her eyes. “Well. When you put it like that…”

“Hey.” Sigrid reached out her single, unhurt finger to tap on Serana’s armor. “Why did you go home, to your dear old dad? I practically gift wrapped that vampire cure for you, waiting in Morthal. You could have avoided being entombed in the castle of the damned.”

“I guess I’m just not as smart as you, Sigrid.”

“Guess not.”

They lay there as Sigrid tried to fall asleep again, throat achingly dry. Was this how all beginner vamps felt? This dry thirst that couldn’t be quenched?

And a dark coil of fear wrapping around her heart, extending a tendril to poke at the baby who floated, just a wee coffee bean ensconced in her uterus. Oh baby. Please be okay. We’ve got to get back to daddy soon. He’ll be worried sick.

“Can you tell me something good?”

She felt more than heard Serana animate herself once more. The vampire did do something similar to sleeping, during whatever passed for daytime outside of these caves. “Like what?”

Sigrid blinked, rubbing small circles over her lower belly. No real bump yet. She had seriously lost some weight, during her trek here. “Something good or funny. Or both. I feel...not scared, exactly. But I’m going to have a hard time falling asleep, knowing I might have a baby vampire spawn ready to eat its way out of me.”

A dry chuckle. “Fine.” There was movement as (Sigrid assumed) the Volkihar moved to turn on her side, facing her.

Her voice, when it came, was so dry Sigrid could have towelled off with it. “All those lovely dresses my father’s thralls kept stuffing you into? They were mine.”

She felt a bubble of nervous anxiety rise inside her. “Um, why? No way. You sure those weren't just some moldy dresses that were lying around?”

“Oh, yes way. They were all made, I think, in preparation for my arrival back into the court. Your measurements are similar enough to mine that they made it work. Though I think…” the vampiress tapped Sigrid’s breast band. “-That your cleavage was a bit too…”

“Perky? Busty? Boobilicious?”

That dry laugh again. “Yes. Those things.”

Serana spoke again, after a moment where Sigrid flattened herself against the ground as she practically felt the vampire check out her rack.

Think ugly thoughts. “I think he wanted to replace me with you, honestly. The Dragonborn, the most powerful human being currently walking Skyrim as his darling daughter to foster. Da always loved power more than anything.”
Shifting sounds, as Serana turned away. “...More than he ever loved me.”

Sigrid blinked herself awake. Something had to be said, despite how wrong it felt to say it. Miss Manners had never covered how to console your undead girlfriend over the brutal death of her megalomaniac father by one’s own hands. “I’m...sorry things didn’t work out the way you hoped. Harkon was kind of a bastard, wasn’t he. But he was your bastard dad that I killed.”

“Yeah.”

“Friends?”

The vampire gripped her proffered hand, making Sigrid whimper with pain as Serana eased down the pressure of her returned squeeze. “Friends.”

“Awesome sauce. Hey, do you know if anyone near Solitude sells a kind of pickled vegetable in brine? I can’t tell you how good that sounds right about now.”

“Ugh. You mortals and your stinky foods. I hear Solitude sells some local specialty of pickled fish.”

“Whoa. Ew. Totally not what I was going for. Never mind. I’ll ask someone who actually eats solids once in awhile.”

“I like a bit of meat now and then. As long as it’s fresh.”

“Really. Stop.Talking.”

******

“...Auriel, Auri-El, Akatosh...so many different names for the sovereign God of the snow elves. And yes. I prefer snow elf. The name Falmer usually holds a negative meaning to most travelers.”

Sigrid soaked in the sight of Gelebor, Knight Paladin of the Snow Elves’ last sanctum in Nirn. He looked like David Bowie. Even sounded like David Bowie, with that slightly supercilious accent and tone that clearly declared I am so far your superior in every way that it doesn't even bear mentioning. Could she teach him to sing Space Oddity?

A tall, blonde elf that sounded like David Bowie and had lived for millennia on a secluded mountaintop. There’s a new pop song in there somewhere, waiting to be born. Or a country song, depending on how all this turns out.

-She loved it. “So you don’t call them Falmer? The creepers who are blind and would love nothing better than to munch on your bones?”

Gelebor blinked, his clear light blue eyes and pale ice-blond hair reminding Sigrid of a stained glass window she had seen depicting the Archangel Michael. “No...those twisted creatures you call Falmer, I call the Betrayed.”

Awkwardly moving her splinted arms as she adjusted her position near the shrine, Sigrid waved him on. This was downright fascinating. She ignored Serana, who sighed aloud, chafing at the delay.

”I feel nothing but sympathy for the Betrayed, despite my actions against them.” Gelebor continued, that pale face drawn in thought. “But I’m afraid that they’re well beyond a cure at this point. The twisted forms you’ve seen didn't occur overnight. It isn't a plague or a disease that ravaged our
species. The dwarves may have stolen their sight, but it took many generations for them to become what they are today."

“Well, isn’t there some hope?” She lifted an eyebrow, smiling at him as the looming elf looked puzzled. “They are still technically snow elves, deep down inside. Really deep.”

“Perhaps they’ll never return to their former appearance, but over the centuries, I’ve noticed a rise in their intellect.” Tapping his lip with a long slender finger, Gelebor scrunched his aristocratic nose in thought. “If a line of communication could be established with them... maybe they can find peace.”

“...It’s the only way they’ll discover that they weren’t always malignant... they were once a proud and prosperous race.”

Yawning, Sigrid rolled her eyes. “Well, I’m all for it. Keeps them out of trouble, stealing children and stray chickens from Nord farms and such.”

“Yeeessss...” The snow elf drawled, eliciting another grin from Sigrid as the vampire decided enough was enough.

“...Great. Thank you ever so much for the history lesson. Now that your curiosity has been satisfied, Dragonborn, perhaps you’d like to be healed so we can be on our way?”

Sigrid stood, with help from Serana. Winced as her legs bore her full weight. How long had it taken to travel here? Serana couldn’t give her a good estimate, since they had spent considerable time underground. No regular meals, either, since the vampire blood had the added side effect of curbing hunger.

“Can we? Gelebor, do you think Akatosh’s shrine will work? I’d really love to be healed.”

Killing off this constant, nagging thirst would be an added boon. She had found herself increasingly transfixed by the throbbing pulse that beat like a metronome in the white neck of the Snow Elf. *Gross.*

His smile was blinding, in that all-pale face. “Of course, my child. Come closer to the sunburst of Auri-El, and place your hands in the fountain. I will bless you myself.”

Hobbling over, Serana shrank back from the shrine as Sigrid placed her hands cautiously in the clear liquid.

As Gelebor began to pray, in some elven dialect that probably predated the Skyforge, Sigrid closed her eyes and thought hard.

>Clean. Want to be clean. Clean and healthy and whole. Baby too. Please please please, Auri-El. Akatosh. Whatever you want to be called...I believe in you, Allfather. You helped me once. Help me again!

She opened her eyes to see her hands fairly radiate with bright golden light. The weaving ropes of
pure aura shimmered around her, settling into her skin with a warmth that reminded her of lazy summer days. Days spent at the park, or the beach. With the constant light of the sun, bouncing everywhere...safe and warm and real.

Flexing her wrists, she peeled off the splints and ragged bandages. Rejoiced at the range of movement as she walked, then suddenly broke into a run. Nearly skidding on the ice, she did a mad little jig as Serana covered her mouth to hide a smile.

Leaping at Gelebor, she grabbed the snow elf in a tight hug. She felt a tentative pat as he stood there, probably too polite to say how much he didn’t want to be touched.

Whatever. She was so happy!

-And starving to death. Her belly was practically sucked to her backbone. “Oh wow. Thank you so much. Um...” she scratched her head, aware her long hair was a rats nest. That she probably stank to high heaven of pus and blood and sickness, her undergarments a grotty mess. “Do you have any spare clothes? Hot baths? Or food? Yeah. I could eat a mammoth, right now.”

Gelebor arched an eyebrow, a small smile playing on his thin lips. “Mammoth is in short supply here, Dragonborn. But the vale deer are quite tender. A moment.”

Trailing after him, Sigrid gestured to Serana to follow. Which she did, after sighing once more in a fit of pique. Sigrid smiled widely at her darkling friend, receiving a timid, fanged smile in return.

Everything was going to be okay. She was going to get some decent clothes. Eat a hot, well-dead meal of venison (that might possibly make her urine glow in the dark).

And then, she would bid Serana farewell and find a way home.

Home to Whiterun, at last.

************

The massive valley of the Forgotten Vale was rimmed in glacial ice year round. High up, in the Druadach Mountain Range it lay silent and still. Dawn had burst upon the far eastern peaks, gradually spilling life giving light onto the frozen landscape. Water rushed beneath frozen icicles, the only sound of life here, in this polar retreat.

Until a voice echoed strangely, sparking a small avalanche that pulled down a couple of rocks into the riverbed of the valley.

“...take your protein pills and put your helmet ooon! Come on, sing it with me!”

A reluctant male voice joined in. “Ground Control to Major Tom...” as the warrior and the elf suddenly appeared running full tilt from an ice cave in the mouth of the valley, followed by a herd of screeching, rancorous Falmer.

“Yes, yes yes! Let's grace them with one last serenade! Ten! Nine! Eight! Keep singing!”

Slashing about with her new sunhallowed elven blade, Sigrid the Dragonborn roared out at the top of
her voice as she gutted the Falmer who lunged at her, spittle flying from their gaping mouths. “This is Ground Control to Ma-hajor Tom!”

*Splat! Thwunk!*

“Commencing Countdown! Engines on!”

Crackling electricity fried another Falmer, as Gelebor neatly slashed off arms and cauterized them, all at the same time. A multitasker, that guy.

“Check ignition and may God’s love be with yooooou…”

*Splurt! Thwep! Clunk!*

Later, as they cleaned their blades in the snow, the last surviving snow elf looked on in amusement as Sigrid belted out the remaining verse, practically pulling a Sound of Music moment as she twirled in the armor he had found for her.

What he called Ancient Snow Elf armor, she called the albino merger of ebony and elven armor into something quite unique. Potato, potah-toe. It was *pretty*.

“And I'm floating in a most peculiar way-hay...and the stars look very dif-fah-herent, to-daaaheeeey!”

“For heeere...am I sitting in a tin can?” She gestured to the wide valley that dropped sharply below. They sat at the edge of a stairway to a vast lake, overshadowed by a massive iced over waterfall. It was a truly incredible sight. *If only it was a bit bloody warmer.*

“Faaar above the world. Planet Earth is bluuuuue...and there's nothing I can doo-ooo!”

“...Tin can?”

She turned to her elven comrade. “Tin is a type of metal. Eh. It would take too long to explain.”

After bidding Serana farewell, she had watched the vampire go with mixed feelings. The Volkihar had decided to go back to the castle, to obtain access to the Soul Cairn and meet up with her mother. Valerica had been hiding out there for centuries...it couldn’t hurt her friend to meet up with the last remaining vestige of her past life and achieve *some* sort of closure.

Wishing her the best of luck, Sigrid had asked her to send letters out to any potential couriers, informing any and all that the Dragonborn was, indeed, alive. Serana owed her that, at least. Sigrid could find no other way of letting her family know; to inform them of where she had been all this time. *Because it would have KILLED her to take the path to Solitude, instead of swimming even further north. Bitch.*

It weighed heavily upon her. No fast communication. No chance at a speedy return. More than ever, she dearly wished for a cell phone and a working network connection.

Sigrid had Shouted for Odahviing, for Paarthurnax. No one had appeared. Not even after weeks of repeated yelling, on the highest peaks that Gelebor was willing to drag her up to.

For she was showing her pregnancy at last. She hadn’t been sure at first, as she regained some of the weight she had lost while dead to the world, infected with the super special version of *Sanguinaire Vampiris*.

Was it a food belly, from so long being underfed? She was damn sure eating everything in sight.
Nope. The roundness she had slowly prodded, that grew week after week was hard. And she realized one day, as she had been cleaning her sword and absentmindedly patted the mound...it had moved. Since noticing the first time, Sigrid felt more and more tiny jabs from the little warrior tossing and turning inside of her.

...And felt a seeping sense of grief, as she realized Vilkas had missed it. Missed the first, butterfly nudge movements of his child. It only strengthened her determination to find a way to leave, to return to him. Fast.

When the Snow Elf had answered her regarding which month in the year it was, she had been completely taken aback. Not that she could have known, for the Forgotten Vale never melted to change with the seasons. *Always winter, never Christmas*. 

“One, Dragonborn. It is the last week of Sun’s Dawn. Almost First Seed...you have been here for two and a half months already. Why do you ask?” He questioned with that never-ending patience she suspected hid the soul of a true saint. Only a saint would have put up with her forcing him to sing ‘Dancing in the Street’ as she shuffled and made obscene smiles of delight. *R.I.P. David Bowie, you magnificent bastard. Your doppelganger is here.*

Sitting down, she counted back on one hand. Was it Hearthfire or Frostfall, that month spent trapped in Castle Volkihar? Couldn’t remember at this point.

Another month, according to Serana, of being carried and dragged along rocky shoreline, through cave systems and glaciers to reach Gelebor.

Then Evening Star. She definitely could recall the coldest month of the year, after nearly freezing to death in Gelebor’s shrine. He had found her some warm furs to shroud herself in. Vale sabre cat, she had been told. It was warm, and even if it looked like the pelt had come from a weird tiger who had roller bladed into a wet-paint rave, she couldn’t complain.

It was the middle of that month that Serana elected to leave, to find her mother. Strand Sigrid here with Sir Gelebor and his lovely tenor voice.

And no way out.

*And* a tiny passenger that had grown from coffee bean size to apparently a cantaloupe. All in a matter of months.


***************

A brilliant idea had come to her, as she had trudged up and down the valley, Shouting for her dovah friends who evidently were too far away to come to her rescue.

There had been dragons in the Forgotten Vale. For sure...the two ancient dragons that always popped out of the ice on the lake, scaring the shit out of her when she had played the Dawnguard DLC.

How dramatic would *that* be, in real life? Two of them, who obviously lived underwater. Sweet!
Water dragons. She had to talk to them.

And Gelebor, ever the gentleman, had told her he would escort her to her ride home. Like a nice boy seeing his date home from the pizza parlor.

Sigrid was determined that she was going to teach him all the songs from Labyrinth before she left. And had made a decent stab at it, to be sure. To hear ‘Dance, Magic, Dance,’” come from the stiff, overly polite Mer had totally made her day. She was sure he only indulged her due to her pregnancy. And the fact that he had been alone for forever.

Ugh. Sigrid had to find a way to convince him to leave, and see Skyrim for what it had become. And not just what he remembered. Fascinating though it was, to hear his accounts of what the Dwemer had really been like, though.

Creepy perverts who loved logical debates and hated all other mer, apparently. But they were elves. Short elves with beards. It made her wild, sometimes, with just how much infighting broke out between those who shared more similarities than differences.

The hellacious racism had to stop somewhere.

She told the Paladin over the fire one evening that she wanted him to leave his empty shrine and come visit her. “…You should really see the College of Winterhold, too. With your incredible past, they wouldn’t just love you! They’d keep you. And of course, you’ll have to see baby Tom when he’s born.”

Gelebor had stirred the fire with a stick, smiling but offering no affirmation to the question of leaving. “Tom? I thought you were going to name the child Kodlak if it was a boy, and Aela if it was a girl?”

“Nah. Changed my mind. I’ll probably change it again about a thousand more times before this kid pops out of me.” Rubbing the tightly stretched skin, she smiled as the tiny knee/butt/elbow of her unborn baby bounced against her palm. “Maybe I will pick out a name in Dovahzul. Vahzahriilan.”

“A proper mouthful. What does it mean?”

“True Bravery.”

Sigrid could have used some of that later, as the twin dragons erupted from the ice.

Gelebor, at her insistence, kept far enough away that she was sure the dovah would not be startled. They seemed a matched pair, male and female as they climbed in the air, trailing streams of glacial lake water and roaring at the intruders.

“Drem yol lok, dovah of the Forgotten Vale!”

She watched in bated breath as they swooped even further up, then dove downwards...nearly clipping her with their wings as they got a better look.

Gradually, the two dragons landed upon the ice. “What joore speaks to us so boldly? Wo los hi? Piraak hi Dovahzul?”

Sigrid held up her hand in greeting. “I speak some, but not very fluently. I am still learning.”
Bowing her head, just enough so that the dovah would see her respect, Sigrid straightened.

“I am Sonahsod of the Hofkahsejun. The Dovahkiin. You can call me Sigrid.”

Watching her, she tried very hard not to fidget as the massive predators weighed her in their gaze, unblinking. Then, the smaller dovah took a step forward. Then another, shaking the ice of the lake.

“Lok paaz, little one? You bear a kalpa? An egg child?”

Looking down at her protruding 'egg' belly, Sigrid grinned. Her armor no longer fit comfortably, now that she was about halfway along in her pregnancy. She had taken to wearing a long ankle length white tunic that she secretly suspected was Gelebor’s nightshirt of sorts, along with the snow elf gauntlets and a new travel backpack worn over it. The elegantly curved elven blade that Gelebor had blessed just for her hung by her side, a comforting weight.

She looked ridiculous. But it worked for now. “Geh. Might I know your names, my new friends?”

The larger one that she believed was male flared his wings wide. “Naaslaarum, Dovahkiin.”

Sidling even closer in curiosity, steam ejected from the female’s nostrils as she came closer. “Voslaarum, Dovahkiin. But you did not climb this mighty mountain to tinvaak with us, hmm? What is it you want?”

Feeling Gelebor waiting patiently behind her, Sigrid stepped forward, her boots cracking the ice. Small cracks. Nothing to worry about...if it was holding up under the combined weight of the dovah, it could hold her and her baby weight.

“My laas liin - my life mate - waits for me at home, near the Hofkahsejun. I cannot climb the mountains carrying this...egg. And nor do I wish to make them wait for me, as I struggle.”

She spread out her hands beseechingly. “Voslaarum, fen hi aak? Will you take me home to him?”

The two dragons looked at one another, seeming to speak with eyes alone. Finally, Voslaarum faced the Dragonborn. Sigrid saw with a slowly building affection that the female dovah’s eyes were a glorious, rich green...slotted in gold rimmed black. “Geh, Dovahkiin. Roh laan. A fair request. We are also expecting young to arrive.”

“Really?” Sigrid felt her face nearly split with a smile, as happiness suffused her in an instant. Baby dragons! How adorable! “That is...wow! Congratulations to you both!”

The father dovah lowered his head to better look at her. Darker in hue than his mate, his large liquid eyes were almost fully black. “Ful nii los, Dovahkiin. Perhaps your coming was a portent. Long have we slumbered in this lake, protecting our kalpa who rest at the bottom. It is past time for young to be born once more.”

Placing her hand on her belly, she felt a gentle succession of kicks. “Thank you so much. Nex hi. ”

Waving to Gelebor (whom she had bid farewell to the previous night, fondly hugging him again despite his stilted protestations) Sigrid carefully climbed up upon Voslaarum.

She was quite a bit bigger than Odahviing; though whether it was due to her age or to Odahviing’s relative youth, Sigrid had no idea. The gleaming, silvery grey scales had a mother of pearl sheen that fairly glinted in the weak light of the north. She held on to two protruding neck spikes as the dovah took off with a running leap.
As those massive wings flapped, bearing them higher and further away, Gelebor waved...becoming a mere speck in the distance as Voslaarum wheeled away to the east. The deeply ridged frozen valley of the Forgotten Vale spread out before her, even more impressive in its scope far up here where the sky sank into the blackness of space. Nothing. Absolutely no civilization for leagues, as far as the eye could see.

This was definitely the right choice, riding dragonback to get home.

Sigrid laughed in the windy gusts that tore at her hair, ensuring that her backpack was secure and tight as she clung with her thighs to the dragon’s great scaly back. “Oh, Voslaarum! Daar los brit fahzon!”

The Dragonborn felt the dovah laugh beneath her. “Of course, Dovahkiin. It will take only a day. Two at most, to deliver you safe to your laas liin. Naaslaarum would be...hmm... valdrekaan, wretched without me. As must be your male.”

“Geh!” Shouting her response, so she was heard, Sigrid felt her eyes tear as the dragon dipped further below the clouds, straight into a nearly visible air current. She held on tight, hoping with all her heart that nothing earth shattering had happened at Jorrvaskr. That Serana’s notes sent out via courier had reached those who must surely be searching for her still.

She didn’t want to contemplate any worst case scenarios, just yet. It was enough that she was on her way.

“Faster!” She screamed with joy, feeling her baby roll and kick within her. As though her happiness was somehow catching.

On her way home.

Chapter End Notes

All Dovahzul has been taken from this nifty website:

https://www.thuum.org/learn/practice/phrases.php

Daar los brit fahzon! Such a beautiful view!
The sun hung high in the sky, as the sounds of workday activity outside filtered through the thatched eaves of Breezehome.

Farkas and Carlotta slept through it all. After the fourth night time feeding, his wife had crawled up the stairs like a Draugr, desperate for rest. He had changed the girls’ soiled breechclouts, carrying the dirty linens outside to the basket between his thumb and forefinger. Much as he was deeply in love with the tiny, adorably plump babes who had shaken his world upside down, he didn’t want to smell any of their leavings in the house. Ugh...would have been worse with the nose of a werewolf. Glad I cured myself when I had the chance.

Curling around her in the wide, fur strewn bed, Farkas awoke first. Cracking his eyes open, he hugged Carlotta closer as she shifted in her stolen midday slumber. She was completely out of it; dead to all noise and disruption. Farkas felt his face stretch into a lazy grin, as he caught a glimpse of gloriously full breasts, straining against her loosely laced bodice. How had he never noticed this miraculous development in other new mothers?

Perhaps it was just that it was his Carlotta. His wife was not convinced, but the Companion found it terribly difficult to avoid touching the swollen ripeness of her breasts whenever she bore them to suckle the twins. They were irresistible, and he told her so. Repeatedly. At least five times a day.

For food, not sex. Food not sex. Nope. Still didn’t work. He palmed her left tit, feeling the heft of it in his hand with a sigh of pleasure. Carlotta squirmed, blinking up at him as he smiled, leaning over to brush her forehead, her cheek with soft kisses as the woman made a noise. Tugging his neck down to hers, she-

-Crying. Insistent, high pitched wails that echoed as Fjora awakened Gydda.

Always with the eating. Groaning, Farkas rolled out of bed as his wife stretched languorously. He pinned her with his gaze, enjoying the view as she sat up and fixed her bodice.

“Duty calls.” The Imperial smiled gently, with a trace of reluctance. “Can we- I mean, do you have to go back to Jorrvaskr soon? Can you stay?” Her tongue darted out to wet her lips as she reached out, palming him through his pants.

Damn. Wish I had the day off. “Afraid not, love. Athis is balancing the books, and I need to be there for the afternoon lessons.” Leaning over, he kissed her firmly, trying to ignore the ever-rising shrieks of rage outside their chamber.
“Alright, alright…” he muttered, lifting Carlotta into his arms as she giggled. Walking out of the bedroom with his burden and down the hall to the girl’s room, he deposited his wife onto the floor. “Here’s your ma, you little cock-blocking dremoras.”

“Farkas!” Admonished Carlotta, though she softened it with a smile as she picked up a tomato-red Gydda who was punching the air with little fists. Both girls had their own carved pinewood cribs that rocked on gliders. Carlotta had decorated the room with cheerful rag rugs of rose pink and blue, with a jar of mountain posies sitting on the cupboard where they stored the ewer of water and clean breechclouts, as well as a veritable mountain of swaddling clothes.

Why they needed so many damn tiny outfits, Farkas could only guess. Probably because of the constant shitting and puking. Cute little savages. “I’ll see you three later.”

“You too!” Carlotta called after him, distracted by the hungry mouth already fastening onto her proffered nipple. As Gydda sucked with hungry, insistent little mewls, Carlotta raised her head to notice Farkas watching, eyes dark with want. “Get going!” She laughed, flashing him the other full breast with a knowing laugh, as he groaned again in vexed frustration. “Later!”

“Later.” Tearing himself away from the domestic sight, he clomped down the stairs and buckled on his armor and sword with the slow effort of sleep-deprived lethargy.

Life had take on a predictable, almost idyllic rhythm, he mused to himself as he walked up the streets of Whiterun to the Wind District. Most days, he would help Carlotta out at night and long into the morning. Leaving only around midday to attend to his tasks as instructor at Jorrvaskr, which could last until after dinner sometimes. More rarely as the newbloods took on more of the workload, he would leave Whiterun on a job. Thank Shor and Kyne that happened less often, as his duties revolved more around the physical training aspect of the warrior’s hall, rather than seeking the renown of doing great deeds.

He had already proved himself, many times over. They could stand to send someone else to seek fortune and glory for a few more months.

The care and feeding of the girl-twins was all consuming. So much that he decided after the first few weeks to bring in some already cooked meals, first from the Bannered Mare and then from Tilma, who had chucked him on the chin and refused payment when he had asked. Just to alleviate some of the pressure Carlotta felt, to keep up with the housework and their children's care. Though bread and cheese were filling, he craved actual cooked meals more often than his sweetheart could spare the time to make them. She was nearly as hungry as he, from the labor of providing milk for their girls.

“So. Where has my brother run off to, this time?” Examining the lunch spread that other Companions were already doing full justice to, Farkas sat and began tucking into a bowl of beef and vegetable stew. Almost, he could ignore the twinge of sadness and worry that always accompanied thoughts of Vilkas these days.

Ever since Sigrid’s death, his twin had been loosely drifting. Like a leaf tossed upon the wind, he wandered restlessly. Back and forth, from the settlement north of Lake Illinalta to Jorrvaskr, then off again to some random destination provided on the will his late wife had recorded. Rootless and unanchored.

Though it was far too early for such things, Farkas wondered if Njada hadn’t had the right idea of distracting Vilkas with something...if not someone else.
Were there any other run-down farmhouses in need of a full overhaul? Any fair maidens desperate to be rescued from the clutches of evil mages? He was keeping an ear out.

Anything to keep him from the increasingly reckless talk his brother indulged in more often, nowadays. Talk of exploring barrows and dwemer dungeons, plumbing the depths to see what treasures lay there. There had been rumors of a great bear, far to the west nearly in Hammerfell that was as large as a mammoth. Farkas had watched in deep concern as Vilkas had perked up at the news, a manic fire burning in those bloodshot eyes.

There had to be something else. Some other task to set that would fully occupy his time. Like taking his rightful place as Harbinger?

“He’s running an errand in Rorikstead.” Teldryn Sero leaned back in his chair, fastidiously picking his teeth with an elven dagger. “Should be back soon enough.”

“Hmph.” Farkas had been cautiously optimistic about the Dunmer sellsword. He had not consented to join the brotherhood of the Companions yet. But surely there was no one better to set an example to the new bloods. He and Athis had hit it off immediately, and so Farkas was not surprised to see the latter walk shakily into the dining hall and sit with a leaden thump next to Teldryn.

Peering over at his Dunmer shield brother, Farkas swallowed the last bite of stew. “Athis. What bothers you?”

His crimson eyes looked nearly dazed. “There’s something you should see. You too, Teldryn. Come on.”

Casting a glance out at the training yard, Farkas was comforted by the sight of Njada putting the new bloods through their blocking exercises. They would be fully occupied for at least another hour, leaving him free to attend to this new development.

Following Athis to the Skyforge, Farkas climbed the stairs along with Teldryn, hastily holding on to the stone walls as a mighty blast of wind nearly bowled them over.

“What in Azura-” Teldryn shielded his eyes, for once uncovered by the chitin helm. “A dragon!”

And so it was. A massive, silver scaled female by the sight of it, beating her wings furiously to attain altitude as she roar-coughed something in that harsh speech of theirs. Winging away to the west, Farkas tracked her as she grew smaller with distance, then disappeared over a hilltop.

Not lingering to watch, Teldryn had followed Athis up to the Skyforge to see what all the bother was about.

Pulling himself into the open with a grunt, Farkas looked around. Eorlund was nowhere to be seen. The embers of the forge glowed as they always did, a fine assortment of blades and axes stacked neatly by the grindstone, waiting to be sharpened.

Teldryn stopped stock-still in his tracks. “It can’t be.”

Athis shook his head in a strange grimace that seemed to be wavering between a smile and a sob. “I know. But, here we are. The glorious s’wit pulled it off, somehow.”

Lifting his gaze in the blinding light to see what they were gawping at, Farkas felt a queer trembling mixture of joy and raw, gripping pain as he beheld a woman in white, clinging to the stone head of the eagle above the Skyforge.
The wind blew in fitful gusts, wrapping the white cloth even tighter around a full, round belly. Her long tangle of auburn hair whipping in the wind like a pennant, the Dragonborn held tightly to the slanted ledge of space between the outstretched rock wings, smiling tightly.

“Hey, guys. A little help here?”

*******

Too bad Voslaarum didn’t have the clearance to fully land. God, the drop down to the Skyforge looks much farther, way up here.

The men had stayed absolutely silent as Teldryn had thrown her a rope. Sliding down, Sigrid fell in an ungainly heap as her legs gave out from days of riding dragonback. Ouch. The looseness in her hips from the pregnancy was making her more clumsy. Soon enough, she’d be waddling everywhere. Can’t wait to see what witty insults Vilkas will come up with for that.

Feeling the roughness of his palm as Farkas hefted her back to a standing position, she wet her lips, not liking the stony blank stare her shield brother was currently aiming at her. “Farkas, I can explain—”

“You damn well better. I warned you, woman!” Seeming to struggle for words, Farkas settled on skewering her with those icy grey eyes as she shrank before that judgemental gaze. “...not to do anything suicidal? Remember?”

Shoving his giant hands through the length of his dark hair, Farkas gritted his teeth. “And you fucking broke his heart.”

“Farkas—”

“No, Dragonborn. Just...stop. Can’t talk to you right now. Maybe later.”

She watched in a creeping swell of dread as he stalked off, clearly furious. Turning to Teldryn and Athis, she took in a shaky breath. “Um. Didn’t you guys get a message from Serana? I made her send courier notes to every major city. I’m...so sorry I couldn’t get word out earlier, but we were stranded somewhere incredibly remote.”

Feeling the babe flutter and roll inside her, responding to the stress that seared through her at Farkas’s words; Sigrid put a hand to her temple as the two mer exchanged uncomfortable looks. That...was not the reception she had been hoping for.

Where was Vilkas?

“...What happened while I was gone?”
Compassion fairly radiated from his creased red eyes, as Teldryn reached out to delicately touch her
swollen torso. “Serah, it is quite a long tale. Why don’t you come down to the hall, and I will fill you
in?”

As he took her hand, she gratefully clung to the sellsword as Athis took her other hand, still seeming
to chew upon whatever he had been meaning to say. “And perhaps you can tell us what you have
been up to these past few months as well.”

“Gladly.” Though she felt a tickle of mirth, as she beheld the slack jawed shock of Njada dropping
her shield upon spotting her, Sigrid couldn’t quite manage a smile. She made it down the steps,
blinking as in one strangely choreographed movement all the newbloods turned and gaped at her.

“Really, guys. Stop playing with me. Where is my husband?”

*********

“...Hail, Companion. Where’s the fire?” Skulvar Sable Hilt called out as Vilkas rushed past the
stables, gasping for breath as his legs burned with the effort of keeping in motion.

That damn dragon was flying westward again, straight into the setting sun. He hoped he was not too
late.

He lost what wind remained to him trying to run up through the market. Stopping near the well, he
pulled the bucket up with quick, impatient movements and hurriedly took a drink. Dumping the rest
of it over his head, Vilkas shook himself like a dog.

*Good enough.* That had been the break he needed to take off once again, staggering towards
Jorrvaskr. The weak spring sun wasn’t nearly warm enough to dry him as he took the steps two at a
time, and he shivered, flinging the doors open to the dark smoke filled hall.

A group of shocked faces greeted him as he plowed through the room towards Farkas. “What…” -
he panted, desperately trying to catch his breath. “What was that...that dragon doing here?”

Farkas just looked at him. “She’s alive.”

His knees gave out then, as he sat down in a nearby chair. Warm hands gripped him, patting his
shoulders as Athis tried to get his attention.

Whatever it was, it didn’t matter. Vilkas was swimming in a bewildered kind of elation. Like he was
fairly floating in midair. Lighter than he had felt since...well, since Solstheim.

*She’s alive! No idea how the woman managed it, but fuck if I care.*

“...-kas. Vilkas! She left!”

“-What? She was here ?” Suddenly hyper aware, he realized Athis had been shaking him for some
time now. Farkas was still studying him with that careful stare, arms folded tightly.

The Dunmer threw up his arms in frustration. “...stubborn fetcher! She left with Teldryn for Lakeview Manor about two hours ago, when we told her that was the likeliest place to find you!”

Feeling a shiver of anticipation, Vilkas tilted his head back and closed his eyes. Shit. It didn’t feel real.

Coming down from his high, he swallowed and looked at his twin. Maybe there has been some mistake... “...You’re sure. Right? That it was her? All this time. This is-”

Shaking his head, he stood up and paced the floor, almost shaking with the sick adrenaline of knowing.

“Yeah. Pretty damn sure. Dragon dropped her off on top of the Skyforge.” Farkas sighed, leaned back against the timbered support pillar and hitting his head with a sigh.

Vilkas noticed, as though for the first time, the deep shadows beneath his brother’s eyes. “We had words. Tell her I’m sorry, when you see her.”

The large man smiled wryly at his confusion. “Was in shock, brother. Never expected to see her again.”

Biting back an invective, Vilkas pinched the bridge of his nose. Why... “Fine. Tell me later what I’m apologizing to her for.”

There was a low murmur of voices from the assembled Companions, newbloods and veterans alike watching as he mulled over what to do. Feeling his heart finally descend from his throat, he stood. “Got to go.”

The newbloods erupted in cheers, hollering and crying out in a bedlam of noise. He lost track of how many came up to slap him on the back or shake his hand, as he fiercely tried to collect his thoughts.

“Take this!” Njada pushed a backpack at him. Lifting the flap, he saw it was fairly overflowing with travel rations. A full waterskin. Sleeping furs.

The Block trainer bit her lip, decidedly not looking at him. “...Sorry about, er. Earlier. That thing. Just...go and bring our Harbinger back.”

“Shouldn’t be hard to overtake them.” Farkas cautioned, as Vilkas sucked in deep, calming breaths.

“They’re walking past Riverwood. And your woman? She’s huge.”

Uncomprehending, he stared dumbly as Farkas patted his belly, eyebrows raised. “Heavy with child, you lucky bastard.”

Athis jostled him as he almost fell over. “Just...don't kill yourself in the process.”

Nodding, he took off. Fairly tripping down the steps, he couldn’t hold back the stupidly wide grin that stretched across his face.

It nearly hurt. Damn, he hadn’t smiled like this in ages.

Pack jostling against his sword as he tore off past the Gildergreen, he could still hear cheers, as the
Companions trickled from Jorrvaskr eagerly spreading the news.

The Dragonborn, Harbinger of the Companions...his wife, was back from the dead.

Almost laughing, he fairly blew past the market, ignoring the merchants who called after him. Demanding to know what was going on.

His woman had some serious explaining to do.

He could hardly wait.

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Someone had been busy.

Trailing her fingers along the carved dragons in the timber crossbeams, Sigrid marvelled at how much had changed in the space of a few months.

Lakeview Manor had been completely transformed. When she had first purchased it, the worn down cabin had almost been on the brink of falling over, with holes in the thatch and missing foundation stones.

She had paid for it to be fixed up before the honeymoon, of course. Had thought that nostalgia would have been one of its strongest points as a gift. And she had been proven right, at the time. He’d loved it.

But this place…

It was to the old cabin what a Bugatti Veyron was to a Toyota Prius. It totally blew the old shack away.

“...Serah? Come and drink your tea while it’s hot.”

Dragging herself to the kitchen, she sat down in the chair her bodyguard pulled out for her with a silenced groan. No sign of her husband yet. Someone had been around though; the oven contained swollen loaves of bread, still doughy. The yeasty scent mingled with the fresh night air leaking in from the kitchen window, left ajar. Flames still burned in the main hall’s stacked riverstone fireplace.

“Thanks, Teldryn. The baby isn’t coming for a while, though. But by all means….keep spoiling me.”

Blowing on the hot steaming mug as she gingerly cradled it in her hands, Sigrid watched the Dunmer as he poked around, investigating the shelves and cupboards. Even going so far as to lick some of the butter from the churn. “Nasty. Use a knife, you fetcher.”

As he opened his mouth, no doubt to fire a saucy retort, he stiffened, leaning back just in time to avoid a thrown blade that vibrated as it struck the wood of the wall. She barely had the time to notice that it came from the cracked open window.
Then, it was all a chaotic blur.

Sigrid had Shouted almost instinctively the Slow Time Thu’um, just to see what the hell was going on. Drawing the sun hallowed blade, she could make out the moving bulk of someone hiding outside.

Heard more of them slam the front doors open with a clap-bang, as surprise was now foregone in favor of brute force.

Two. Maybe three, from the sound of padded footsteps gliding closer. All Morag Tong, judging purely by the Dunmer garb stamped with a stylized hand that she glimpsed, right before Teldryn shut and locked the far door in sluggish, exaggerated movements. Leaving one way in, one way out. A fatal funnel.

Dragging herself to stand, she gripped the handle of her sword and stepped backwards, next to Teldryn Sero who had already drawn his blade and bore a handful of writhing, sparking electricity in the other hand.

The Shout ended abruptly, as time sped up once more.

Side by side, they waited for the Morag Tong to make their way down the main hall and into the kitchen. Sigrid jerked back, nearly falling against the hot oven as an ebony blade stabbed through the window, shattering the blinds in a noisy clatter of scrapped wood.

“Come out, come out Dragonborn…” a mellow voice chuckled behind the ruined window.

Allowing the sellsword to step past her, Sigrid pulled the chairs down on the floor in between her and the window, creating a rough blockade.

Teldryn was now fully occupied with the two Morag Tong trying to gain access to the kitchen through the double doors. Amidst the crackling magic and the occasional slashes as he fended them off, Sigrid watched the window.

Watched and waited, until she saw red eyes framed in a black hood rise above the windowsill.

“Fus Roh DAH!”

Sigrid was gratified to see those red eyes widen, right before their owner was thrown back out of sight, followed by a sickening crunch.

One down.

Stepping over the overturned chairs and out into the main dining room, Sigrid managed to keep one of the assassins from tossing a ball of flame at the walls with one swift overhand chop.

The unfortunate man screamed through his hood, as his arm glistened wetly at the newly shorn stump. She raced through the back room with the spare tables and storage, knowing he was not far behind.

Running full circle into the main hall near the fireplace once more, she dodged Teldryn and his opponent in her race for the front door; trying very hard not to trip over anything until she gasped,
collided with something tall. Someone who grabbed her quickly, before she fell.

She swung her blade blindly in panic, barely missing the head and going for another upward strike, when the man tried grabbing her wrists once more. “Sigrid, it's me!”

-Vilkas- Pale grey eyes huge, as he caught her left wrist tight in his hand and stared at her face first, drinking the sight of her down until he took in her swollen stomach. Shock leached what color he had, as his other hand carefully reached out to-

“Behind you!” She cried, right arm automatically thrusting her sword into the head of the Morag Tong bearing down on them, his remaining arm bearing a dagger already poised to strike.

She was caught, hopelessly ensnared in that silvery gaze that burned with emotion. Sigrid was now fully flush against her husband, her sword still stuck in the skull of the corpse that fell; lifeless behind him as she wavered on her feet nearly toppling them both over.

“That's all of them, I believe.” With one final swing, Teldryn Sero cut off the last attacker's head, sending a splatter of blood streaking across the tablecloth.

Feeling a nearly effervescent rush of joy at seeing her lover, up close and whole, Sigrid soaked in the sight of him. He seemed content to maintain the almost electric connection, his pupils dilating as his hand on her wrist steadied them both; thumb rubbing against her knuckles as he pulled her even closer against his lean form.

“Damn.” His voice sounded vaguely disinterested. As though they had just got done talking about the weather. “I just bought that tablecloth.”

Suddenly, it was funny. Still taking in with a sharp pain all the changes in him, the neglect that clearly showed the unhappiness marking her absence, she began giggling.

The ridiculousness of their situation seemed to hit Vilkas at the same time. She felt his chest rumble with laughter, pressed up against him as she was, as he rested his head atop hers.

Sweat, pine sap and leather. She continued to inhale deeply, rubbing her face against the softness of his neck, the rough of his beard as her eyes filled with tears.

Letting go of the sword, she ignored the dead body that flopped to the floor behind them. Still helplessly laughing, Sigrid hugged him with both arms, as he freed her left wrist to embrace her in turn.

A quiet clap of the door as it closed betrayed Teldryn's passage outside. They were alone.

They stood there like that without words for an indefinite amount of time, just breathing as they held each other tightly. Sometimes her breath would catch in a sob. Other times, it would be him that she felt nearly convulse as he gripped her even harder.

“...Thought you were dead.” He eventually spoke, muffled into the mass of her hair.

She sighed. “I was nearly dead. And undead. Serana kept me from reaching you all after killing Harkon, you know. Still haven't forgiven her for that.”

Feeling him shake against her, Sigrid buried herself even further in his arms. Her voice was nearly inaudible as she spoke against his chest. “It was awful. No way of letting you know. Thought I was
going to be stuck there in the cold forever.”

She felt him run a hand down her back. Slide down her rear, gently pressing her against him. “Woman, you have no idea - we held a fucking funeral for you. Ondolemar and I...we...all of us searched for days. There was nothing to prove you had survived.”

“...I did. Barely. But I can’t blame you for thinking that I was a goner.”

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she remembered the fall. Her certainty that it was the end. “My breasts saved me.”

“...Huh?”

Unwilling to step back to make it easier to see, she craned her neck up at him. He looked exhausted. “Serana...kept trying to turn me. Wanted to be, um, with me. But I don’t swing that way. Too bad for her. I knew wearing those stupid gowns would be a mistake.”

Watching a number of emotions flit across his face at that statement, she felt the baby roll, then kick out sharply against Vilkas where they were pressed together. He spooked, looking at her in wonderment. “Was that...”

“Yeah.” Feeling warmth flood her as he reached a shaking hand out, she grabbed it and placed it on her belly. Pushed down, until the tiny passenger kicked again, against their hands.

Vilkas sagged against her, spent. “Alive.”

“We both are.” Looking around her at the wreckage, she managed to gasp out a laugh despite the tight, hot joy that she knew he shared. He was still studying her, a smile hovering around his mouth. “Wow. Do you know why you had Morag Tong after you? I know at least one of them was after me.”

“I have some idea of who is responsible. But it can wait.” The ends of her hair brushed the floor as he picked her up, cradling her as though she was something precious. Lifting her arms to wrap around his neck, she rested her head against his chest as he moved, stepping over the growing puddle of blood and debris to enter what appeared to be a bedroom.

Taking in the massive, four poster bed practically swimming in thickly layered furs, she felt him chuckle as he spun slowly around, showing off. “Whoa. You’re making me dizzy. Hold still. I want to see everything.”

The room was tastefully decorated in a style that hearkened back to Jorrvaskr, with subtle hints of other influences. Small things...a horker tooth that bore a scrimshaw carving of a longboat, laid next to a pinecone the size of her head. A gleaming chunk of what she recognized was stalhrim, stacked atop other various metals and leathers. Woven tapestries and shields had been hung on the timber walls, a tall wardrobe and set of cabinets flanking the bed were polished to a high sheen. Books had been wedged into the spaces unfilled by drums, boots, potions and other assorted odds and ends. She happily noticed the two child sized beds in the far end of the room, delicately carved with flowers and stacked with folded blankets and toys. Did Carlotta give birth yet? She must have.

A branching antler bone chandelier cast the entire room in a rich amber glow. The entire effect was that of rustic comfort. A mountain man’s paradise, and she told him so. He smiled in response, grey eyes distant as he sat carefully down on the bed.

Reaching up to tug gently at the dark hair that had grown long...nearly to his shoulders, Sigrid slid a leg off of his lap, straddling him. “Is this what you’ve been doing? Working on the house?”
God. The look on his face. “Had to do something, to keep my mind off of…” he sighed, looking away, absent mindedly scratching his beard.

Mentally, she cursed Serana yet again with all the colorful swears she had picked up from her travels, focusing on the particularly rude Dunmer insults. Giving into impulse, she cupped his face in her hands.

Felt him swallow thickly, as he shifted beneath her weight. His warm hands bracing her from slipping off his lap, as she slowly leaned forward to press her lips against his.

For a moment, Vilkas was still. Unmoving. Then he responded, his mouth slanting deeply over hers as a hand reached up to tangle itself in her hair.

Reveling in the sensation, they continued exploring each other in the heady haze of reuniting after so damn long.

He palmed her breast. She reacted by arching her back with a moan. Sigrid grabbed his hair and practically swallowed him whole, sucking on his tongue as his hands dragged over her body in increasingly frenzied motions. Mapping the valleys and hills of her, as though he could see her by touching, committing the entirety of her to memory.

They maintained an unhurried, steady rhythm that fanned the flames growing steadily, sparking deep inside with every glide of his tongue against hers. Every scrape of his beard against her face. Feeling the chapped suede of his lips as he mouthed her ear. The indrawn breath he took, when she carefully ground against him with her hips.

It wasn’t enough. Abrupt with raw need, Sigrid pushed him back onto the bed. Shut her eyes tightly, as he surged against her, the hard heat of him tantalizingly close. Digging her knees into the furs, she gave as good as she got, savoring the way his head tossed against the bed as she freed her hand, pulling at the laces of her bodice…

“...Serah, I’m just going to grab some furs and sleep outside…”

“Go away Teldryn!” She fairly roared, losing all control of her Thu’um as the room shook, books clattering to the floor as her ire rumbled through the house.

Hearing no response but a hurried slam of the door, she facepalmed...growling in embarrassment as her husband laughed quietly beneath her.

“...Assassins. Vampires. Sellswords. Do you know if anyone else has laid claim on your time, woman? Some other guild that wants to kidnap you from me?”

Feeling her breath hitch as his (clever, wonderful) hands finished untying her bodice, she relaxed into his touch. “Nope. Think I’ve killed them all. I’m yours.”

Vilkas chuckled, sliding his hand beneath the roundness of belly as she keened with want. “Good, because I’m going to put fucking bells on your armor from now on.”

Her skirt slid up her thighs as his hands pressed her against him. Rocking gently, she was nearly rigid...
with the strain of holding back. Of not wanting to spoil the moment, so perfect in the purity of their understanding. She saw, with pleasure as she dipped forward to press her bare breasts against his chest, that his face was taut with tension as well. “You...can do whatever you want. As long as you keep doing that.”

And they did. Until the bread, left untended ended up as charred bricks, when they checked the oven very late the following day.
Chapter 78: Krig och Fred (War and Peace)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“"The strongest of all warriors are these two — Time and Patience.""

- Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace

The next few months were some of the happiest Sigrid could remember.

Which was highly ironic. It was as though the incredible relief of reuniting with her husband and friends had a swinging counterweight, dragging down in the troubles that followed. So much happened that had been unexpected.

She had spent one glorious, dreamlike month at Lakeview Manor after the attack by the Morag Tong. After some days spent deliciously alone with Vilkas (occasionally in the company of Teldryn Sero, when he could stand to be within thirty feet of them) they were happily surprised at the arrival of Farkas, Carlotta and the rapidly growing twins.

One month of something akin to a family reunion; her man laughing, joking...complete with teasing brother, sour male bachelor, sisterly company and the madcap disruption of adorably demanding babies. Sigrid was utterly enchanted with Fjora and Gydda, and found herself bonding with her Imperial sister in law more than she ever thought was possible, given the differences between their backgrounds.

As they planted the spring crops, Sigrid found herself asking countless questions about Cyrodiil. What it was like, to see the White Gold Tower in person? If the Imperial had visited an Ayleid ruin, and what the government had reverted to after Martin Septim’s death after the Oblivion crisis. Carlotta eagerly told all, expounding on the beauty of Kvatch reborn where her uncles still lived. Sigrid realized that a hole she had not known existed was somehow filled by the warm friendly banter...the sheer, good natured cheer that was all Carlotta. With a bittersweet ache, she recalled her real sister, lost to another world. Sarah had shared a nearly motherly bond with Rebecca in Rapid City...listening to her complain about men, buying her ice cream with every heartbreak and reluctantly shopping and submitting herself to makeovers (carefully washed off in the safety of home) when occasion required. But her new sister in law was different. Whether it was the harsh life of subsistence; of hard manual labor, the death of a spouse and the ever present threat of danger that had changed them both, she would never know. Sigrid would savor it, all of the pleasure of their company while she could.

Having raised boys in her previous life (which seemed so very far away, as she kneeled in the warm damp earth, planting cabbages with and throwing dirt at her husband)...the girls were a novelty. Carlotta and Farkas began to rely upon Sigrid and Vilkas to watch the twins every night after supper, for the Dragonborn could not get enough of the wonder of them. Tickling their plump tummies. Changing poopy cloth diapers with no complaints (this was all old hat to her, though the faces the men made were hilarious). Wait until they start eating grown up foods. Breastfed babies made such mild-smelling poo.

Kissing those fat cheeks, singing silly songs that Vilkas merely shook his head at. He had given up
asking her to explain certain things from her world that still found their way out, in terms of slang, music and pop culture references. He would merely smile at her, as she bounced Fjora on her shoulder, crooning ‘Once Upon a Dream’ to what would hopefully soon be a Sleeping Beauty.

How could she ever explain Jiminy Crickett, Dumbo or Cinderella? You almost had to grow up with Disney to understand the nostalgia. Vilkas responded by teaching the twins (and his wife) traditional Nord nursery songs as they sat by the fire every night, rocking them to sleep. Songs of gentle giants, clever milkmaids and quests to find great treasures, buried deep in the earth.

And if Nord lullabies seemed to involve an inordinate amount of death and dismemberment, well...the soft look on his face as he sang kept her from asking too many questions. He had a beautiful, mellow baritone voice. She could listen to it all day.

The longer they stayed in what had once been Windfall Farm, the more memories seemed to surface for the Companion brothers. Days passed, with both men and women hard at work to prepare the homestead for the growing season. Making hay while the sun shined bright, she thought in exasperation, knee deep in muck as they all bailed out the cellar one rainy night. The cellar had been an absolute pain in the ass from the beginning.

What had those game developers been thinking, she thought as she carried buckets up the steep stairs and passed them off to Farkas. No WAY a forge and smithy would function below ground, not in this clay soup. As the spring thaw continued to flow, they were forced to divert it. Their digging produced a river rock-lined moat around Lakeview, creating almost by accident a stream that doubled as irrigation for the new crops poking green heads out of the ground. Almost as though they were unsure of their welcome in this deluge.

“Every cloud has a silver lining!” Carlotta chirped, as the newly dried cellar was lined with flagstones and tamped down firmly with grout of clay. Finished, dried and turned into an expansive root cellar and storage room. Nope. No forge here. Though she did pack away her dragon scales, bones and assorted armory to save for later. No sense in tossing or selling those odds and ends yet.

Almost, Sigrid preferred the simplicity of contract jobs at Jorrvaskr - get out there, kill the thing, return for the bounty... for the labor here in the backwoods never seemed to reach a stopping point. There was always something to be mended, wood to chop, meals to cook, clothes to clean. Her hands swelled and blistered, then healed into new, tough calluses that rubbed against the hardness that already marked her from training with swords. A new type of toughness, all raw and real, just as important to learn.

The men were kept fully occupied as well; Farkas and Vilkas finished building shelves and barrels for storage, fixed the house and tended the animals. Sigrid learned how to cobble shoes when Vilkas had worn his last pair of boots completely through, from running after the cows that had strayed far from their pen.

He’d chased them all the way into a spriggan grove. Somehow he had managed to rope them and lead them back before the tree spirits could bespell the poor beasts. Fingers smarting from the effort of punching holes through the stiff leather with the steel needle, she was finally tutted at and taken under Carlotta’s wing, as the Imperial scolded her for not using an awl like an normal person.

*Like she knew what an awl was, before this*. Biting her tongue, she cast aside her pride and attended to the Nord way of domestic life. *My kingdom for plumbing and electricity!* Modern inventions would have saved so much time and energy.

And yet, as she hung the laundry out to dry on clotheslines and wiped her sweaty forehead, she couldn’t help grinning at the sheer beauty of the forest around them. The cool freshness of the air,
unpolluted and filled only with birdsong and the buzzing of insects. Not even the most remote national parks of her homeland could compare.

Throughout the month Carlotta painstakingly taught her the basics of keeping a household in Skyrim. How to keep a fire burning by banking the coals at night. Pinching a piece off of a lump of dough, to keep the yeast active for the next day’s bread. How to stretch the meals by keeping an ever-simmering cauldron of stew on the fire, to which they would add vegetables and meat until it all cooked into a kind of gumbo that anyone could snag a bowl from, at any time.

After the girls fell asleep, Farkas and Carlotta would return from wherever they had ‘walked to’ (Sigrid always gave Farkas an arch look when that excuse came up) and the four would talk late into the night, pleasantly worn out by work and the nightly ritual of a bottle of mead. They would snuggle as couples in front of the fire, sharing stories of what they remembered from their respective childhoods until sleep finally took them, falling into their beds. And the daily grind would begin anew.

The measure of peace did not last. Reality interfered, as it always did.

“Really? A census!” The Dragonborn shook the paper that had just arrived by courier, fuming as Carlotta looked up from cutting vegetables.

“We had those in Cyrodiil. A good way for publicans to find out who skimped paying taxes and pinch us for more septims. By Alessia, I hate tax collectors.”

Hefting her pregnant bulk into one of the chairs at the main table, Sigrid groaned. “Well, I doubt Jarl Ulfric has just taxation in mind. The fucking n’wah just wants to find out how many of his constituents don’t belong. Imperial, Dunmer, Argonian…”

Crumpling up the letter in her hand, the Dragonborn fisted it and threw it in the fire. “It can only lead to worse things, Lotta. That’s how oppression begins. First they find out your name. Where you were born, what you do for a living. It’s impossible to hide the color of your skin, or the shape of your ears. Then, once you’re on record, life becomes harder. Your prices go up, but the wages for your work drop to near nothing. You end up living in the slums, like those fetchers in Windhelm. Just wait…Riften, Dawnstar, Kynesgrove…”

Carlotta tilted her head in curiosity as Sigrid closed her eyes in pain. “Might as well pin a yellow star to every sod who isn’t Nord while they’re at it.”

The front door banged shut, as Vilkas and Farkas brought in armfuls of firewood. “If you’re discussing that census the Jarl of Windhelm wants to put in place, think nothing of it.” Her husband tossed two logs on the fire, then kissed the top of her head as Farkas sat down near them with a groan. Carlotta smacked his hands away when he tried to steal a slice of apple from the pile, ready to be mixed into pie filling. “It’s wildly unpopular, even among his court. It will never go through.”

“The very idea…asswipe. Murderous bastard can go fuck a rottic horker.”

“Language, sister.” Carlotta chided, looking over at the girls currently sprawled (and chewing) on a snow bear fur near the fire. Catching Vilkas’ eye, she rolled her eyes as he tongued his cheek in merriment. “Right. They can’t even roll over properly yet. Once they can babble I’ll be sure to reign it in.”

Carlotta had been aghast at the news that Ulfric, Jarl of Windhelm and celebrated hero of Nords since the Great War, had put out a death notice upon the Dragonborn. Privately, Sigrid thought that the woman preferred not to think about anything so dark. Utterly content with her life, Carlotta
brimmed with constant positivity. Talk of assassins and grim tidings did not suit her worldview; so she ignored it.

Not having that luxury of uncaring, Sigrid chose to speak privately to the twins about the updates that poured in, more frequently as her belly grew with the passing weeks. Being Harbinger and Dragonborn had kept a steady flow of missives and requests coming, even to the secluded woods of Falkreath. As pleasant as playing house had been, she knew...it couldn’t last. And with some of the news, Sigrid just couldn’t see the silver lining past the rising clouds on the horizon.

The Stormcloaks had slowly encroached upon new territory that winter. Shor’s Stone was now overrun with Ulfric’s followers, as was Winterhold. *Bet the College just loved hosting the xenophobic Nord soldiers.* Last she heard from her couriers, floods of blue and grey-backed men and women were patrolling the slopes of the Throat of the World, easing ever closer to Whiterun. Remembering the heavy *thwunk* of firing catapults, the death notices of Pelagius and the charred disaster of Whiterun overrun in the digital gamescape, Sigrid shuddered. *Over her dead body.* They would need to return soon, to prepare with Jarl Battleborn for any contingency. Vilkas had already taken to poring over defensive manuals, often muttering under his breath about shoring up the crumbling walls and reinforcing the gates.

Sigrid would find bits of parchment that her husband would leave around the house - lists of how much food and water to store. Where to cache weapons and stock arrows and bows, in case of siege. It made her smile with nearly covetous glee. *Not just a pretty face, her man.* She left them where they lay, reassured as she went about her daily tasks at the sight of those scraps of paper. As she snuggled up to Vilkas on what would be her last night at Lakeview Manor, Sigrid yawned, sneaking glances of what he was currently studying. The *Death Blow of Abernait* occupied his attention tonight, and she watched, half asleep as his fingers slowly turned the pages. The fireplace threw a warm, flickering glow on his face that shifted with the glowing embers. He looked older, sterner somehow with the light hollowing the valleys of his cheekbones and forehead. The darkened amber light caught stray silver that threaded through his hair. *Was this how he would look as an old man?*

*Shor, let them live long enough to grow old together.* Sigrid clung to his side, making a pained face as the tiny gymnast did what felt like back handsprings in her uterus, visibly bulging her skin in an almost macabre display. Vilkas reached down and patted her belly. “Let your ma sleep, little one. Playtime’s over.”

“Keep telling him that. Maybe he’ll listen to his dad.” Covering another yawn, she fell flat on the furs, playing with the mammoth ivory cuff around her wrist. “Order him to stop dancing on my bladder, while you’re at it.” The privy they had dug outside in the permafrost was hardly deep, and the *smell*...even in the cool of early spring she despised using it. The others could visit the Bog of Eternal Stench. She’d keep using her trusty chamberpot.

“It could be a girl.”

“True.” Grimacing, she still mentally marked off this baby as another son. The kid kicked like an ox. “Then we’d inherit tons of slightly stained swaddling dresses from the twins. I’m not sure if that would be a perk or a punishment.”

Farkas and Carlotta had already taken themselves to bed an hour past. And her Dunmer housecarl had decided to visit Falkreath to gather what news had not come by courier (and probably to get wasted at Dead Man’s drink, far away from chores and shrieking babies).
They were all alone. Yesss. They hadn’t had a chance to be intimate for days, and with the increased blood flow and pregnancy hormones, well...she was getting antsy.

Feeling a mischievous grin curl up her lips, she watched for his reaction she stealthily reached over to touch his thigh. Making her fingers walk up the roundness of muscle there, her hand playfully slunk beneath the drawstring of his pants, only to have him lift her away as he continued reading.

Drawing her hand back, she frowned. Not like him. “Is something the matter?” Maybe the pickled foods she had been craving lately had put him off. Damn. Knew those eggs smelled weird.

“No tonight, Sigrid.” Those cool grey eyes were fixed solely on his book.

Sitting up with a grumble Sigrid felt a mixture of annoyance and worry wash over her, as she glared at her husband who NEVER passed up the chance to have sex. Not covered in mud or sweat, or on the road, or while they were swimming in the lake... “Really. Is my belly grossing you out? I’ve heard some guys aren’t fond of the look.”

His cheeks pinked, barely discernable in the firelight. “That’s not it, woman.”

“So, what?” Perhaps he really was too tired, though she doubted it. She was familiar with his endless stamina when it came to bedplay by now.

Vilkas flipped another page over, crossed his legs at the ankle and continued to ignore her.

This calls for sabotage.

It was easy to pull the oversized nightshift she wore to bed up over her legs, though it caught around the hard curve of her naked stomach. Balling it up in one hand, Sigrid listened for any sounds that would betray a crying baby, or wakeful sibling...then threw it at his head.

Still and unmoving, he sat there, allowing her shift to cover him as he sighed through the fabric.

Crawling on hands and knees, she scooted closer and pulled the book from his unresisting hands. Kissed his mouth through the thin cloth of her nightgown. “Come on...” she begged, sitting neatly in his lap as she placed his hands on her. “They’re all asleep. Teldryn’s gone. Please please please... before the babies wake everyone up...”

Turning his head, he pulled the shift off of his face to reveal a defeated look. “Woman, it’s...not good for you. For our child.”

Sitting back on her heels, Sigrid stared at his look of shame with faint surprise. “What?”

He looked vaguely uncomfortable. “Carlotta...heard us, that day we thought we were alone in the woodcut clearing. Remember? Planting carrots?”

She laughed, easily remembering the silly innuendo that had ended with her face crushed in the dirt as he had ploughed her a new furrow, after she had wrestled him against a tree and taken him in her mouth. Both of them had emerged from their chores completely caked in wet earth and smiling like lunatics. Huh. No wonder Carlotta had seemed so sour that day. “So? It doesn’t hurt the baby. Believe me...I’ve had four already. There’s nothing wrong with making love while pregnant, Vilkas.”

Looking away, his grey eyes focused on the fire burning low. Reflecting it with an almost wolf-yellow sheen, as he blew out a breath. “Well, she chewed me out, for being such a selfish rutting bastard. Not sure what to think now.”
“Don’t think.” Smiling ruefully, she rested her arms behind his neck, forcing him to look at her or be smothered by her breasts. Not that he would mind either way. “I wish she hadn’t told you that, to make you worry. You know, sex can even help the baby be born...if we do it when I’m good and ready. Forty weeks along.” Wagging her eyebrows suggestively, she was rewarded with a snort, as he finally rested his hands on her hips.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He spoke softly.

Feeling her nipples tighten, she shivered as he leaned slowly over to place a gentle kiss on her neck. “You...won’t. Though I can’t say the same for you, if you don’t give me what I want.”

He laughed breathily, his hand dragging up her spine to trace a shoulder blade. “Cruel woman. You’re sure I won’t...er, hurt the babe, with my-”

“Oh just stop right there!” That was the last mental image she wanted. Pushing him back, she bit her lip as she began tugging his pants down. “Come on, pants....off!”

“Should...charge you by the hour...” Her hands caressed the twitching muscles of his hard stomach, tracing the vee of his hips and his stiffening cock as he helped her along, kicking off his clothing to rest somewhere near her nightgown. Taking in the beauty of him, the clean lines of his body, she sighed. So handsome.

Suddenly feeling self conscious, she curled up in a ball as he sat up once more. The fire had burned almost completely out, leaving white ash and red embers. In the dark, he looked larger than life. Ominously large. “Sigrid.”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to.” Turning her head away, she mentally kicked herself for being such a wuss. Maybe she did smell like pickled eggs. Her belly, somewhere along six...seven months along had swelled into a huge, fleshy beach ball marked in reddish stripes. Wrapping her arms around her knees, she tried to ignore the sinking feeling of ugliness. A smelly, unlovely preggo.

“Woman...” She felt his hand cup her cheek. Pull at her arm. “What’s wrong now?” A sigh puffed against her face. “You know I can’t read your mind.”

“Just...” Waving her other arm restlessly, she shifted away. “Ugh. Sorry. Nothing’s wrong, except that I am monstrously bloated and awkward and horny. Just put me out of my misery now.” Picking up his hand, she placed it on her forehead. “Quick. A really fast punch.”

A soft snort, and then he whispered back. “Like I’d do that. Here,” and then suddenly she was the one being laid carefully down upon the furs.

Her belly jumped at his touch, as he traced feather light patterns on her skin. Cupped the softness between her legs. “I can almost hear you thinking, love. Take your own advice. Stop thinking.” He blew a warm breath over her legs, parting them as he rose over her in a dark mass of shadow.

Sliding inside of her, so easily with the slickness of her all ready for him, she curled her toes in the furs as he set a steady, maddening pace. Her breath caught in a choking gasp as his tongue traced a damp line down her jaw. She captured his mouth in hers, grabbing his ass in a bid to increase the draggingly slow pumping of his hips to something more vigorous.

“Impatient-” He bit her lower lip, worrying it between his teeth as she groaned in feverish wantonness. “Just...feel.”

Pitching her head back against the floor, Sigrid forgot that her hair was snarled in a knot beneath her back, as he began to move in earnest. With every shuddering heave, he rubbed against the roughness
inside that felt so damn good; a thrill of something building up with each passing glide within her core.

Bucking against him, she dragged her nails up the meat of his back, digging in almost to the point of drawing blood. His breath was hot and fast against her ear, as her jaw hurt with the clench of her teeth as she pushed back against him, trying desperately to make it last while ending it, ending the slow sweet torment of it all -

She peaked, orgasming in endless coiled waves of heat, as with one graceful motion he propped himself up upon his hands, no longer carrying his weight only on elbows as he slammed into her, making her nearly shout.

A hand came up, firmly smothering the noise he ripped from her, as she writhed helplessly beneath him. Glorifying in the rush of pleasure, she twisted her hands in his hair with bliss as he came. Came hard, uttering a muffled oath with his face buried in her breasts.

Nearly drunk with satisfaction, Sigrid realized she had completely wrapped her legs around Vilkas, and was in fact trying to pull him down upon her, as he strained away - trying not to crush her belly. The situation brought quiet laughter from both, as they shakily untangled their limbs into something more sleep inducing.

Yawning, she nuzzled against his chest as he pulled a blanket over them both. “Hmm...thank you. That was perfect.”

“Mmm.” Finger combing her hair in his hands, she enjoyed the touching as he stroked the weight of her mane down her back. Long, repetitive strokes that lulled her even further. “Do you remember what was bothering you.”

A soft snicker. “Yes. Mm’was feeling ugly. Big and pregnant.”

“Hopefully I’ve eased your fears on that.”

Lifting her head, she looked at him. His eyes were nearly shut. Just the smallest crack of grey peering back at her, as he blinked sleepily. “What do you think? Is the bump cute or gross? Not that I’m fishing for compliments.”

He swallowed a yawn himself. “If you have to ask, then you probably are. But…” A rushing movement of furs, as he rolled her over to her side, spooning her with the length of his body.

The belly in question also got a hug, the child rolling within her at the movement as he caressed her with his hands. Stroking the skin as he had touched her hair. “…how can this be anything but beautiful? You hold creation itself within you, woman. Never take it for granted.”

A tenseness that had been pulled tight inside her loosened somewhat with his words. “Not everyone thinks that way.”

He laughed again. Pulling her tightly against him, she felt him kiss her head as her eyelids fluttered closed. “…Don’t think.”

“-Just feel.”
Tilma passed away three weeks and five days after Sigrid arrived by dragonback in Whiterun. Lucia was the one to discover the old woman still abed that morning, her lined face slack in death. They had made the two day journey to Whiterun for the funeral, leaving Bolund as temporary steward and caretaker. It was a quiet ceremony, for the unsung hero who had mothered a generation of warriors at Jorrvaskr. A calm end for an industrious, kind woman. Sigrid was saddened to bid her farewell.

Per her duty as Harbinger, Sigrid had hired on a young Nord named Alsbet to cook and clean for the Companion’s Hall. Fresh from the farm, Alsbet had stammered her thanks to a bemused Sigrid, obviously cowed by the luxurious surroundings of Jorrvaskr. The hall had taken on even more hopeful newbloods in her forced sabbatical, and she often found herself being introduced routinely to new faces of men and women, of every race and background.

She smiled and nodded as she greeted the newcomers, trying desperately to remember all their names and failing. *Blame it on pregnancy brain. That’s still a thing, right?* Vilkas laughed out loud when he found her recording the names in a book with nicknames and reminders...like Jord the pimply-faced Nord. *Dugrash gra-Molazhg, the green orc scumbag*.

Scarlet with embarrassment, she had waddled away from him in the newly appointed office that used to be Kodlak’s bedroom, too slow now to avoid him as he tackled her, papers flying as he tickled her mercilessly.

Those few days spent (mostly) alone had not been enough. Truly, she thought later, completely worn out as her husband slept curled around her in his old room, Sigrid didn’t think she would ever tire of this. Of the fervent heat that bound them, the embers easily fanned into flames with a word. A look. Even with all the arguments and compromises that inevitably came with marriage.

He threw his worn clothing to the ground, making her grumble as she picked up after him. She was overly fastidious about cleanliness, driving him mad as she insisted on cleaning every dish with soap and water before food was placed upon it. He was more skilled at cooking...the loaves of bread baking in the oven when she had first arrived at Lakeview had been his work. Her bread turned out either too spongy or too tough, and she blamed it on the variable hot spots of a wood burning oven, and not (as he smirked in superiority) due to her lack of talent.

She insisted on fighting alongside him, even as he threatened to handcuff her to Jorrvaskr’s hull. “I’d just Shout my way out of it, love. Come on. You need me and my Shouts to take down these necrobastards before they summon Potema.”

Gliding his greatsword for the last sweep of sharpness upon the grindstone, he set to work rubbing it with a cloth and some oil, frowning at the very idea. “*No*, Sigrid. There is plenty for you to do here without looking for trouble.”

She grit her teeth as the child kicked against her breastplate (newly expanded, pleated leather that made her look more like she had a beer belly than a baby bump). “Just...one last job. Promise. Chalk it up to foresight or whatever...Wolfskull Cave is a nasty piece of work.” Swallowing at the thought of him disappearing into the dark cave, never to return… “Don’t go alone.” *Don’t go without me.*

“*Bells* woman. What good are you going to be, sneaking in some dark cave when I’ve strung you with bells?”

*Compromise.* Wasn’t that what the best marriages were made of? After an argument that devolved
into shouting and crying (damn pregnancy hormones) she ended up following him west, with the watchful eyes of Teldryn Sero watching her. *Babysitting, more like.*

Vilkas led the way, taking on the necromancers and walking skeletons with grim efficiency as Sigrid crept behind to Shout down any who ran past him. They had easily cleared Wolfskull Cave, the three fighters more than up to the task.

And the reward was nothing to sneeze at either. Toasting their victory (her mug filled with tea, as the men downed Evette San’s spiced wine at the Winking Skeever) it wasn’t long before her extensive knowledge was proven right yet again. Proudspire Manor was now up for sale, and while they drank at the bar a courier arrived, with summons to the court of King Balgruuf.

Jarl Elisif would also be present, managing Solitude still under the sufferance of the previous Jarl of Whiterun. Killing two birds with one stone; they could pick up the bounty for Wolfskull Cave, chat with Balgruuf about Ulfric’s antics, and perhaps pick Elisif’s brain on the lingering instability of Haafingar. If only they would get hitched, Sigrid thought unrepentantly. Balgruuf was still relatively young and not bad looking. The petulant widow could do far worse.

As Vilkas painstakingly counted out the gold septims for two rooms that night at the inn, she mulled over the idea of buying the overpriced house. *Bet Elisif would give us a discount. Dragonborn, finder of things. Finisher of quests. Killer of death, according to the last gods-awful bard song I’ve heard. Ugh.*

All things in their own due time. *Eyes on the horizon,* she chanted in her head as they walked to the Blue Palace the following morning.

As she approached the throne on her husband’s arm, surreptitiously adjusting the velvet weight of her red formal gown as it swished around the hardness of her belly, she gave a mental prayer of gratitude for the reward money. Thanks to her last will being speedily executed by Vilkas, she had been shocked to find out just how few septims remained to her name.

Well. Not like she was destitute by any means; the collective treasures from years of travelling all over Skyrim had netted her quite a fortune. But though she received many messages and gift baskets that bid her well (*Glad you’re not dead, Dragonborn, so you can fetch me this ‘blank’ from that ‘blank’*) she noticed with exasperated amusement that no one ever returned the gold she had donated with her will.

C’est la vie. At least the money had gone to worthy causes.

“Hail, Sigrid Farstrider. Dragonborn, Harbinger of the Companions. And welcome to you, Vilkas. Please, come and be seated!”

Formalities over, they sat together at the table. Sigrid smiled at Elisif as she joined them, tripping in her haste to sit next to Balgruuf. His last few months as High King had been overwhelmingly positive, though she noticed the fine lines around his eyes had bred into a nest of wrinkles that had not existed before.

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“Jarl Balgruuf. To what do we owe this pleasure?” She took a sip from her goblet, stoically refusing to make a face at the brackish well water. *Would it kill them to add something for flavor? Oh Crystal Light, I miss you.*

Elisif spoke first. “I hear you took care of that problem down south, near Dragon Bridge. Summoning Potema…” She shuddered delicately. “I’m quite grateful that it was taken care of early, before anything untoward happened. You have my thanks.”
“And the reward.” Balgruuf sipped his own juniper flavored mead, sky blue eyes twinkling as Vilkas let out an almost inaudible sigh. He was not going to stop giving her grief about her insistence at coming along.

“You’re welcome, my Jarl. Balgruuf, have you heard the latest news from the eastern front?”

“I have.” Placing his cup carefully down on the table, the High King rubbed at a spot on his bearded chin, face unhappy. “If I am to be honest, it doesn’t look good Sigrid. Not for Whiterun. Not for us.”

Leaving his wine untouched, Vilkas picked apart a bread roll. “The Companions have already begun to implement plans for updating Whiterun’s defenses. Jarl Battleborn has agreed that many changes must be made for the city to stand secure. More stone to be added to the outer walls, reinforced gates. That sort of thing.”

“Good.” Elisif fidgeted, definitely not looking at Balgruuf as the older man pursed his lips. Oh yeah, Sigrid thought, darting her eyes between the two of them. Something was going on here.

“Dragonborn, I’d feel more at ease if you spent the rest of your womanly confinement in the walls of Jorrvaskr.” Stalling her as she opened her mouth, he raised one golden brow at her. “None of that, friend. I’m honestly shocked your spouse has not kept you abed. But I know of your stubborn nature.”

“King Balgruuf, I appreciate your concern but…” She chewed upon her lips, as she thought about how exactly to say what had to be said. “It’s been quite the year for unexpected partings. I will not be kept separate from my husband.” As Vilkas turned to her, the question clear in his silvery gaze, she lifted her chin. “I go where he goes.”

The King made a noise of approval. Elisif sighed, blushing prettily as both Vilkas and Sigrid looked at her, making Balgruuf chuckle heartily. “Good. Both of you should stay in Whiterun, then. Consider it a favor, if you will not obey an order.” With a wry tilt of his head, he waved in a servant carrying a covered tray. “You should see this, Dragonborn. Before my housecarl intercepted it, this was addressed to you.”

“What is-” Lifting the tray lid, Sigrid blinked at the homestyle apple pie, with crimped edges and latticed crust. Still warm.

Shaking her head in confusion, she looked at Balgruuf who was no longer smiling. “It is poisoned, Sigrid.”

Her husband nearly growled at that. “Who delivered this? Did it come with a note? Anything?”

King Balgruuf raised his hands, a wordless plea for calm as Sigrid swallowed down a heave of nausea, still staring at that pie. It looks just like the type Tilma used to make. “We have some idea. Any other incidents, since you arrived at your homestead?”

“None.” Not feeling particularly hungry now, Sigrid pushed away the breakfast plate of eggs and potatoes. “I can’t imagine why that rat-bastard still has a target painted upon me. I haven’t done anything ground breaking politically since that blasted Moot.”

Balgruuf’s face looked unexpectedly gentle, as Vilkas took Sigrid’s hand beneath the table, squeezing it firmly. “Does he need another reason, Dragonborn? You’ve made an enemy. One with a long memory. Ah…” gesturing to the servant again, who bowed and left the room, the King smiled a bit grimly. “And your friendship with…hmm, certain individuals does not lift you any higher, in Ulfric’s sight.”
Her breath caught as she beheld what the servant placed before her now, the poisoned pie whisked away like so much trash.

Sigrid wasn’t quite sure what she was looking at. Some type of flowering plant. A twisted bower of jade green branches bent in spiralling curves. Amidst the shaking leaves, rather like the heart shaped quaking aspen, tiny white flowers nearly hid a single, succulent looking golden fruit.

Her fingers trembled as she pulled the heavily embossed letter from the bed of the tree’s potted base, untwisting the ribbons that held it shut. She read aloud, stumbling over the ornate calligraphy…words that were more like scrollwork than anything meant to be spoken.

“Greetings and Salutations, Sigrid Farstrider. Dragonborn and Harbinger of the Companions.

I am most gratified to learn that you survived. Please enclose a fully detailed account of how, precisely, you managed to stay alive after falling from such a great height. A feat of some Thu’um, perhaps? You gave us all quite a turn. Don’t ever do it again.

Enclosed is a gift for the impending birth of your child. It is an asphodel tree, from my very own garden nursery here in sunny Alinor. Water it weekly, giving it as much sunshine as your wretchedly cloud covered hovel will allow. Akatosh knows it will need all the help it can get to last the winter. But should it survive, I recommend mashing the fruits into a mixture of honey paste and carefully strained flour. A marvelous supplement for yourself and your infant. I myself consumed it as a child, and flatter myself that I have accomplished much, for a Mer of my age and status.

Also included in this missive is a full statement of Aldmeri court gossip. I realize it has been some time since we have last caught up on the parliamentary procedures, but I trust that with some recollection all will be comprehended in time. Ancarion has proved a faithful accomplice, providing a full account of the travesty Elenwen inflicted upon the Thalmor stationed in Skyrim. Her holdings have been stripped from surviving family members, all accolades and awards taken down and quietly banished from polite conversation.

You will be pleased, Dragonborn, to find that Elenwen as an embarrassment has been more of a catalyst for change than any mere war. Let us pray that we may keep it so. I have no desire to return to the far north, unless you plan on naming that child for me. Then, perhaps I may deign to grace you with my presence once more.

Ever your bosom friend,

Justicar Ondolemar, Lord of Sunhaven Hall of Alinor, Jewel of the Summerset Isles

She read it a second time to herself, as Vilkas broke into a flurry of conversation with the Jarl and King, quietly relating his version of events. Carefully folding the letter, she inhaled the scent of the tree, not sure of what to expect.

Peach. Apple. A hint of plum? The flowers gave off a delicate perfume that seemed to clear her head, making her somehow more aware…more present than she had previously been.

Dragging her mind back from fond memories of her old Altmer friend, she cleared her throat. “So, you think Ulfric believes that I am…what? Some kind of Thalmor sympathizer?” Of all the ridiculous ideas. Her husband nearly laughed, turning it into a cough as Elisif glared at him.
“It is no trifle, Dragonborn.” The Jarl folded her hands in her lap, staring her down. “I’ve danced back and forth with the Embassy for years. I know how they think. And this gift…” she tilted her head at the asphodel tree. “Well.”

“Before, it wasn’t personal. A strategic choice to remove your influence. Now that he thinks you are allied with the elves he will kill you, if he can.” Balgruuf flatly stated.

Sigrid ruminated over everything that had transpired, tapping her fingers against the pot.

She knew she was not alone. She wasn’t sure how many were out there who had actually survived the Thalmor’s questioning (such a blase word for torture) but she knew from reading the stolen embassy dossiers that Ulfric was one of the few that lingered yet in Nirn.

Remembered grass green eyes looking startled, as she plunged her blade into the unguarded belly of a Thalmor sentry. *Are we all that different? I hate what he hates. I love what he loves.*

The census. The Forsworn. The Dunmer ghettos...Shahvee humming a jaunty tune, as the Argonian scraped at a tanning rack on the docks with short, practiced moments. Her voice was a friendly hiss. *"Sometimes life puts you in difficult circumstances you didn't choose, but being happy or unhappy is a choice you make, and I've chosen to make the best of things that I can."

Straightening her shoulders, Sigrid felt a hardness congeal what compassion she had for him in her heart. *We are nothing alike.*

“I suppose there is no way to request that Ulfric cease sending these assassins after me?” She supplied hopefully, as Elisif groaned and Balgruuf shook his head, almost while she spoke the words.

“No. You have already reached out to the man, as I have. Every effort at honest communication has been rebuffed. We may encounter him at some court function or gathering of the Jarls. Perhaps words may broker some understanding then. That is, unless it comes to all out war.”

“I do not trust to hope, Sigrid. And neither should you. Go, and prepare yourselves.”

Leaning back in his chair, Balgruuf suddenly looked every one of his many years. “...Stay in Whiterun, Dragonborn. You, your man and what protection Jorrvaskr can offer. Trust no one outside your inner circle.”

As they walked away from the meeting, her husband deep in thought as he escorted her down the stairs...Sigrid caught a last minute glance of Elisif and Balgruuf speaking quietly. Before they turned down the curve of wall that would block her view, she saw the man lean over to place a kiss upon Elisif’s trembling hand.

Walking in silence, Sigrid found herself similarly captivated by branching ideas that she turned over and over in her head. *Must write back to Ondolemar. Have to tease him about a tree as a gift, the snooty goober. Glad he’s okay. Balgruuf and Elisif? Yes please. Haafingar is saved. A pie? Really? Everyone knows I’m a sucker for a good steak. Cancel that - can’t trust food anymore, damn it. What am I going to eat? Do pickled cucumbers even exist in Skyrim?*

*Gods fucking damn it all to hell. Ulfric you bastard. Leave me alone.*
The last month of gestation was sweaty, sore and punctuated with wild mood swings. As spring burst into full bloom, her belly expanded as well. Soon, a five foot bubble of personal space extended around Sigrid, as she stomped around Jorrvaskr in her wrath.

Glowing? Who ever had a glowing pregnancy? I hear glowing and I give you gross. Sweaty. Flatulent. HUUUGE. There are no showers here! No nice doctor offering an epidural and a c-section in case the plumbing down there is wonko. Damn damn damn. And what I wouldn’t give for just one Carl’s Junior Western Bacon Cheeseburger.

Shit on a crumbly cracker, I will kowtow to a Daedric Lord if they can hand me an interdimensional portal so I can swoop off to 21st century America and hit some drive thrus. Maybe a Walmart.

Pregnancy cravings were something she had not anticipated being so damn irritating. Skyrim had nothing that even closely resembled chocolate. There were pigs, of a sort...more like the boar she had warily watched (from a distance) run wild back in Solstheim. But the farmers here in Skyrim tended to herd cows, goats and horses more than boar.

Which was unfortunate, as her newest quest entailed creating the perfect Western Bacon Cheeseburger.

“...You’ll love it.” She admonished Vilkas and Farkas, when they eyed her creation askance as she set two plates upon the table of Jorrvaskr. Newbloods crowded the table, most of them pretending to be utterly uninterested and failing.

A quarter pound (roughly, the measurements here were more like ‘fistful’ rather than ‘one cup’, but hey) of charbroiled steak, cooked outdoors on a wood plank. Grilled onions, thinly sliced tomato, a slice of good yellow cheese and two halves of a roll.

The condiments had been the real kicker, along with the bacon. She had managed to convince Anoriath that her cause was a worthy goal (along with a promised cheeseburger, once he brought home the bacon) and after a couple of weeks she was delighted to receive a shipment of salted shoulder of boar.

Bacon. Glorious, greasy fatty bacon that melts in your mouth.

She despaired at creating barbecue sauce. What went in it anyway? Vinegar, tomato paste, mayonnaise...those weren’t completely impossible to find or create, though mayo was a bitch to mix by hand.

Honey, thick and crystallized, could be a stand in for molasses. Pepper actually existed here, in the form of black pepperwort that was more dastardly spicy than the mild peppercorns she was acquainted with.

Mustard...shit. She didn’t need mustard. She had barbecue sauce.

After much experimentation with condiment mixtures, the piece de la resistance was complete. Now, to try it upon her two test subjects.

Waiting with bated breath, she watched Farkas pick up the sandwich in his huge hands (they made the quarter pounder look downright dainty) and take a huge bite.
He chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed.

Completely poker faced, he turned to Sigrid. “That...may just be the best damn thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“Yeaaah! Burgers all around!” Looking around as the newbloods shuffled, eager to slap together their own dinners from the table stacked with supplies, she noticed Vilkas’s plate was empty. Just crumbs remained. “Did you like it?”

Looking bored, he slouched back in the chair. “Disgusting swill. I managed to choke it down. Barely.” Seeing her grin, he gestured to her plate, beckoning for her to bring it to him. “You should really let me taste test that. What if it's poisoned, woman?”

She scoffed at the altruistic look he had pasted on his face. “You just want my food. Never steal food from a pregnant woman. That's so low.”

Placing a hand over his heart, he shook his head resignedly. “You wound me.”

“I will, if you steal my cheeseburger.”

He raised his eyebrows, suddenly all business. “Very well. What do I have to do to get another west baked cheese-something from your loving hands?”

Sigrid thought about it for a second, then snapped her fingers. “Hah. I've got just the thing.”

-And that was how music night was born. Sigrid clapped and cheered with the rest of the warriors as Vilkas and Farkas got up to sing, after waiving their turn twice already. They bore twin expressions of deep suffering, as the opening strains of the lute trembled in the close air of the hall.

“Brilliant, Harbinger! Best idea you've ever had!” Athis called out to her, as the crowd quieted down.

The only slight regret she felt as they began was not specifying the choice of song.

“Our hero, our hero claimed a warrior’s heart!” Farkas sang, gesturing to Vilkas who posed, making kissy faces at the audience amidst catcalls and shouts.

Oh damn. Sigrid shrank back in her seat. This was not good.

Vilkas sang out next, maintaining a completely blank face. “I tell you, I tell you the Dragonborn cum!”

Rough laughter circled around her, as Sigrid pretended to be invisible. Njada was currently flopped over like a dying salmon, laughing helplessly as Sigrid glared daggers at her.

Athis shrugged. “What? It's a classic.”

With a wicked look in his grey eyes, Vilkas shot her a sassy smile as both twins sang in unison.

“With a voice wielding power! (thrusting their hips for emphasis, Vilkas batted his eyes at a now completely red Sigrid) of the ancient Nord art!”

“...belieeeeve, believe (more whistling and pointed comments) the Dragonborn cums!”
Sigrid stood, waving for the lute players attention. “...all right, you've had your fun. Get out.”

Boos were interspersed with laughter as Farkas and Vilkas took deep, exaggerated bows and played the crowd, receiving back slaps and handshakes as they were replaced on stage by Athis. The Dunmer rolled his eyes and launched into a drinking song about a silt strider and the netch that loved her too much, as the hubbub slowly quieted down to a dull roar.

Still stiff with fury, the Dragonborn refused to look at them as the brothers stood on either side of her, faces wreathed in stupid grins.

Farkas tried first, still smiling. “Sigrid, you know we-”

“Shut. Up.”

Her husband broke out into laughter, her fists tightening into a white knuckled grip as she seethed. “But woman, it was too-”

“Don't make me Shout you down. I'm the fucking Dragonborn. Now, thanks to you, I'll be the Dragonborn who ‘cums’. What were you thinking?”

Farkas nearly choked on his own guffaw as Vilkas began crying as he laughed; the bastard was so far gone. “We thought it would be funny.”

“Hell, I'm funny too. Tiid Klo Ul!”

The brothers blinked, not a moment later finding themselves suddenly ass naked as the crowd stood to applaud, the female (and some of the men) really cheering at the show.

Twirling and bowing, Sigrid was hoisted upon shoulders as she shrugged, grinning like the Khajiit who stole the skooma. “...With a voice wielding power of the ancient Nord art!” She sang, gesturing for the other fighters to join in as the twins took the walk of shame to find where she had stashed their clothes.

“Oh, it is on, shield sister! Watch your back!” Farkas yelled as a still laughing Vilkas ushered him downstairs.

“Alright. How did you do that?” Njada asked, face flushed as they bunked together later that night. Farkas and Vilkas were still searching for their clothing, wearing only cut off shorts over their smalls as they looked high and low, enduring good natured jibes from passing Companions.

The Dragonborn smiled brightly, pulling out their missing garb from where it had padded her belly. “Trade secrets. I think I like music night, after all. Let's do it every month.”

“You're the boss, Harbinger.”

Chapter End Notes

Tiid Klo Ul, the Slow Time Shout. Hee.
Shuffling up the steps to the Wind District, the Dragonborn came across Lucia and Lars Battleborn sharing the world’s most awkward first kiss.

Standing there, she watched in mirth as, completely oblivious to the world, the young teenagers continued to make out in their poorly concealed spot right by Heismkr’’s cottage. And my, wasn’t that a lot of tongue. Perhaps this wasn’t their first kiss, come to think of it.

Sigrid sighed. First it was Mila Valentia, and now Lucia. Mila had remained a student of Arcadia for the last year or so, soaking up all the alchemy training she could before leaving to be apprenticed in Solitude at Angeline’s Aromatics. Sigrid was not entirely sure it was the best decision, given how long Carlotta’s fourteen year old daughter had been mooning over Balgruuf’s son Frothar.

But, she supposed as she watched the two teens inexpertly suck face; there were worse matches to be made. Just this last week there had been a spring wedding of some young Nord couple who worked at Chillfurrow Farm. The groom had been enraptured, the bride lovely - and also nearly as pregnant as she, wedding dress stretched tightly over a swollen belly of what would have been trouble had the ceremony fallen through.

Oh, young love. “Hey, Lucia. Time to go. You’ve got blade training today.”

Breaking free with an audible pop, they both fairly jumped apart. “H-harbinger! Um…” the girl seemed lost for words, as Lars merely glared at her and folded his arms. Damn. The kid must have grown three inches in the last year alone. The Battleborn had newly defined muscles in the arms and neck that flexed as he frowned at her.

Guess it’s time for the sex talk after all. “See you around, Lars. Come on, Lucia.”

Not looking back, as the girl blushed furiously as she followed, Sigrid hauled herself up the last set of stairs and into Jorrvaskr’s main hall.

Alsbet was sweeping up the remnants of the noon meal. “Good afternoon, Harbinger.”

“To you as well. Where’s my husband?” Gesturing for Lucia to go to her lesson, the girl shared an uncertain smile as, rolling her eyes with the drama, Sigrid nearly pushed her to the back doors. “Go on. Alsbet, is he already at Dragonsreach?”

“Aye, Harbinger. They’ve been closeted for some time now.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Turning back around, she huffed a sigh as she picked up her trailing hemline and made her way back outside and down the steps. Dresses loosely fitted were the only thing that fit her now, and she descended like a bulbous dwemer animunculi...heavy, round and perpetually pissed off.

Stairs. So many stairs, here. Would it have killed them to have Dragonsreach on a more level plane?

Feeling the throbbing ache of the baby’s head rubbing against her pubic bone, Sigrid managed to make it up the two flights of stone steps, pausing to take in the view of the flowering Gildergreen as
she rested near the planked bridge. Not long now. The child had turned, head down in just the last week. It was difficult to say, since the calendar was so different from the Gregorian one she was accustomed to...but Sigrid would say she must be nearly full term now.

And the false contractions had started nearly two weeks ago, never lingering long enough to be called true labor pains. Blowing strands of hair out of her eyes, she continued into Dragonsreach and thought warily about healthcare in Skyrim.

In a land where praying at shrines healed grievous diseases and wounds, the vast array of potions and healing spells seemed almost superfluous. But death still struck in many medieval ways. The hygiene practices here were rudimentary, if not outright pitiful. Children and the elderly still died of the flu in winter and the cholera in summer; the sad little graves making her wince as she passed the Hall of the Dead.

Yes...death still stalked the citizens of Whiterun, if one couldn’t drag themselves to a shrine, for instance. Or didn’t stock up on potions. Or had no magical experience whatsoever, like her. Thu’ums didn’t count.

It didn’t bode well for giving birth. Women died in childbirth all the time here. Carlotta had been lucky, Sigrid found out as she had grilled the Imperial on her delivery of the twins. Though early, they had come quite quickly...a mere nine hours of labor from the start of insistent, unremitting pain to the final push.

Not bad at all. Her longest labor had taken two full days. Sigrid was hopeful that with the sheer amount of walking she was doing lately that her labor would be relatively fast also. You survived days of torture by Thalmor questioners. Managed to live through an epic fall from hundreds of feet high into a cold sea. Turned into a dragon, and then back again. I think you can take the pain of childbirth without drugs, Sigrid.

It was more the anticipation that made her nervous than the real thing, she reflected as she waddled past the great hall throne room and up to the war room. Her first son Sean had been born when she was nineteen, the other three following soon after and spaced roughly one to two years apart.

She was no spring chicken. At thirty four, this would be the oldest she had ever carried and birthed a baby. And she was feeling the strain. Oh, to be nineteen again and not have to worry about skin elasticity or energy levels.

A murmur of voices grew louder as she approached the table where they all sat. Her husband looked up and smiled as she approached, dragging a chair out so she could sit down with a sigh. The Jarl nodded at her sternly, then continued pointing out troop movements that had been indicated by blue pins on the map spread out upon the table.

They were all here, the main masterminds of Whiterun’s slow, creeping renovations. Jarl Olfrid Battleborn, his sons Jon and Idolaf, Vilkas, the new steward Avulstein Gray-Mane and the Nord Warrior Sinmir (the one who seemed to live to complain at the Bannered Mare. Sigrid had taken the time to listen to him once, and had encouraged him to approach the Jarl with ideas instead of stewing over drink). All had devoted countless hours in the last few months to hiring builders, overseeing the construction of the reinforced gates near the stables and creating new watchtowers in the south and northeast of the city.

The noise of stonemasons and carpenters hammering incessantly was distracting, to say the least. When they had reached the portion of wall that surrounded Jorrvaskr, Sigrid had made the decision to give the warriors a free day from training in the yard. With all the pulley-lifted rock slabs groaning overhead and the constant clash of rock being broken by pickaxe, there wasn’t a chance in hell that
the newbloods would actually learn anything useful out of doors.

But now the walls were nearly half again as tall as they had been, the crumbling tops smoothed and added upon, like the rough edge of a cake smeared with frosting. After consulting with Vilkas, Farkas, Athis and Njada, Sigrid had agreed that inner gates should be constructed within the Underforge’s outer and inner tunnel entrance as well as in the bathing spring area. She could still remember Torvar’s unfortunate end when the Silver Hand had utilized the branching cave system...no one really knew just how extensive those tunnels were. Not even Aela, when she had reached out via letter to the female werewolf in Solstheim, asking her advice.

Better safe than sorry. She had just finished counting all the barrels of mead, wine and food preserves that had been stored in the basement to provide for Jorrvaskr in case of a siege. They had enough, if they rationed sparingly, to keep them all healthy and strong for six months. A protracted siege would be...highly unfortunate. With the farms likely put to the torch, Whiterun could starve if the city did not manage to fend off invaders by then.

Thinking of the green fields of growing wheat nestled in the plains of the tundra, Sigrid tried to focus on what the men were discussing. The cramping, twisting pain was growing more insistent, and she shifted in her chair as she caught up on a conversation regarding trebuchets and other long range weaponry.

“...can get the mages to throw a volley of fire and lightning over the walls, could turn the tide…”

“Cauldrons of oil, boiling hot. Keep them ready for heating, once the enemy is spotted. That will end it quick as rain.”

“...Yes, that would work, but the damage to Whiterun-”

“No, we haven’t finished rebuilding the western watchtower yet. I want to focus on the east and north, where an attack is most likely.”

Avulstein Gray-Mane shot a look of reproach at Idolaf. “We need eyes in the west as well. No telling where an attack will come from. Better to be well prepared, than not have news when we need it.”

The two families had reached an uneasy truce with the marriage of Jon Battle-Born and Olfina Gray-Mane a year past. Sigrid could tell that friction still rubbed the new family bonds, as more often than not the men would pick at one another’s arguments instead of providing constructive criticism. She would find herself the unwilling mediator in these spats, with Vilkas offering the occasional comment or observation that would end a fight in favor of seeking the best solution for all.

The infighting wasted more time than she appreciated, since her time was now spread so thinly around Jorrvaskr, with Carlotta and the twins’ care, and in keeping up with her courier spy network that now spanned Solstheim and part of Morrowind. But after seeing Whiterun fully stocked and secured for battle, a bright swelling of pride filled her chest as Vilkas stood, arms casually embracing her as the townsfolk cheered with the opening of the monstrous, newly fortified bridge. Everyone had feasted that night, relieved that the bulk of the great work was over. Stormcloaks had been seen now and then from a distance; their scouts spying and surely reporting back to Ulfric the changes that had taken place in the tundra trading capital.

Feeling another cramp well up from deep inside, Sigrid felt sweat pop out on her forehead. After the
pie in Solitude and another incident, in which Athis had readily kneecapped a traveler who had pulled a poisoned knife on her, Sigrid didn’t really care what the Jarl of Windhelm thought. *An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*

Yes. On this they could all agree...Gray-Mane or Battle-Born...Whiterun came first.

“...should ensure that all citizens are accounted for. Dragonborn, what do you think of making your husband a fellow Thane?”

“Huh?” Looking up, she could see Vilkas turn a stunned look upon Jarl Battle-Born, as the man leaned back in his chair eyeing them contemplatively. Idolaf, Jon and Simmir nodded in agreement, with Avulstein scoffing softly, fixed upon tallying up the costs of the construction.

“Well, sure. Of course I think that is a great idea. He’s worked for so long to make this happen.”

Taking his hand in hers, Sigrid smiled fondly at the gratified expression Vilkas wore as Jarl Battle-Born began speaking of the perks that would come with being Thane of Whiterun. A ceremony would come to pass, in which Vilkas would stand and receive a noteworthy weapon; symbol of the honor that had come. He and his children would be exempt from paying the city taxes, and guards would look the other way should altercations arise.

Nearly wriggling in her seat, she made a face as her bladder insistently pinged her again. *Stupid pea sized bladder.* “One moment, gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me…”

-And as she stood, a warm rush of liquid slowly eased out from her, wetting her dress visibly as all conversation halted. Vilkas blinked, an astonished expression replacing the look of pride he had previously worn. “Wife, are you all right?”

“...Broke my water. Water broke. Baby.” She managed to speak around the now near constant pins and needles of cramping, as the men (most of whom had children of their own) clapped Vilkas on the back and offered her congratulations.

“Don’t...say anything yet. I still have to get him out!” And as a new wave of pain crashed into her, tightening her belly almost rock hard with the contractions, she allowed Vilkas to lead her (with very soggy footsteps, damn that was a lot of fluid) down the stairs, calling for assistance as she focused on her breathing.

*In, out. In, out. Think about the sound, not about how much it hurts.*

*Breathe.*

***************

It took thirteen hours from the breaking of her waters to the birth of Thadrig.

As Carlotta walked her, back and forth on the upper floor of Breezehome, she cried with the sheer pain and excitement of it all. Her tears had been set to overflow at an instant, these last few months. So it didn’t surprise her that the worm of terror she felt digging at her insides, only made worse at the tense expectation of labor and birth also brought them on.

“You can do it, Sigrid!” Her sister in law checked her swelling cervix, measuring with fingers just
how wide the opening grew as time passed. “You’re doing so well already. Not much longer!”

As Carlotta eased her back up from the bed, urging her to walk once more Sigrid was grateful that they were more or less alone.

Vilkas had been ushered off by Farkas and the other Companions to wait for news at the Bannered Mare. They were probably getting him completely plastered, she thought in equal parts irritation and fondness. She could hear faint singing all the way down here in the house. Oh well. It was better than what Olava the Feeble had tried to do, earlier.

The old crone was Whiterun’s version of a crazy, fortune telling neighborhood granny. Who also apparently insisted on attending all births and deaths, to address all the superstitions that the Nords still clung to. Not having the brainpower to form words that would send the well meaning woman away, the Dragonborn just kept breathing. In, out. In, out. Ignore everything else.

Sigrid ground her teeth and tried to ignore the distractions, as Olava had opened every window and shutter in the house, going so far as to air out every cabinet. ‘To open the passageway’, she had intoned in a quavery mystical voice. The old woman had then taken out a knotted rope, and with grand flourishes had bid Sigrid sit on the birthing stool and watch, as she slowly unbound the ropes and called upon Mother Kyne and Father Shor to bless the birth of the child, to unbind her womb and allow for a healthy birth. Sigrid would rather have taken the rope and strangled her with it, but that wouldn’t have set a very good example for her child. So, she waited painfully for the pomp and circumstance to end.

No...the final straw had come when Olava had come at her with leeches. To ‘stem the swelling and choler from her enlarged humors’, the old bat protested, as Sigrid literally dragged Olava out the door and slammed it shut in her wrinkled face.

Carlotta had looked on in amusement, gathering clean towels and boiling water as Sigrid had turned away from the door, bending nearly into the fire as she was gripped by yet another clenching contraction. “Can’t...focus, with that fraud hovering over me.”

“It’s just as well.” Washing her hands thoroughly with soap (as Sigrid had begged her to do months before, while trying to explain germ theory to the puzzled Imperial) Carlotta eased her back upon the birthing stool. The stool looked a bit like a wooden commode, with a bottom cut out for apparently the baby to be shat through. Maybe gravity helped? She had given birth on white sterile tables back home, complete with drugs and stitches. God help her.

Only Danica Pure-Spring was available now. As Carlotta gave her the all clear (FINALLY) to begin pushing, Sigrid held her hands and sucked in great gulps of air, bearing down as the priestess of Kynareth nearly laid on the floor to get a good view.

“Yes, Dragonborn! I see the head!”

Trying not to crush her friend’s hands as her stomach rippled in agony, Sigrid cried out one long wailing shriek, as through the burning ring of fire her baby slid, wetly, from her body and into the waiting hands of Danica.

Slumping into Carlotta’s arms, she blinked back tears as Danica suctioned the baby free of mucus with her mouth. They were all smiles, as the tiny perfect boy (definitely a boy!) began to howl, his wrinkled skin rubbed of all goo and afterbirth with gentle toweling as Sigrid pushed one last, piercingly painful time to deliver the placenta.

“You have a son. Congratulations Sigrid!” Danica carefully laid the wee screamer into her waiting
arms, as she stared in fascination at her child. Whimpering, as his cries came less frequently, she cuddled the little newborn to her bare chest, a grin stretching her face as she marvelled at the beauty of him.

Ten fingers, ten tiny widdle toes. A slight fuzz of dark hair. Healthy and alive and hers.

“I’ll go get the men. Why don’t you rest upstairs, dear, and I’ll check you for any tears or lacerations later?”

Nodding, suddenly exhausted as her high from giving birth washed away, she dragged herself upstairs supported by Carlotta. Her sister in law fussed with the furs and blankets, placing layers of absorbent towels beneath her hips as, uncaring of her nakedness, Sigrid placed her son’s mouth to her breast. Small sucking sounds announced a successful latch, after a few tries. His scrunched up, puckered face smoothed out as the baby began swallowing down his first meal outside of mother.

The umbilical cord had been cut and tied off with very little ceremony. Sigrid chuckled a bit at the memory of a friend, the crunchy granola type who had kept the cord on long past her child’s birth, only letting it fall off once it was a decayed, wrinkled rope. How that was healthier for the kid, I have no idea.

Gods. I’m just grateful we’re both okay.

Resting her head against the bedroll, she just couldn’t stop smiling. Her jaw hurt, everything hurt, and yet she laughed with the joy of success.

“...Sigrid?”

Her husband stepped into the room, bearing a single lantern for light. Dimly, she realized it must be nightfall now, so out of it from the birth that she realized she must have been napping on and off. The little guy was out cold, nuzzled against her chest and cocooned in a rabbit-fur bunting.

Content, she watched the roundness of her baby’s chest rise and fall with each restful breath, then looked up at Vilkas. Clearing her throat, she spoke a hoarse whisper. “Come and meet your newborn son. He hasn’t bit me yet, so you’re safe.”

Nearly collapsing on the bed, Vilkas set the lantern down on the cupboard. Dull with tiredness, she realized he was nearly trembling as he reached out one hand to touch her cheek first, then that of their baby. “Is...is everything alright? You are well?”

“Yes.” Treating him to another earsplitting grin, she rolled over slightly. “Here. Saved you a spot. Just...watch out for the blood.”

Noting the stain that spread from the towels laid beneath her, it didn’t seem to put him off at all. Laying down on the space provided he wrapped his arms around them both, grey gaze stolidly fixed on the sleeping face of the boy.

“Do they always look like that?”

“Like what?” She laughed, seeing her husband smile shyly. “Like a potato plucked too early from the ground? Yes, most newborns look like that. We’re just lucky he doesn’t have much of a cone head from being born. Terence looked like a caveman when he came out.”

Carefully cupping the babe’s skull, she showed him gently where the fontanel was. “See, when they’re first born, the plates of the skull are loose to allow the baby to be pushed through and out more easily. When he gets a bit older, his skull will harden, and this soft spot right here will
Vilkas took a shaky inhale, then breathed out as his hands clasped hers. “Thank Shor one of us knows what they are doing.”

They lay like that for some time, her watching the baby as Vilkas watched them both. The lantern candle guttered in a stray draft, prompting them to cuddle even closer as Sigrid let out a massive yawn.

“Do you mind taking him so I can nap? I know we have the baby cradle somewhere around here, but I don’t want to leave him alone. And I don’t want to squish him if I accidentally roll over.”

Accepting the tiny burden with reverent awe, Vilkas rocked his son as he carefully eased his legs off the bed. Sitting next to her, he fixed Sigrid with a warm smile. “So. What do you think we should name him? Farkas is waiting downstairs, ready to greet his new nephew.”

“Hmm.” Running through the list of names she had carried in her head for months, she tried and failed to hold back another yawn. “What do you think about um...Thadrig?”

“Thadrig.” Leaning over, Vilkas rested his forehead against hers, as the baby made a tiny mewl of annoyance.

Placing a soft kiss on her lips, she smiled dazedly as her husband tucked her in more thoroughly. “Thadrig is perfect. Sleep now.”

...And so she did, falling into a slumber so deep, she couldn’t remember where she was until a newborn wail awakened her with a shaky jerk, hours later.

Feeding him once more, she rested her free hand on her husband who had passed out next to her on the bed, finally done showing off the newly christened Thadrig.

*Family and honor.* Kodlak’s voice, just an echo of a memory, flitted through her mind as she fell asleep surrounded by loved ones. *That’s what it means to be one of us. One of the Companions, lass.*

*Family and honor.*

Chapter End Notes

Heyyy, over 2100 hits on Vanished Without a Trace! Woop woop!

Thank you all for reading (and commenting. I luvs them comments) I've truly enjoyed fleshing out the universe of Skyrim.
Blixt av tänder och svärd (Flash of Teeth and Sword)

Chapter Notes

Viking pre-battle music. Wardruna again. Loves them so.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6loWrABr8gA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ulfric Stormcloak dreamed.

He knew it to be a dream, for he was beardless; robed in grey as he walked the cold stone floors of High Hrothgar. The darkness stretched forever, the walk continuing as he looked around. Searching for something, or someone. He’d know when he found it.

A full decade of youth had he spent training under Master Arngeir. Before the Great War, before imprisonment and scorn and shame. A simpler life, before death and the sword had come to call him down a darker path.

His father Hoag, Bear of Eastmarch, had encouraged his studies. Ulfric could still recall the smell of his father’s pipe smoke, the roughness of his chain mail as he embraced his child. “Ahh, I’m proud of you, boy. Plenty of time to sow the wild oats of youth later, when you’re a blooded man. For now, learn. Study the Shouts from the Masters. T’will prove a boon in the future; those words. Aye, and the discipline, son. Do us honor. Don’t ever give up...see it through.”

And he had tried. Years of meditation, of suffering chillblains on his knees and hands from long hours of kneeling on icy stone. Nights spent alone, masturbating in the quiet hours of early morning so as not to be disturbed by the Greybeards...who somehow knew, in an uncanny way, the exact moment he would seek to while away the loneliness with self pleasure. Years of dry, uninteresting meals that consisted of salt fish and leathery fruit and old waybread, day in and day out. And all in absolute silence; broken by the occasional quiet word from Arngeir, savored slowly and far between until Ulfric felt like screaming, just to hear a raised voice.

All that, to master the Shout of Unrelenting Force and the Shout to Disarm. Useful, he dubiously supposed, but for what? Not up here, high on the mountaintop. His teacher had firmly impressed upon him that Shouts were only to be used in worship of Kynareth, and not for personal gain; to fight or show off with.

He had despaired then, seeing the years unspool like thread as he lingered in silent halls, surrounded by old men who refused to speak. Saw his future, for he would die on the mountain, grey of beard and heart...perhaps a bare handful of Shouts learned for his labors, to be spoken to the sky alone.

Whether it was fortune or fell tidings, Ulfric had been torn at the news that he was needed to fight. To lead the men and women of Windhelm in his father’s stead, for old Hoag lingered in illness brought on by old age, and would never greet his son in this life again. Ulfric left with a strange relief, taking the path of seven thousand steps in mingled joy and foreboding. Hoping he was prepared enough. Strong enough for what was to come.
He had made up for his isolation later, before the Markarth Incident and his capture by Elenwen. He had employed all the substantial wealth and influence at his disposal to slake a young man’s lusts...to drink, eat and fuck in the rare times he was not occupied at the war table or fighting on the front. Though he always remembered his youth in seclusion with fondness, he was grateful that it had not been his calling to replace Arngeir in the seat of High Hrothgar. He was needed elsewhere.

No...as his dream self turned this way and that, searching down long, endless corridors, Ulfric remembered... as though through a fog... the moment it all crystallized for him. White hot, hard and hating.

The slap of the whip. Dripping of blood down swollen welts that stung, almost acidic with the salt water they regularly splashed on the cuts to keep them from infection. The hiss of tongs glowing, burning his flesh as he screamed until he was hoarse. Tied up, begging...pleading for mercy from the merciless, for his father, for anyone really to release him from those elven whoresons.

From her.

Where are you?

“Here”. A calm, female voice called out, beckoning him on.

Ulfric beheld a door. Huge, carved and old like all of High Hrothgar’s structure. Something lay beyond that he sought. What he wanted, no, needed.

As he viewed the massive impediment of wood, doubt crept into his dream self. Did he dare open that door?

Stiffening his spine, Ulfric fought through the fear. He was a true Nord. Blooded and scarred in ritual combat. The blood of elves and men painted his axe. He feared nothing...least of all a woman.

The door creaked open with a forceful shove. In the familiar courtyard, she stood in the snow, hooded and robed.

His feet moved of their own accord, stepping towards her. “Who are you?”

Whether it was the dream or the trickery of the mind, Ulfric did not know. But, as the woman lifted her hood, she shifted. At once bearing the sallow, sharp features of an Altmer...only to shrink into a cheery smile shadowed by tangled auburn braids.

“You know me.” The Dragonborn spoke, that flat accent overlaid by the haughty crispness of Elenwen. Back and forth, gold turned to hazel. Elf, human. “And I know you. You can go no further.”

He feared this witch; an amalgam of all he despised. Looking beyond her form, Ulfric saw a mountain path that was crowned by a stone carved throne. The path was lined with Nord men and women in Stormcloak armor, hardy and loyal. The ancient throne of kings, upon which he would right all the wrongs done to his beloved homeland.

How he longed to sit upon it. “Let me pass.”
Elenwen’s gloating gaze turned to motherly sorrow, judgement apparent in green gold irises. “You are unworthy.”

He reached his hands out pleadingly, disgusted at how his voice cracked with his young age. “All I ask is the means to defend my people. To lead them to a higher prosperity unrivaled by Ysgramor himself. Free and proud once more of their heritage. Please.”

The Dragonborn morphed into Rikke. His old comrade looked upon him with shrewd appraisal. “And you are the one who knows best? How many have you killed in service of your ambitions?”

Rikke melted into Elisif, tears trembling as the woman folded her arms defiantly. “How many more must fall until the jagged throne cracks?”

“No, no...that's not what will happen!”

The Dragonborn stood before him once more, appearing as she had the day of the festival. Her babe suckled at her breast, pale against the deep sapphire of her gown. “So the innocent are thus sacrificed for the greater good.”

Sour bile rose in his throat. “I'll save all that I can.”

“Even us?” Dunmer eyes of red became slots of reptilian gold that dilated into feline ovals. “Are we not citizens of Skyrim?”

Ulfric glared, hating the lines he was forced to cross. “Your loyalty will always be divided. Skyrim belongs to the Nords.”

Blurring, shifting faster than he could keep track, he stepped back as the figure became a whirlwind of light and color.

“UNWORTHY!”

-------

...“My Jarl?”

He blinked awake, the dream sliding from his mind like so much sand. Sighing, Ulfric sat up, sore from sleeping upon travel furs after years accustomed to a kingly bed. “Report.”

The general, whom he now recognized as Hjornskar Head-Smasher, began his gruff recitation. “The trebuchets are loaded and waiting. So are the troops. Ten fists of men and women, armed and ready to fight at your command.”

As Ulfric struggled to awaken more fully, a scarred and familiar hand proffered a wet towel. Taking it, the Jarl mopped up his face. “Galmr.”

His friend took up all remaining space in the tent, filling it with the sour, gamey scent of bear grease and sweat from the officer’s pelt he constantly wore. “Say the word, and Whiterun is yours.”
Peering beyond his two generals, Ulfric looked up at the sky. Dark, almost pregnant with rain. Thunder rolled in the distance, a deluge waiting to pour down. Beyond his tent, he could still see the blackened remnants of the farm they had taken over, slow burning flames providing a dim light for the throat cutters. Warriors, tasked with disposing of the remains of the farmers, quietly killing those who lingered in life from the initial assault. Massive catapults, spread at a league apart were fully weighed down by earth and stone, faithfully manned by three soldiers each. The Stormcloaks milled about, restless and eager for blood. All against a background of violent grey, a dark dawn waiting to rise.

It was a sign. Relief relaxed his shoulders, as Ulfric smiled at the good portent. Kynareth herself blessed their cause this day.

If only it had not needed to come to this. “Whiterun is but a means to an end, old friend.”

“I’ve toured our camps.” Galmar’s fist tightened around the hilt of his waraxe. “The silent ones are standing by the tunnels. We’re ready, Ulfric...whenever you are.”

Strapping on his armored mail, Ulfric shifted aside to allow his old friend to assist him. Buckles were tightened, weaponry checked in the ease of long familiarity. Today was the day that would live forever in songs and tales, he thought grimly as the sounds of war cries spilled out across the tundra.

"Is any man ever ready to give the order that will mean the deaths of so many?"

A sneer tugged at Galmar’s chapped lips. Resting his hand on Ulfric’s shoulder, the old bear fixed his gaze upon the Jarl. "No. But neither is every man able to give that order when he must."

Turning away to stare once more out of the tent, Ulfric listened with half an ear as Galmar continued to speak. “…But you are that man, Ulfric. You've been that man before, and you'll be him again. And these men and women - they call themselves Stormcloaks because they believe in you."

Settling his Jarl’s fur cloak around his shoulders, Galmar grunted in approval. “They’re the meanest, toughest sons of bitches Skyrim has to offer. And they want this. They want this as much as you do. Perhaps they want it more.”

Pushing his way out of the tent, Ulfric took deep measured breaths. Forced himself to count, to slow the heartbeat that thrummed a furious cadence, echoing the drumming of the skalds that had followed his encampment.

The supply wagons had been carefully hidden back beyond the line of fire. Even now, he could see the stragglers - women and men who followed, eager to make septims off of servicing the warriors of the Stormcloaks. Whether by fletching arrows or providing one last warm embrace, the camp fairly vibrated with activity. He could hear the ecstatic moans of those who spent the last of their coin for the comfort of another’s flesh, accompanied by the metallic ringing of hammers, the sizzle of cookfires and shouts of the officers as they checked and rechecked the supplies.

As ready as they would ever be. “Galmar, send word. Tell them, a new day dawns. A storm rises over Whiterun.” The weight of his sword was reassuring, as it thumped his leg with every step the Jarl took. As he strode down the slope toward the front lines, Nord warriors saluted him, dropping what they were doing to stand at attention as he passed. Awe colored their features, as even the whores, the beggars, children and cooks ceased their activities to stare.

Following at his side, Galmar grinned. "Aye, and the sons of Skyrim will greet that dawn...teeth and swords flashing!" Stepping away, the Bear began to roar new orders, as Ulfric stopped at the edge of the camp to examine his prey.
The city had been newly fortified these months past. Old crumbling walls had been stacked high with fresh rock and mortar, and what had once been a weathered moat and drawbridge had been replaced with a mighty bastion of timber and steel. Fires burned upon the crenellated walls, gleaming with movement as the torches of sentries moved ceaselessly, back and forth. Ulfric beheld the surrounding fields burned to bare earth; the harvest hastily brought in early this year.

Not for the first time, Ulfric prayed that the war would be swift. That the loss of life would be minimal. It never sat well with him, killing those that bore the blood of his homeland. It was all well and good to kill High Elves...piss faced prudes should have been shown the door decades ago. Ah...If only Whiterun could be reasoned with, to stand with him. By him, as they ended the tyranny of elves and southern men.

Not far off, he could hear Galmar stirring up the troops to battle. Stoking the fire in their blood with practiced, but heartfelt words. “...This is it men! They say that our cause is false and that we are nothing more than thieves, thugs and murderers!”

Stalking down the line of warriors standing ready, the Bear General scoffed. “But no! We are farmers! We are craftsmen! We are sons and daughters of shopkeepers, maid servants and soldiers! We are the sons and daughters of Skyrim! And we have come this far because our cause is true. Because we fight as one.”

A battle maiden shook a fist at the sky, overcome as she listened. Nodding, Galmar brushed by, continuing to rant. “...And because our hearts are bursting with anger! What we do here today, we do for our country! For all the true Nords of Skyrim!”

As Ulfric rehashed the myriad objectives in his mind once again, he allowed himself a vague smile as he heard what his second in command chose to say next. If only the trade capital of the tundra had not been quite so industrious this last summer. It would have been far easier to take what was his right, without resorting to underhanded schemes. “Whiterun's walls are tall, but they are old and crumbling inside, like the Empire whose Legion lines their pockets. They've barricades to block us, but we'll tear through them and the milk drinkers behind them!”

Cheers arose, as some lifted their swords eagerly, ready for blood. “Our objective is the drawbridge. If we can find a way to drop it, the city will be ours! Everyone on me. Let's show these Imperial milk drinkers what true Nords look like!”

As one, the units of men and women moved out, screaming for Sovngarde, Shor and Kyne as they branched into three spikes of an attack formation. One went directly for the gatehouse, a full assault. The other carried ladders with hooked rungs to attempt to scale the newly fortified walls.

And the last accompanied Galmar, as he nodded to Ulfric. They sought the secret way inside; a hidden network of tunnels and caves that wormed beneath the rotting underbelly of Whiterun and the corrupt hall of Jorrvaskr.

Soon, there would be no need to fight further. Ulfric drew another deep breath of fresh, yet untainted air. Leverage was, by far, the best tool in his arsenal at the moment. But he would use others, until the Dragonborn’s child was in his custody.

Would he kill a child to further the cause? A ripple of unease stole through him, as his jaw tightened at the memory of wailing women. Grieving upon reading the rolls of the dead in Windhelm; years ago after the Great War and more recently, after skirmishes in their own homeland.

*It falls upon me to make the choices. To rain death upon those who resist. So be it. Resolution hardened his heart. Raising his arm, he braced himself for the first wave. Forced himself to yell, past*
the lump in his throat that threatened to choke off all sound. “Launch the trebuchets!”

Wind howled past him, hot with the burning pitch of flying boulders heaved past him into the air, descending like Shor’s fury itself upon the walls of Whiterun. Faintly, he could hear screams of terror rise as the trebuchets aimed true, and buildings were torn into far flung splinters. An orange glow rose above the walls, dampened by the fog that had rolled in from the plains.

A war horn sounded, plaintively calling. Another horn responded. The drums pounded on.

Watching as the first fist of Stormcloaks descended upon the burning city, Ulfric watched in pain and hot, fierce pride for men and country. Today would be glorious, indeed. For Ulfric and his generals had prepared, had slaved night and day to counter every obstacle. They would overcome even the might of the Dragonborn herself, and that of her slavishly devoted minions.

How far the Brotherhood of Jorrvaskr had fallen, bewitched by the woman. An outlander, no true Nord. He would lead them back to the old ways...or they would die upon the sword and in the flame.

The city burned. Breathing deeply of the cold wind that bore the scent of rain, Ulfric felt a weight ease in his chest.

“And so it begins.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll admit...I have mixed feelings about Ulfric Stormcloak.

On one hand, I like this character alot. There's alot to respect here. The guy has been fighting most of his adult life for his country, and has enough cleverness and charisma to attract a following. It takes moxie to avoid capitulation to a greater power, like the Thalmor. And being told (wrongly) that him breaking under captivity was the REASON for the Imperial City’s surrender in the Great War...gosh that would have sucked. I bet he feels super guilty. Stupid Elenwen.

And then...there's everything else. The racism, nationalist pride that excludes anyone who's not native Nord. Which is funny, because Orcs? They've lived in the border mountains forever. And the Forsworn, who remind me a LOT of the Celts and Picts being pushed back from their territory by Romans and invaded by Vikings, history wise. A sad story, even if the Forsworn are icky, ritual sacrificing devil worshipers. I'm totally going to write a story about a Forsworn witch Dragonborn. The squick factor would be SO HIGH!
Chapter Notes

I'm handling the Battle of Whiterun in broken down segments. If you're unreasonably upset by anything you read in these chapters, take heart. It's not over 'til the horker sings.

"I have shown the people that when our Jarls drink the Empire's milk, it makes us weak. I must now show them the path that will lead us back to our strength. There is no progress without sacrifice. No wheat without threshing the chaff. The Empire and the Jarls who back them must be swept away. The people demand it. I demand it."

- Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak of Windhelm

Feet pounding the cobblestones, her breath was a ragged gasp as she dodged the townsfolk fleeing for the safety of Dragonsreach. So many had lingered, not believing the warnings. The slowly multiplying pinpricks of torchfire that had bloomed on the southeast horizon, as the armies of Ulfric Stormcloak came ever closer.

And now, the war had caught hold of yellow roofs and timbered walls all around her. Burning. Everything was burning!

Just like Jorrvaskr had, years ago. Steeling herself against the panic that fluttered, making her want to run (to hide! Run and hide!) Lucia pressed on, impatient to deliver the note the Dragonborn had tasked her with to the men at the front.

"Lars! Lars, c'mere!"

She barely recognized him. He was wearing a full set of nordic carved steel armor, staring in shock at what Lucia realized had been a man. A Stormcloak, helm fallen off to reveal a young face blank with death. Trying not to look too closely (or inhale, for the body had released its bowels upon dying) Lucia couldn’t tear her eyes away. He couldn’t have been much older than her, or Lars. Blood seeped sluggishly from his chest where an axe was buried deeply.

Coming back to himself with a jerk, Lars Battle-Born leaned over and yanked the axe free, stumbling a bit. With a look of concentration, he dipped his fingers into the blood. Drawing his hand slowly, deliberately over his face, Lars turned to face Lucia. Biting back a whimper at the look in his eyes; wild beneath the bloodpaint he had earned, she handed him the note. He accepted it with a nod, his fingers caressing hers as he read what was written.

"Lars, so um...they’re already over the walls?"

"Yeah. They have ladders. We keep pushing them off, but more still come."

As he spoke, a high shriek sounded as both teenagers turned to look up. Anoriath the meat merchant had kicked another ladder free from where it gripped the newly cut stone of the walls. Lucia could
see the Stormcloak soldier wobble, shake, then fall backwards...wildly flailing their arms as they screamed. All the way down, until the sound cut off abruptly.

Not lingering to view the results, Anoriath had already strung his bow and fired off three more arrows, at least one hitting their target with a meaty thwack. The Bosmer restocked his quiver, yelling encouragement. “C’mon, you puling little louses! Fire some god damn arrows! You going to let an elf outshoot you, eh?”

That did it. The city guards who were staggered along the wall arose shakily from their crouched cover and began firing as Anoriath continue his jibes. One fell, transfixed by an enemy arrow through her eye slit. The body caromed off of the wooden scaffolding, landing with a heavy bump at their feet.

Stepping daintily away from the creeping pool of blood that was now intermingling with the Battle-Born’s kill, she grimaced. *Ugh.* Grasping the hilt of her sword, Lucia made her face stern. “The Dragonborn said to wait until the Stormcloaks are thick at the gates, before pouring the boiling oil. Get as many of them covered as we can.”

"Aye. Smart.” Clasping her hand once more, the Imperial girl’s eyes closed instinctively as Lars kissed her, hard and fast. Her lips tingled as he pulled away, smiling crookedly. “I’ll let the Companions know. Get back to Jorrvaskr, Lucia. Stay safe.”

“You too.” Watching for the briefest moment as he strode off, calling out to the group who held the gates, Lucia sighed. Licking her lips, she tasted salt and iron. Braith was going to be jealous. This was the fourth time he had kissed her, without any coercion or trickery on her part. Not like Braith. Braith who had bullied and insulted the Nord for years, driving him back indoors to read rather than play with the other children. Until recently, when seemingly overnight he had shot up by half a foot and gained twenty pounds of muscle. Lars had come into his growth, and with it had found his confidence.

Lucia liked his new, bold attitude. She had liked it even more, after returning the book she had borrowed when he had leaned forward carefully, slowly...giving her all the time in the world to back out before clumsily smooshing his lips against hers. Standing there like that, she wondered what the big deal was about, until almost by mistake she moved. Tilted her head, first to move away. Then to get closer, as his lips applied a strange warm pressure that sent shocks of... *something* all the way to her toes.

Which only got better when they had tried using tongue. Lucia grinned. They’d had some time to practice.

Coming back to the present, Lucia saw a crowd gathered distantly near the Gildergreen. Sigrid must be there, giving orders. She’d report back. Then, maybe she could return to Lars and fight by his side. She was *dying* to show off the new moves she had memorized in her last training session.

Jogging up to the Wind District, Lucia’s mind whirled as she thought about just how truly lucky she was. Ever since her mother had died and her remaining family had cast her off, she had been alone. Had spent one miserable year begging on the streets. Accepting handouts from Hulda, from Danica...anyone really, who could spare the charity for a septim. Eating rotten food that made her sick. Wearing clothes that were more like holes patched together with thread. Digging through refuse piles, once actually sleeping in the compost heap that steamed with warmth when the winter chill was too cold to bear, sleeping on the bench outside the Temple of Kynareth.
She could still hear Braith’s taunting jeer. “Shit-eating Imperial! Yeah...roll in your stink, where you belong, Talos-hater! Skeever-shit!”

Only when the nice lady (Sigrid, Dragonborn. A legend!) had invited her to work under Tilma at Jorrvaskr had things begun to improve. That first night, after bathing away a crops worth of dirt and plucking at her new dress, Lucia had laid down in the bed next to Tilma. She still could hardly believe her good fortune. Even though Vilkas had been scary; so grumpy as he told her what was expected of her, at least the old woman had been all smiles (how she missed her).

And though everyone at Jorrvaskr seemed really rough, with all the sharp weapons and loud laughter and spooky warpaint...nobody hit her or yelled mean things.

Regular, filling meals. New clothes that fit. A place to sleep that was warm and smelled far better than the manure pile. A strange, jumbled sort of family to cook and clean for, to call her own.

And now she was one of them. The youngest of the whelps, with Alsbet doing most of the work of cleaning and cooking now that she was so busy all the time. Who knew that training to be a warrior involved so much reading, or pushups? She was now used to running laps around the yard with the others, but Farkas still had to be patient with her when it came to practicing with the sword and shield. She had gone out with Njada to kill wolves and even a sabrecat once, out on the tundra. But so far, she was Unblooded. Lucia wasn’t sure she really wanted to kill a person. Even a mean one.

None of that! Pushing her way through the people who were all clamoring for attention, Lucia finally squeezed through to the small space right beside the Gildergreen where Harbinger Sigrid stood.

Everyone was talking at once. Some held out parchment scrolls, shaking them in the Dragonborn’s face. Some held weapons, but they were smarter. They held those in their hands, pointed safely away from the Dragonborn. Others were yelling, faces bright red with spit flying. Everyone looked scared.

“-Can’t sustain these kinds of damages! My shop is-”

“Must hearken to their demands, Dragonborn, or we will be overrun!”

“...see why we can’t take the fight out to their blasted camp! Kill them all!”

Lucia could see the Harbinger was half-listening, her eyes flitting attentively to everyone. Aware of everything, even as she pored over the map held tightly open for her by Vilkas. Her new dragonscale armor gleamed dully in what light came through the heavy storm clouds. She nearly looked poured in silver herself; the dovah scales in this armored set were the same steely hue, tipped in black spikes. Seeing her, Lucia felt a surge of confidence. If anyone could keep them safe, it was Sigrid. “I delivered the message, Harbinger.”

“Good girl. Get to Jorrvaskr now.” Cutting her off before Lucia could lodge a complaint, she pressed her lips together in anger as Sigrid shook her head, amusement lighting the serious face she wore almost constantly now. “I need you there, sweetheart. Go to the basement, where Carlotta and the babies are. Protect them for me, please. That would be the biggest favor ever.”

“I guess I can do that.” Straightening, Lucia adjusted her leathers, glaring at Belethor who stepped on her foot in his urgency to get through to her mistress. “I’ll see you later, right?”
“Definitely, kid.” Waving away the townspeople swamping her with questions, Sigrid stalked off towards Dragonsreach. “Meet me up there, love. After you check on the others. I’m going to get a better view.”

Nodding as he folded up the map, the master at arms reached into his backpack and turned to Lucia. Feeling him press something into her hands, Lucia looked down to see a health potion. High potency, freshly made by the newness of the label. “Go while you can, lass. The trebuchets are firing again.”

Nodding, Lucia pushed her way out of the crowd once more, towards Jorrvaskr.

*Guess I’ll find out how tough I am, soon enough.*

******

“Whiteruuuuun!”

“Victory, or Sovngarde!”

“Auughh, *Mother!* Save me, mother Kyne!”

The boiling oil poured with a wet, plurping pulp of noise, as it spattered hotly on the miserable bastards below. High, frantic screams drifted up, setting Farkas’ jaw on edge as he finished tilting the huge cauldron until it was fully empty. “All gone. Next.”

“Let’s see how this turns out. Maybe the survivors will turn tail and run?” Athis suggested, quickly firing off an arrow at a Stormcloak who had avoided the spill. A brave end, dying with arms still stuck through the steely gate he had attempted to climb. Not all met such a worthy fate.

Farkas could still see the Stormcloak woman who had died, blubbering and pleading with an arrow stuck in her gut. She had dropped her axe and torn off the helmet, revealing matted blonde braids and frantic grey eyes. “I surrender! No, please! No more! I yield!”

Watching her twist in agony, bleating for nearly half an hour, Farkas had finally called for a bow. Had delivered a merciful arrow to ease her suffering. She lay still, the corpses of her fellows piling upon her steadily as more succumbed to the burning volleys of the mages further down the wall. Others fell, choked and burning by the heat of the oil. The dead lay now in grisly heaps, the reinforcements slowing as they appeared, fewer and further between. And always the endless arrows, shot by the Whiterun guards and warriors on the walls...seeking the gaps in armor and neckguard to find flesh.

“Skyrim belongs to the Nooords!” One man made a desperate last lurch at the gates, battering at it with his axe and shield.

The two Companions watched in black amusement as the poor sod slipped and fell in the slickness, nearly impaling himself on fallen blades and pikes that were still grasped by the dead. Furs sodden with smoking oil, the Stormcloak hauled himself up, hand over hand until he clung to the gate, gasping.

“Feh…” A Whiterun guard lifted his helmet to spit, resting upon the barrel of oil he had hauled up
with a fellow warrior. “We should put him out of his misery before Tsun laughs him out of Shor’s Hall.”

“Can’t do much damage to the gate, lying against it like that. Leave him be, for now.” Adjusting his blade against his back, Farkas frowned at the scene. Such a fucking waste.

Sigrid had been right. Ulfric was a fool. This was far too small a force to send, to bring down the reinforced gates of Whiterun. No battering rams, hardly any archers. Ysgramor’s balls, not even their ladders had been successful…the Battle-Born lad had just delivered the news that no more ladders had been raised in the past hour. Yet he and the other civilians still remained alert, watching for further launches from the trebuchets that had caused so much damn panic.

One flaming ballista had hit the rear of Breezehome. Farkas had gritted his teeth in raw frustration, kicking the smoldering boulder as he rushed off to man the gatehouse. The garden his wife had painstakingly planted that spring had now been crushed into so much mud. Nothing for it now. He would pray for rain, to put out the fires that blazed all over Whiterun. Damn Stormcloak sons-of-bitches. Attacking his home!

Much good it did them. The giant man estimated that Ulfric had lost roughly two hundred twenty three fighters assaulting the gates head on. More, if he tallied the ones who had struggled to climb over the walls. For a Jarl he had often heard described as smart, this was a stupid move.

Slowly relaxing from the tension that had bound his shoulders into steel wire, these last few days, Farkas grinned. “That’s it? If this is Ulfric’s grand plan, then I say we break out the mead now.”

“A bit longer.” Athis peered into the gloom, wiping his brow as the rain began pattering down in fine sheets. “Something is out there, I swear it.”

Stretching his neck until it popped, Farkas stood at his shield brother’s side and looked out into the fog. The dead lay still, the last shuddering gasp of the slowly dying done long ago. Nothing moved. Not even the ravens dared to come out and feast, in this weather.

Thunder. Athis stiffened, craning his neck even further to see, as another shaking blow hit the earth. Rumbling the very stones of the gates, giving Farkas a headache atop the terse stiffness that plagued his back, from standing so long.

And still nothing stirred.

_Lightning strike, maybe. That thunder sounded close._

He was about to turn to Athis, to recommend a sweep of the perimeter just in case, when the mammoths appeared.

Spectral, lumbering out the mist like phantoms. The defenders stood riveted, spellbound in a kind of dread as the great beasts charged forward. The thunder of their great limbs pounded the earth, leaving great circles that quickly filled with rainwater.

Struck dumb by sheer amazement, Farkas got a good look at the leading mammoth and its rider; a blonde Nord female with face painted fully blue with woad. She was screaming triumphantly, directing the mammoth with slaps of her leather reins towards the corner walls.

Everything slowed down. Even as he drew his blade _oh so slowly_, the Companion could not help but fix his notice upon the small things. The rattling of his teeth as the beasts burst through the reinforced stone walls like piled tinder. The guards firing arrow after arrow at the creatures, the projectiles hitting the furry hides like so many thistlepricks embedded in a mountainside. His stomach
leaping with vertigo, as the very floor beneath him fell. *Pain:* sharp and insistently pounding in every nerve, as rocks bashed against his arms and head, crushing his armor until it dented so that he could not properly draw breath.

His legs wouldn’t move. *He could not move!* Athis screamed next to him, trapped by rocks large as smelters as suddenly another mammoth rolled over, the great hairy fetlocks charging over him. Straining to take in one more breath, his eyes tracked the belly of the beast, one, two more of them ploughing over the ruin of the gatehouse wall, followed by a stream of Stormcloaks.

*Cru*shing BURNING pain ah *FUCK* that hurt, hurt hurt, as the last mammoth carelessly crushed Farkas beneath his legs. Bellowing, followed by more screams and rockfall. Dust and sweeping rain was all Farkas could see. He tasted metal and bile. Realized that he had been sick, before his eyes dragged shut...weighted by stones that eased him into an exhausted blackness.

Forgiving, peaceful night.

************

A full hour Lucia had sat here in the basement, and still the children wailed.

Carlotta was doing her best to soothe the twin girls clinging to her, but no matter how Lucia rocked and sang, Thadrig refused to be soothed. His face was a red crumpled ball of anguish, tears soaking through her leathers as she patted his back, praying that the battle would soon be over, and his parents available to come claim the screaming dremora before the Imperial girl went completely batshit mad.

The bairn was now near seven months old. When she had first descended the stairs to see Njada standing guard, they had all been calm. Playful, even. His cousins Fjora and Gydda had been distracted by the way he rolled around on the floor in his sacklike tunic, grasping at the balls of twine they would roll to him. Fjora had begun walking a month before, with Gydda grasping at walls, pulling herself along after her sister as Carlotta clapped and encouraged them along.

Noisy, smelly with the spoiled effluence of dirty breechclouts and spilt milk, Lucia had gladly gone upstairs to fetch more fresh water...just to escape the pandemonium for a bit. None of the other whelps lingered indoors. Jorrvaskr was eerily silent...Lucia fancied, near haunted by the ghosts of warriors past, as she hurried along the dim halls.

Far away, she could hear the cries of battle outside these walls. Sounds of fighting, steel clashing against steel. The ever present booming thuds of ballista, caroming off of rock wall and wood. All newbloods had been sent to fight for Whiterun, and she felt a twinge of irritation at being called to play babysitter, instead of standing up with Lars, Braith and the other older ones who were even now earning valor and respect from the elder ones.

Her? She was slowly being spackled by a layer of drool, urine and spit up milk. Her blade was a sinking weight at her side, shield still hanging on her back bumping into the walls and furniture as she walked along. Lucia thought every few minutes about disarming herself, so as to chase the girls better. To make it easier on herself to cuddle the squirming ball of misery that was the Dragonborn’s son. Every time she made a move to place the babe down, he grasped her with tiny fists, so pathetic in his distress that she was moved to bounce him yet again on her shoulder.
Phwoar. One at a time, perhaps, the children might have been a pleasure. Together, they were an incredible chore.

Normally, a chore Lucia would have enjoyed. Playing with babies was far more fun than, say, fletching arrows. Or sharpening blades by the hour under Eorlund’s hawklike supervision.

But not like this. Not as thunder rumbled outside, above ground...the older women nervously jumping at every sound and flash of candlelight. Dust pattered down from the ceiling crossbeams, coating Carlotta’s hair in grey as she worried her lip, folding and refolding swaddling clothes. Njada paced the length of the hall, stopping near the bathing rooms that were protected by gate lock and key, then striding back all the way to the offices and bedrooms once more.

And the bairns would not shut up. Wiping snot off of her neck, Lucia gratefully passed Thadrig to Njada. The Block trainer cleaned up his face with a linen scrap, wincing at the high decibels of sheer torment coming from the little one. “Dragonborn’s son, all right. The bairn shrieks louder than a skeever being skinned alive.”

“Eww. How would you know what that...never mind.” Receiving him back, when Njada’s cautious handling made Thadrig shriek even louder, Lucia sighed and began the cycle once more. Pat pat pat the back. Rub, to ensure the babe burped up whatever air he was currently inhaling along with his snot. Bounce, bounce the babe against her shoulder, so the rhythm soothed him into what would hopefully be a restful sleep.

Finally cried out, Thadrig whimpered fitfully as she continued the same rubbing, patting pattern. Soon, he would fall asleep at last, she thought expectantly. Then she could sit down. Maybe take off the heavy burden of her weapons and leather armor, too. It was surprisingly warm near the bathing pools.

Carlotta had achieved some success. Both girls lay asleep at her feet, rolled up in fur bedrolls. Their wispy blonde hair framed faces that were deceptively peaceful in slumber. Lucia couldn’t decide which parent they took after most; Carlotta or Farkas. They were a fair blend of both.

The baby sucked at his fist, his soft back still quivering as he settled down in her arms. “That’s right, little one.” Lucia whispered, shooting Carlotta a grateful look. “Sleep now, Tiny Thad. It will all be over soon. Just go to bed.”

“I’ve a space for him right her, next to the girls when he drops off.” Carlotta whispered, rubbing her eyes as she held back a yawn.

Turning to Njada, Lucia was about to ask where the closest chamberpot was, when she noticed the Block Trainer standing completely still. “Njada? What is it?”

Blinking, her jaw worked as the Nord woman struggled to speak. With a sharp burst of fear, Lucia saw the arrow that had suddenly grown from her breastplate, punched straight through the iron unnoticed amidst the noise Thadrig had been making.

As she stared, it was as though her gaze summoned the blood. Trickling wetly through the arrowpoint hole, it welled from Njada’s open mouth as her large, brown eyes blinked, near glazed over in shock.

Carlotta had not seen yet, or else Lucia was sure it would not be quite so silent here in the basement. She felt a gripping tension overcome her, her heart leaping in her chest as she consciously willed herself not to squeeze the babe overmuch. Forcing her body to act like nothing was wrong; to continue bobbing, patting and rocking, even as Njada took one, fumbling step forward and then
slumped against the wall, still trying to speak through the blood that now painted her chin.

Over Njada’s shoulder, she could make out figures standing behind the barred gate that led to the hot springs. A man, tall and rough, wearing a bearskin over his head like a hood. He smiled, exposing yellowed, crooked teeth. The Stormcloak next to him had nocked another arrow, aimed directly at Lucia and Thadrig.

Her eyes were immediately drawn to that arrowpoint, so sharp and small. Death in the release of a finger. Her chest hurt; and suddenly she realized that she had stopped breathing altogether. Nothing was more important than watching that arrow.

The man’s voice was a croaked whisper. Friendly, like.

“Ease down, lass. We won’t hurt you. Just...bring me the bairn. That’s a good girl. And the keys, too.”
Chapter Notes

I listened to Wardruna's 'Odal' while writing this. A bit more hopeful, than just pounding drums and war horns. The kids singing along in swedish is super cute.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_QbyP6q0AQ

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The harshness of Skyrim has a way of carving a man down to his true self.”

-Tullius, General of the Imperial Legion

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The arrow pulled tight had her at a disadvantage. But not for long.

Lucia did not dare turn to look, but did observe the moment Carlotta heard the bear man speak. She could almost see in her mind’s eye the Imperial woman notice the arrow in Njada's chest, for the mother reacted with a terrified indrawn gasp.

The world was strangely vivid; every sense on high alert as Lucia, conscious of the archer tracking her every move, cautiously placed one foot forward. Then another, turning her body so that the shield she still wore on her back was now in front of her and Thadrig.

Reaching out one shaky hand for the keyring that hung on Njada’s belt, Lucia stared into the Nord woman’s glassy eyes. Flicking her eyes towards the healing potion, concealed in her knapsack upon the nearby table, Lucia prayed the woman would know her meaning. Please don't run me through for doing this. We can take them!

The Companion seemed to understand; her fierce grin sudden and bloodstained.

The keys jingled in her hand.

Collapsing as she tried to reach out to a retreating Lucia, Njada fell over upon the table, groaning. Playing it up much? Lucia thought, nerves fairly singing with anxiety as she eased her way towards the gate. She hoped it was all an act, or else this would be, would be… no don’t think about it. Companions aren’t afraid of anything!

“That’s right. No fast movements, you hear me lass? Slow and smooth.”

The smelly bastard was so cocksure superior as she managed (after a few fumbling tries while trying
to maintain constant watch on the arrow) to unlock the gates. So assured that once the gate opened, he swept right in followed by the archer.

Just the two then. For now.

Lucia backed away as they entered the basement more fully. The older one scanned the room, seeming to search for something. “This can’t be it. Two women and a girl, ah…” the twins had stirred with the footsteps and noise. “Three girls. And the Dragonborn’s child.”

The archer smiled triumphantly. “Galmar, we’ve done it. The battle is over.”

“Not yet, Ralof. Shor’s sack, you’re an impatient one. Go on now, take the child. You know what to do.”

Thadrig’s whimpering changed into short, sharp cries. No doubt brought on by the tension in her arms, Lucia thought. Who could blame her? The archer had his attention fully fixed on her now, as she slowly inched towards the door that led upstairs. Poor Carlotta...hopefully Njada could help her now. Lucia couldn’t really draw her sword without adjusting Thadrig and giving away her intentions. Better to run for it. She was fast.

The one the archer called Galmar walked towards Carlotta and the twins casually, like he was on an evening stroll. “Hey Imperial. You’re the Dragonborn’s sister by marriage, aye? You come too.”

Ralof continued approaching Lucia, the bowstring slackening as he winced at the loudness of the baby’s yowling cries. “Got a screamer here. Come on, just hand him ov-”

wrrrrrhKtcthunk.

Lucia froze the moment the archer did, his bow falling from unmoving hands as eyes rolled up into his skull and he crashed down, weighed by the sharpened shield jutting from the back of his neck. He sprawled nearly on top of her feet, body shivering in mild tremors. The nerves did that, Lucia vaguely remembered, appalled at the ease at which life could be taken. Just like that. Alive. Then, dead.

Everything seemed to happen at once.

Njada (still sporting an arrow in the chest) picked up her sword and emitted a harsh, throaty gargle. Galmar managed to turn just in time to avoid her first wild swing, those creased eyes bugging out in surprise as he took in Njada and the now dead Ralof.

Lifting his greataxe with one smooth motion, the bear man dodged another attack and stepped into Njada’s personal space. Carlotta screamed behind him, as Galmar impaled Njada in the throat with the spiked head of his weapon. Her teeth were bared in a fierce snarl of pain, as blood fountained over the man’s fists and axe haft, dripping on the floor.

Jerking it up again, seemingly stirring the woman’s brains with the sharp point as Njada slumped in death, Galmar lifted a armored boot and kicked her backwards. She fell with a heavy leaden bump, so final , as Njada slumped in an undignified sprawl. And all the while, Carlotta continued to shriek in horror, her voice accompanied by thin dual wails as the twin girls awakened from their sleep. 

Run run hide run NO. Lucia grit her teeth and drew her sword, moving the ever-wriggling Thadrig to her left hip as she panicked, trying to decide what to do. Can’t run. Put him down, then fight. He won’t be trampled if I lay him here. He could roll, but oh gods, I’m dead if I go after that beast.
Dead dead dead. We’re all dead!

“Put the sword down, girl. I won’t ask again.”

Lucia was shocked from her woolgathering as Njada’s killer squared off with her, the red tipped greataxe securely held in his knotty hands.

She bit her lip. She believed him when he said this was her last chance. The man’s mouth was pulled down in a deeply grooved frown, a tic in his forehead beating almost in time to the moans of misery behind him. Those eyes were cold as a blizzard in Morning Star.

A Companion never backs down. Slowly, carefully placing Thadrig down beneath a near table, she pushed a box beside the crying babe, to prevent him from rolling away. Grasping her shield with her left hand, Lucia felt a ripple of nausea tighten her gut as Galmar made a noise of disgust. “So be it, lass.”

Thrust, parry. Or was it parry, then thrust? All the lessons she had sat through, all her hours of training with dummies and her instructors became mental mush, as the towering Nord stalked toward her. Gripping her sword handle tightly, she lifted her chin, defiant. She would do her very best, to keep this one’s stinking hands off of Thadrig! He wouldn’t touch him!

Lunging forward, Lucia battered at him with her shield, then pushed her right arm holding her sword out in a firm thrust. It pierced the bear man’s shoulder, right through his chainmail. Harder, yet easier than piercing burlap dummies, for the chainmail provided tough resistance to her sword. But it slid so smoothly through the meat of his body…

Jerking it back again, Lucia stood at the ready, flushed with success. Galmar didn’t even seem fazed, as blood dripped from his wound. “Not bad. For an Imperial bitch.”

“Hyaaargghh!”

It was almost comical, Lucia thought in dazed amusement, as Galmar stumbled beneath the attack that came from behind, ripping deep into his torso. Revealing Carlotta, her dark eyes wild with rage as she swung Njada’s sword up overhead for a killing blow. Like a painting, Lucia could see the twins sitting upright, staring at their mother with solemn faces. Gydda was sucking her thumb.

Another hit. Lucia blinked, swinging her sword in readiness. She hadn’t thought Carlotta had any fighting experience, but she seemed utterly intent upon the Nord.

Galmar staggered, bent over clutching the slash to his side, panting in anger. Lucia could see the Nord’s eyes dart to her, nearly telegraphing his next move. Moving swiftly, she felt a surge of brutality surge through her as she kicked his face to stun him; then grasped the end of his massive waraxe and tugged it away from nerveless fingers. That’s for Njada Stone-Arm!

This was no longer a fight. It was, Lucia thought, as Carlotta stabbed downwards into the Nord’s back with a wet thud, an execution.
Raising the sword again, Carlotta’s breath hissed through her teeth as she sucked in another breath, then sliced into him once more. Digging deeply, twisting in the tip of the sword clutched in her white knuckled grasp. “If you go to Sovngarde...be sure to tell them...an Imperial *bitch* sent you!”

But Galmar was beyond hearing, his bloodshot eyes staring at nothing as his last breath shuddered from him. Still, Lucia marveled, the woman continued to stab him in a frenzy. “Um...Carlotta? I think he’s gone.”

Wiping her forehead with a shaky hand, Carlotta continued to pant. It was as though she didn’t hear her at all, as she grasped the greasy mass of the bear pelt and tugged it off. Fjora had toddled over to Njada’s body and was poking her with one chubby finger, making plaintive noises. Gydda continued sitting and sucking her thumb, pale eyes focused intently on her mother as Carlotta lifted Galmar’s head by the hair. And with unsteady movements, began chopping it off at the neck with Skyforge steel.

*Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.* Feeling sick, Lucia picked up the keys from where they had dropped on the floor at some point, then wobbled over to the bathing pool door and locked it tight.

**Thadrig.** The baby!

Pulling out the box that kept him safely hidden beneath the table, Lucia peered at him. Contentedly sucking at his thumb, Thadrig blinked at her with dark hazel eyes. Phew. He had soiled his breechclout. As she touched him, pulling at his tunic to roll the babe closer, he gave her an adorable gum-laden grin.

Shaking, she picked him up and held him close, ignoring just how bad he smelled. *Safe.* For now. Her mind raced, as she hefted the baby over her shoulder and turned to Carlotta. Finished with her macabre task, the Imperial woman had pulled Fjora off of Njada and was arranging the body of her friend with carefully slow, weighted movements.

A lump appeared in Lucia’s throat. *Njada had saved her life.* “So, she...she really is...”

“Yes.” Closing eyelids over those blank brown eyes with a gentle hand, Carlotta placed the sword she had used to dismember Galmar reverently upon the Companion’s chest. Gydda clung to her legs, a smear of blood painted stark red upon her cheek as she looked up at Lucia. “...Ud. Buhd.”

Lucia laughed, reaching for a fresh clout and the ewer of water for Thadrig. “Have they been speaking already?”

“Yes.” Seeming to look through the walls, Carlotta wrapped her fingers even more tightly in the hair of the decapitated Galmar. Gore dripped from the stump of the neck. “Blood, Gydda. That’s blood.”

********

The mammoths thundered into Whiterun at a full gallop, trampling everything that stood in their way. The gatehouse had been completely destroyed, part of the wall obliterated as if it never had been.

As she soared overhead on Odahviing, Sigrid kept a good hold upon her sunhallowed blade. Much good it would do her, all the way up here. “Odahviing! Dinnertime! Let’s stop these walking steaks from causing any more damage. Za'u piraak bahlok!”
The great red dragon growled beneath her. “Hmm, vahzah. Good eating.” Wheeling towards the mammoths that were stomping their way towards the market, Sigrid saw one of the beasts veer off, overwhelmed by ropes and pincushioned by arrows. There came a cry from below, as the fighters of Whiterun swarmed the mammoth and its rider, stabbing and slashing. She could barely make out Lars Battleborn as he fairly skewered the mammoth’s eye, stabbing straight into the brain to end its life. She raised her sword in a salute that he probably couldn’t see, all the way up here. *Good on ya, kid.*

Further on the eastern edge of the wall, Sigrid could see the warriors of Thirsk kick off yet another ladder. They had arrived just in time to help prepare against the invading horde, their leader Bujold stiffly proud upon being greeted. Yet they had helped, as they had promised so long ago.

The Dragonborn was grateful for their assistance, particularly in setting up the spiked barricades that had already bought so much time. She could see Stormcloak bodies embedded upon the barriers, limply swaying upon the sharpened timbers protecting the townsfolk. Some of the more stubborn folk had elected to protect their shops and homes, instead of seeking shelter beneath Dragonsreach. She prayed they would not come to regret their decision. The death toll was already high enough.

Furling his great wings, Sigrid grinned in expectation as Odahviing dived towards the nearest mammoth. The wind roared against her face, drying her eyes as they nearly crashed into the ground with the force of the swooping attack. Grasping with taloned feet, Odahviing seized a mammoth, causing it to trumpet in agony as he continued puncturing the hide with dagger-like claws, dragging it away.

Leaning over, still clutching the dovah’s spikes, Sigrid took the head of the surprised Nord rider with a lazy swipe of her sword. The headless body fell, immediately covered from sight by the other two beasts who stamped and bugled as the dragon struggled to regain altitude.

Flapping furiously, she called out encouragement as Odahviing struggled to lift the struggling mammoth, whose movements were sluggish as the talons continued to squeeze and tear, all the way over the wall. “There! Right there!”

The dovah roared in triumph and strain as, releasing his burden, it crashed heavily into a screaming group of Stormcloaks who were attempting to raise another ladder. “Bravo! Brit gah, Odahviing! Back to Dragonsreach!”

Sigrid could see the remaining mammoth had been stilled by their riders near the Gildergreen, as none other than Ulfric Stormcloak dismounted one of them and strode up the steps to Dragonsreach. Like he hadn’t a care in the world, surrounded by the fire and destruction he had brought upon them.

Well, *that* wouldn’t do. “Back! Back to the sky balcony my friend!”

Odahviing roared in approval, climbing the eddies of air and giving the Dragonborn a full view of the battle below. More Stormcloaks were pouring in through the holes in the wall, slogging through mud and rain as they sought to regroup near the Wind District. But (Thank Shor and Kyne) they were steadily rebuffed by Whiterun’s remaining fighters. The corpses that looked so small from up here, like miniature action figures, littered the ground. They lay most thickly near the drawbridge and gates, surrounded by heaps of rubble and rock. The numbers of the dead must have attained quite a height to create the veritable wall of bodies she could see now. *Where is Farkas? Athis? Anoriath?*

Her eyes nearly smarting from the effort of searching at a distance, she leaned back on the dovah’s back. No use. She prayed Danica would be safe in the Temple of Kynareth, that the fighters below had a clear path to drag their comrades to safety and healing. Her vision became obscured as the rain returned, in blasting icy needles as the wind picked up.
Turning her gaze all around Whiterun, Sigrid allowed herself to hope, as she looked far off into the southeast. There were no more moving figures crawling towards them. Ulfric had run out of men. The trebuchets no longer fired.

This was it. The end of it all.

**********

Flanked by his generals and what Stormcloaks had survived the assault, Ulfric opened the great doors of Dragonsreach. They opened for him with a deep groan, the dimness inside like the belly of a whale. He had seen one once, upon a ship outside of Windhelm as he had returned home after the Great War. The great fish had spouted in the distance, rolling in the water with a similar sound. A high, rasping screech. Like an unoiled gate hinge. How lonely it must have been for the lone whale, he remembered pondering. To wander the great depthless deeps alone.

Why that memory had surfaced for him now did not bear further thought. He was never alone. Blanking his mind from distraction, Ulfric continued striding forward into the throne room.

They were there, waiting for him. Evenly matched in numbers, as it turned out. Jarl Olfrid Battleborn and his sons. Olfina and Avulstein Gray-Mane, the traitorous bastards. How far the loyal family of Gray-Mane had fallen, in this Talos-forsaken place.

Thane Vilkas stood next to his wife, both bearing blades at the ready and fixing him with the cold stares of judgement passed. Idly, Ulfric wondered where Galmar was. According to their plans, Galmar should have met him at the Gildergreen bearing the Dragonborn’s bairn before they ascended to Dragonsreach. An invaluable bargaining chip. A chance, perhaps, to reduce the bloodshed and ease the stubborn woman into doing his bidding.

He was not here now. A shame. No use in delaying the inevitable. “Surrender the city, Battle-Born.”

The Jarl shifted in his chair. The man looked old, tired. "You realize this is exactly what they wanted, Bear of Markarth."

"What who wanted?" He’d make them say it. Out loud, in front of the pretender. The Dragonborn. No true Nord would suffer (he shivered in rage at the very thought) friendship with the Thalmor. Any Thalmor elf, with saccharine smile and barbed words, ever ready to pounce upon an unsuspecting back. No. This farce ended here.

It was Thane Vilkas who spoke next, assuming much. Too much, in front of his betters. "The Thalmor. They stirred up trouble. Forced Skyrim to divert needed resources and throw away good warriors quelling this rebellion."

Shaking his head, Ulfric could not help but smile a bit. "It's a little more than a rebellion, don't you think?" Disregarding the Thane, Ulfric turned once more to the Jarl of Whiterun. “Why side with the Empire, Olfrid? You were a mighty fighter once. I remember your exploits in the Great War. How has it come to this?”

Leaning forward from his slouch, Jarl Battle-Born sneered. "Mutual advantage! Any fool can see that. For centuries, we have benefited from the Empire's protection, and prosperous trade with the south. In exchange, the people of Cyrodiil sleep peacefully, knowing their northern border is guarded by the fiercest warriors in all Tamriel."
The Dragonborn chose that moment to speak, her words carefully chosen as her choice of armor. *Dragonscales indeed. Ostentatious.* “King Balgruuf still trades with the Empire, but make no mistake. Skyrim is no longer part of the Empire. We do not enforce the White Gold Concordat, and Solitude no longer houses the Thalmor Embassy. No more fighting, Ulfric. Step down now, before you add to your list of regrets.”

“My regretssss…” Again, in the woman’s presence, Ulfric felt a wave of rage nearly entrap him as he longed to part her head from her neck. His fingers were twitching, even now. Straining to draw his sword from his scabbard. “I regret only my failure to halt your poisonous influence, madam. Elf lover. Traitor! Too many good sons and daughters of Skyrim have died, thanks to you and your womanly wiles.”

Stepping forward, she bore a strange gleam in her eye as she opened her mouth to speak a retort - until her husband barred her way.

The only sound that marked the moment was the popping sizzle of the great hall’s fire, as the two shared a look. Nodding, the Dragonborn stepped back with a troubled frown. Seemingly from nowhere, a young woman armed with sword and shield skittered to her side. Bending over, her eyes never left Ulfric as the young gangly thing whispered in her ear; the news darkening the Dragonborn’s face into a wrathful cloud.

Ulfric lifted his hand as his generals paced impatiently, staying them from further action. He would be patient. He had waited too long; had lost too much sleep and health over this course of action to not see it through now.

Thane Vilkas stepped up to the girl, who bowed slightly and offered a grime-coated knapsack like it contained the jewels for Barenziah’s crown. Smiling at its contents, Vilkas reached in and drew out the head of what was undoubtedly Galmar. Grabbing it by a hank of greying hair, the Thane brandished the face towards the Stormcloaks. “Here is the outcome of your underhanded scheming, you festering honorless shitebag.”

Hearing the Dragonborn gasp and the room break out into stunned chatter (and cries of outrage, among his warriors) Ulfric felt nothing but a deep, upwelling sadness. A great man, Galmar. He had sacrificed his all for the cause.

*He would ensure they paid dearly in the same currency.* “I would not have injured the child, Dragonborn.”

“-you bastard. You DARED …” -Cutting her off from further speech, the words she had uttered already rumbling the keep with their sepulchrous tones, Vilkas stepped forward. A casual gesture sent the head rolling at Ulfric’s feet. Those icy grey eyes rimmed in warpaint held a hint of scorn, as the Thane’s voice rang out in the hall, echoing in the rafters.


Silence greeted his statement. Silence weighted with watchful expectation, as all eyes turned to the
Chapter End Notes

Duels of honor were apparently a thing even back in Viking era Scandinavia. A way to prevent further blood feuds between families, to end violence in a way that preserved the touchy sense of honor those warriors gladly fought to attain and keep.

http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/holmgang.shtml
Chapter Notes

The song 'Warrior', by Anilah and Einar Selvik. A haunting omage to the concept of dying, being lifted by a valkyrie up to Valhalla. Appropriate.

- Lyrics : Warrior

Reasoning lets go
and I am propelled in to you
My Skin widening...

Reasoning lets go
and I am propelled into you

Hands and arms grow
and I release what must go
My skin widening
to feel your angelic arms

((Come close
so that I can melt into you))
Come Close…

Reasoning lets go
and I am propelled in to you
My skin widening
to your angelic arms
Leaving this weight behind
My spine becomes light

((Clean my senses
so that I can hear you clearly))

Reasoning lets go
and I am propelled into you
hands and eyes grow
and i release what must go

My Skin widening...
to feel your angelic arms

"Warriors move gracefully"

We lay down our weapons
at your feet
take us with grace
to the other field

Can we Lay down our weapons
and the tired intellect
rise above
and...

((Bring me Grace))
I know you Can.

(Einar's Norse choral lyrics translated:
Unharmed to the battle,
Unharmed from the battle,
Unharmed wherever they go)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4t-Vf5OdoB0&list=RD4t-Vf5OdoB0&index=1

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Silence greeted Thane Vilkas’ statement. Silence weighted with watchful expectation, as all eyes turned to the Jarl of Windhelm.

Considering his options, Ulfric allowed his gaze to rest upon the severed head of Galmar Stone-fist. The man had been a force to be reckoned with in life. In death, he was shrunken and small. The face was slack, mouth open with the swollen dark tongue protruding. What was visible of the eyes beneath sagging eyelids was mere white sclera; blood drained so completely from the ragged stump that the skin was nearly blue beneath the bristling beard.

“I accept your terms.”

Words were no longer necessary. Removing his fur cloak, Ulfric handed off his spare axe and shield to a waiting Stormcloak, who accepted his things with a nod of awe. Einvigl, a duel of honor that relied upon luck and strength, was a fair opportunity. The Jarl of Windhelm was at least a decade or two older than the Thane. But far superior in experience. Not even a Companion could claim the same familiarity with warfare that Ulfric had acquired over the long course of his life.

Across the cleared hall, he could see his opponent prepare as well. Ignoring the muttering of the surrounding men and women, Vilkas tested the edge of his greatsword against his thumb for sharpness. Removed all unnecessary weight, such as the backpack slung around his shoulders as the Dragonborn whispered into his ear hurriedly; her small hand grasping his as the girl-child who delivered the head stood staunchly at her side. Glaring daggers at Ulfric Stormcloak.

Soon, they were both ready. Facing off, the observers formed a tight unbroken ring around the two men, circled around the firepit and hastily cleared tables and chairs. Wide enough to provide ample room for maneuvering and striking; tight enough that they would be hard pressed to keep their distance.

Ulfric figured he should say something. For the bards to write songs about, perhaps. "War always comes down to this, doesn't it? A single truth-laden moment."
Seeing the Companion remain blank faced, stoically unresponsive to his statement, he held up his hand to stay the beginning of the duel. “...Dragonborn.”

Arms folded, she tilted her head and fixed him with a look that could curdle milk. “Why do you not fight me in your husband’s stead? Are you not afraid for his life against a fellow Speaker of the Voice? I’m beginning to detect a pattern in your dealings with others, woman.”

Seeing her grind her jaw in a fit of temper, Ulfric felt his smile widen...only to fade as Vilkas huffed. “Aye, my woman would fight you in an instant, dog. But as her husband, I take insult to your attempts to kill my wife and child.”

The massive daedric blade shone in the firelight as he bore it aloft. “Honorless, I call you. You’re no true Nord’s equal. Nor a man, by your actions. Stand and face me.”

“More of a Nord than you, elf friend. Cunt lapping bitch to that sorceress over there. If any man is unmanned, ’tis you Companion.”

They began circling one another, both watchful and waiting for the other to make a move. Any move.

Feeling a roar erupt from his throat Ulfric sprang into action, swinging his blade up in a sweeping arc. Aiming amidst the wild battlejoy, the song of his ancestors singing in his veins, for the breaks in his opponent's armor. The pale line of throat exposed above the plate metal.

Metal screeched and sparks flew as Vilkas deflected the blow. Swords skidded against one another as they broke apart, then struck once, twice more.

Back and forth, they tested one another, the cutting and slashing forms at once familiar and unexpected. As they stepped and parried...movements familiar to them both in the dance of death, the Jarl could find things to admire about his opponents form. Vilkas favored sudden, swift attack, taking advantage of the slightest opening. The double handed blade appeared to weigh nothing as it spun skillfully in his hands, those grey eyes completely focused upon Ulfric. Every movement. Each tendon tightening the hands that held his sword watched, waiting for a chance. A slide backwards was enough to leave Ulfric open, receiving a long cut that burned like fire and ice to his thigh. He would have been hamstrung, had the blade landed upon its target.

Ulfric feinted and swung. Vilkas parried, all to a backdrop of cheering, shouts and cries that fell dully upon their ears, drowned out by the beat of the blood pounding within. Nothing but the fight now. Man against man.

Loath as he was to admit it, Ulfric was slowly tiring. He had not partaken in a pitched battle like this for some time...the last instance being the escape during Helgen. Vilkas was tireless, remorselessly driving him around the circle of now face-less spectators as they continued to strike and seek the weakness in the other’s stance.

His breath caught in a sudden shout of victory as his blade sliced across the Companion’s eye. Clapping a hand over his bleeding face, Vilkas wavered. Retreated, barely kept him at bay with one hand, bringing up the monstrous weight of the daedric blade again and again as Ulfric pursued him with renewed energy.

Let it be over. Finally bringing both hands to bear once more, Thane Vilkas kept his right eye open and affixed to Ulfric; as the left side of his face swelled shut, running over with blood from the vertical blow.
He could hear the Dragonborn scream in her fury at the wound her mate had taken, the very pillars of Dragonsreach shaking with her ire. “Want me to close my eyes, Thane? Just to even the odds?” Ulfric laughed, feeling strangely light. **Youthful exuberance against the cleverness of age and wisdom? I see your death, Companion.**

In the next instant, he regretted his boast. Hard and heavy, the ornate pommel of the Companion’s warblade slammed into his jaw, twisting it with a crunching pop and pushing Ulfric back several feet, as he struggled to maintain a clear head from the unexpected attack.

Spitting out a loose tooth, Ulfric labored to breath in and out, hateful spite roiling up deep within him...begging to be set free. **If honor were profitable, everyone would be honorable.**

And oh, wasn’t he utterly gratified to see Vilkas’s good eye flare wide open as he Shouted the young fool down... **“Fus Roh Dah!”**

His Thu’um hit the man like a battering ram. Fairly ricocheting off of the spectators he was thrown against, the Thane staggered upright with assistance from his wife and the Gray-Manes. Shouts and accusations were tossed back and forth, screams of foul play ignored as the battle began in earnest now between the two factions.

He could see his brave Stormcloaks run forward with howling war cries to attack the warriors of Whiterun. Thumbing blood from his busted lip and chin, Ulfric licked his lips and grinned at the Dragonborn. Even now, she hid behind her husband...whispering something that sounded suspiciously like Dovahzul as the dazed look cleared from the Thane’s face. The young girl was nowhere to be seen; likely hiding. Which suited Ulfric; he had no desire to slay a girl child.

As Ulfric avoided a clumsy swinging attack from Olfina Gray-Mane (the woman cut down with a high pitched shriek by Hjornskar Head-Smasher) he watched with mild curiosity as the wound on the Companion’s face began to knit itself slowly together. The swelling flattened until there was but a single red slash of crimson upon the young man’s face.

No time to gawk at a Shout that could heal. Not for the first time, Ulfric wished the Dragonborn had come to him. Joined his cause before she had become...tainted. In his peripheral vision, Idolaf Battle-Born came swinging at him with twin axes, roaring out, “Call yourself a True Nord?”

“More than you, pup.” Easily spinning out of the way, Ulfric’s sword nearly split the man in two. As Idolaf kneeled over, grasping his own intestines as they spilled from his tunic, the Jarl found himself balancing his attentions between the warriors seeking his life and the unceasing glare of the Dragonborn as she continued to whisper into her husband’s ear.

Come on. Come at me, bitch.

It was almost as though she knew exactly what he was thinking. Her smile stretched wide as she noticed him looking at her, taunting him with its savage mockery. The Thane’s face bore nearly the opposite expression; a cold so cuttingly stark that it transformed the man’s face into the blank reflection of an iceberg.

Avoiding death with graceful economy of motion, Ulfric managed to come closer. Nearer to the Dragonborn and her spouse. Slash, thrust, step. He was nearly upon them, noting with satisfaction how shakily Vilkas stood, supported by his wife as they both merely watched him approach, screams
of the dying filling the air as he reveled in the coming of their end.

A clear opening. Space, provided by the death of his general at the hands of the old Jarl Battle-Born, the man sliding off of the great war axe to land almost atop the sprawled bodies of his men. No matter. He was almost -

There.

No.

His chest felt curiously tight. Ulfric tried, but could not draw breath but in small, hitching gasps, as the sword that pierced his right side was withdrawn.

*The Imperial girl*. The one who delivered the head and the message. She stood, shaking in fear and pride, holding the sword that bore his blood on it straight and proud. Lifted her small chin in a bravery he had to respect. “L-leave them alone. You skeever shit!”

Ulfric had a moment to wonder how the childish insult would go over, in the songs that would be sung about this battle. Merely raising his eyebrow in amusement at the bothersome chit, he shook off the pain and mentally promised he would find and slay the girl, later.

For Vilkas now stood in front of him. Had he moved, while the girl called him names? Ulfric couldn’t tell. Everything seemed blurred, somehow.

Blood coated the Companion’s face, painting his grim features scarlet. Feeling for the potion he always carried in his vest, Ulfric’s hands shook as he struggled to uncap his salvation.

Was thwarted, as the man slowly reached over and took the potion. Maintaining a strangely intimate eye contact, he upended the bottle, pouring it out.

Swallowing with his efforts to continue breathing, in and out, Ulfric watched the last cloudy drop of potion hit the stone floor. Nearly indistinguishable from the gore that coated the stone flagged floor now. A sense of calm filled him, as he grasped his sword. “Let the Dragonborn do it. It will make for a better song.” *Bring her to me.*

Still studying him, Thane Vilkas shook his head. Light gleamed on the night black metal that ran with glistening red, as he raised his blade. “No one to follow you. No one to mourn your passing. You possess no honor, Ulfric Stormcloak, and now…”

Raising his blade high with both hands, Ulfric saw the promise of death given (so long ago, he had not really believed) about to be fulfilled, in those winter-cold eyes.

“And now, you’ve lost your very life.”

The blade made a rushing sigh, like an incoming wind, as Ulfric boldly maintained eye contact. Staring into those pale irises swallowing him up, aware of each pulse of his heart…

-Until his sight bounced, somehow, and black spiderwebs burst in his retinas, as suddenly the Thane was upside down and white light took him away, where he knew no more.
Wings.

Light, haloing in a radiant nimbus around wings. A face, pale and pure lowering towards him. Dark eyes watching. Judging his actions, his heart.

Farkas knew he was close to the end. The valkyrja had come; those battle maidens of Sovngarde who wandered the fields of war. Ephemeral, winged women that chose the valorous dead and lifted them from pain and suffering, bound for Shor’s Hall.

Had he shown no fear, when the wall fell? Farkas could not remember more than the sudden crash; the pain leeching into a numb panic as he drew breath with increasing difficulty. A sliver of light was all he could see, before the valkyrja lifted the massive stone block from his chest, leaving him feeling curiously weightless.

Carlotta. Wincing at the white light that nearly eclipsed the winged creature, Farkas blinked away the filmy haze that shrouded his vision. Fjora. Gydda. Vilka. Sigrid. Little Thadrig. His family…

Would they endure bravely without him? He had tried his best. Fought well upon the wall of Whiterun against the invaders. He wished the pouring of the boiling oil had not been his task to complete, for the screams of the dying haunted him still. A bad way to go. But being smashed by the falling gatehouse was not much better, if the Nord was to be honest to himself.

“...Farkas. Farkas! Hold on!”

The valkyrja’s smooth, featureless face suddenly drew back, flapping wings buffeting his numb face with a gust of grit and ash.

He coughed weakly. Oh gods no. She was leaving him…unworthy…he would never walk across the whalebone bridge…Da, Ma…

"Come...back…” he breathed, barely audible against the shallow wetness of the blood welling within him. Bleeding inside…fuck. Another shitty way to die. He allowed himself a wry grin. Death by mammoth, by crushing rockfall. And now suffocating inside by the blood that filled his lungs. Huh. No one could say he had not suffered. Pain, ah gods...despite how flayed his nerves had already been, so damaged he could see nothing but white now, as more rock was lifted from him…

It still hurt like a motherfucker.

“- Farkas!”

Vilkas?

A rough sob sounded above him, as the other voices melded into a rush of waters that swept him away. Taking away all hurts, all his awareness as Farkas accepted it. Welcomed with open arms the total oblivion of black easing away the white.
Take me away.

“...He’s alive! We’ve got to get him to Danica, now! Odahviing, carefully!”

The Temple of Kynareth was full to the brim. Never had it been so noisily crammed with broken and bleeding warriors. Red of blood and the blackened ash mingled with earth dirtied the tiled pools of water, all benches and beds occupied with the injured until even the pools were filled with those seeking succor. Danica moved briskly, assisted by her acolytes as they sorted the worst from those who could wait a bit longer for her expert care. Shouts, cries for help drowned the softer pleas for water, for mother...the forlorn sobbing of those who had lost beloved ones, as the dead were hastily taken out to make room for the still living. All this mass of emotion rebounding in a black hole of misery that leaked out, as Vilkas and Sigrid shuffled the weight of an unconscious Athis inside the propped open double doors.

“Healer, here!” Vilkas called out, as Sigrid felt the grey throat for a pulse once more. Beating oh so gently - there. He was still alive. Damaged and bruised, but breathing. The Dunmer’s face resembled a pulped jazbay pie more than the handsome sharpness she had become accustomed to. His red hair lay untied, loose around his shoulders and strangely white from being coated in rock dust and plaster. 

“Hold on, you fetcher. Just...hold on to life. I’ll be back to check on you.” She whispered. Running out after Vilkas from the temple doors, she could see Odahviing hovering overhead.

“Odahviing! Come as close as you can!” She called out, nearly stumbling in her weariness. Not a minute after Ulfric’s inglorious demise, she and Vilkas had limped out of Dragonsreach. Shoving off the Jarl’s praise for their deeds, there was but one thing that occupied their mind. It wasn’t fortune or glory.

It was family.

Did theirs live, still?

Lucia had followed, supplying Vilkas with a clean length of linen to cover his badly slashed face. Quickly binding up her husband’s head, Sigrid hadn’t asked, but she could tell - her man could no longer see clearly from his left eye. It was apparent in the unsteadiness of his gait. How he favored the right side, jerking in surprise as Sigrid moved to stand at his left. Better to bind it for now, until she could attend to it. Her Shout had not done enough to heal what had been hurt inside.

The red dovah descended, accidentally snapping some of the Gildergreen’s branches as he gently laid his burden down, right there in the cobbled mud of the street. Lucia managed to spread out a bedroll beneath him as the dovah’s claws carefully opened; her face tight with unspilled tears as Farkas lay limply. Unmoving.

“Go, Lucia!” Wiping her face, Sigrid pointed at Jorrvaskr. Thank God it still stood, untouched. “Bring Carlotta here now!”

She felt Vilkas kneel next to her as she scanned her shield brother. Oh, it was bad. His face was
relatively hale and whole, but from the neck down…

The man’s nordic steelplate was bent in, puncturing the chest and gut at random intervals. His legs were a red ruin of smashed plate and so much meat. The whiteness of bone, yellowed tendon and muscle almost layered in ragged strips upon the wrecked leg guards and scraps of cloth from his pants.

Especially the left leg. The ankle and foot, Sigrid could see, were barely held on by a thin string of ligament. He was going to lose the foot, if not the entire limb.

Vilkas seemed to be in shock. Staring at his twin, he sat there and nearly trembled, as his hands danced over the mashed straps and broken armor. He looked almost piratical with the linen wrapped around his head, like an eyepatch.

Yarrgh, matey. Pinching her nose, she quickly counted to five. Keep it together, woman. More than ever, her family needed her wits to be about her. No time to fall apart.

“Vilkas. Danica can’t be spared. I’ll use a Shout, but we have to get this armor off before it heals around the bits inside.”

Making sure he understood, she waited for her husband to nod. Working swiftly, they attacked the straps with knives, cutting through what remained of Farkas’ smallclothes, furs and clothing, until it was just the breastplate that remained.

Nothing for it. “When I say, lift the armor up and out. I will speak the Shout for as long as I can. We’ll try to get some healing potion down his throat later.”

Vilkas laid his hands upon his brother’s breastplate. She heard him suck in a quavering breath, and give her a sharp nod. Good. “Odahviing. Help me.”

The dovah really was too big for the Wind District. His tail knocked over a wooden bench, sending it rolling into the Hall of the Dead where it smashed against a gravestone. “Geh, Dovahkiin. At your command.”

Ignoring the raw, sandpaper rasp of her throat, Sigrid inhaled deeply. And gave her nod to go ahead, as Vilkas strained his arms to lift up the deeply embedded piece of metal. It lifted free with a thick, wet sound. Blood pumped out in sticky squirts, darkly ominous, as Vilkas’ good eye scanned his brother in worry. “Sigrid…”

Lifting her gaze to her dovah friend, Sigrid saw the wedge-shaped head dip, rumbling in anticipation. She closed her eyes. Shor and Kyne, save him. Save us all.

“Slen Ahraan Vahraan!”

Rubbing her hands over the torn flesh, the wounds in her shield brother that were nearly blue from blood loss and bruising, Sigrid focused all her willpower into a single thought. Heal.

“SLEN...AHRAAN...VAHRAAN…”

Slowly, blood ceased trickling as skin began to merge. Hastily, Sigrid pulled away any remaining fabric before it too became part of Farkas’ innards. It was like watching a flower unfold in the sun.
Pinching together the punctures, as the seam began to knit together. One moment, the gaping slabs of so much meat were open and shredded...and now.

The leg. His LEG. Oh no.

She felt panic spike as she watched the telltale black line of blood poisoning slowly rise up what was left of his left leg. Shit shit shit.

“Vilkas... fuck. It needs to come off. Now, before the black reaches his heart and stops it forever.”

Still holding the mauled breastplate, Vilkas looked at his twin in sorrow. “He might prefer to die, woman. Losing a leg…”

“...No. Save him!”

Nearly falling to Sigrid’s other side, Carlotta reached out to touch her husband. As if to reassure herself he was really there. Distress darkened the bags beneath her eyes, and her hair lay in matted bunches of black around her shoulders. For the quickest of seconds, Sigrid wondered what exactly had transpired in Jorrvaskr, to give such a normally sunny woman that look of bitter acrimony. She would ask later.

Biting her lip in agitation, Sigrid thought furiously of what was needed. Hot, boiling water. Clean cloth bandages. A tourniquet to staunch the bleeding. Alcohol, to prevent the infection that could surely kill Farkas just as easily as his other wounds. “Carlotta…”

“Yes.” Emptying out her backpack, the Imperial held up a bottle of brandy. Old Cyrodiilic brandy. Good enough. “[...I thought we’d be celebrating by now.” Her laughter had a hysterical edge to it.

“I need a saw. A clean saw. An axe, newly sharpened if you can find it.” Nodding, the woman tore off towards the Temple, pushing people out of her way in her rush to seek what Sigrid had asked for. Repeating the words of the shout beneath her breath, she felt a warm gust of brimstone-scented air caress her as Odahviing repeated it as well. Slen Ahraan Vahraan. Slen Ahraan Vahraan. Slen Ahraan Vahraan!

Vilkas had already beaten her to the tourniquet. Taking off his belt, he cinched it tightly against the pale skin of the upper thigh. Sigrid prodded the still-healing wounds of the man’s torso, wiping away caked on dirt and gore as she mindfully covered her brother’s flaccid manhood with a spare cloak. So silly. He wouldn’t care. Like whining about a fly-bite, when the sabrecat has your head in its jaws. Unable to do anything but watch the blackness creep ever higher, she prayed and fidgeted.

“Here!” Carlotta nearly boffed Sigrid in the head with the axe. Nodding as she examined the fine steel, Sigrid poured a good portion of brandy over the cutting edge. Standing, she looked at her husband and sister in law as they looked up at her with wide eyes.

“I need you to hold him still.” The black line was all the way up to his knee, now. “I’m going to take it off right below the kneecap.”

Leaning over, Vilkas embraced his brother...nearly burying his face in Farkas’ chest. Carlotta crawled over to his right leg, a low moan escaping her as she got a good look at the mass of serrated tissue; the pulped wobbling matter of the left leg greyed and cold.

Her palms were slick. Ugh. Holding the axe between her knees, Sigrid wiped her hands on her husband’s cloak in hurried, firm strokes. He didn’t move from his position, clasping his twin as though it were a lifeline.
Tightening her grip upon the axe, she steeled herself for what she was about to do. “Odahviing, please breathe flames upon my sword laying on the bench, over there. Without lighting anything else on fire.” She managed to speak beyond the chattering of her teeth. Fear; for his life was in her hands now. “We need to cauterize the...the stump as soon as I cut it off.”

Making no sound, the dovah nodded. Smoke curled from his nostrils as bright slotted eyes examined her curiously.

Lifting the axe, she breathed in. Then out.

_In. Out. One clean cut._

Making her last exhale a howl of rage, anguish and battered hope, Sigrid swung the axe down.

Chapter End Notes

"If honor were profitable, everybody would be honorable." Quote by Thomas More.

Quite true. If it was easy to be good, with an instant reward for every good deed then we would never feel the temptation to be bad, right?

I used this reference for the image of the valkyrie Farkas sees in his death vision. And yes...it was Sigrid, framed by Odahviing's wings that he really saw.

Or was it? I like the idea of valkyries swooping around Skyrim, tut-tutting at naughty whiners.
http://norse-mythology.org/gods-and-creatures/valkyries/

Please leave your comments, thrown axes and screams of rage below!
Skörd av Tacksägelse (Harvest of Thanksgiving)

Chapter Notes

Longer chapter than usual. Gosh I don't want this story to end.

Multiple references to popular movies. And one big, steaming finger aimed right at sloppy, poorly written romance novels. EVIL TOMES YOU SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED much less released past the rustling queef of whatever frowsy editor thought people needed yet another Marry a Millionaire romance. DIE SCUM.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Teldryn Sero returned to a Whiterun that had been fairly razed to the ground.

It was impressive, the Dunmer thought as he carefully picked his way through the blighted gap where the doors once stood, that the defenders of Whiterun still lived. As he walked up the road, trampled and scarred from heavy traffic, he had been staggered by the sheer number of the dead lined up and covered in shrouds. The linen lumps bordered both sides of the lane in an unending ladder that led up through the winding districts of the tundra city.

And it seems the ravens had already begun to feast. One soldier's shroud had been completely blown off, revealing a woman whose eyes were being steadily pecked out by the aforementioned bird of prey. Feeling disgusted, he kicked at the scavenger, stepping carefully around the decomposing bodies as the raven returned to its grisly meal not a moment later, reprimanding Teldryn with sharp cawing cries.

Why the Nords couldn’t just burn their dead like decent people, he would never know. They kept the cloying remains in their burial caves and halls, sometimes preserving those who had been noble or notable with repugnant salts and herbs. Leaving them to dry out and terrify all younglings who chanced to see the body, all wrapped in furs and jewels, dessicated and dry in Arkay’s name. Truly foul.

At least the Companions still seemed to keep to the old ways. Burial by fire; by flaming pyre of wood upon the Skyforge, with words spoken over the body as it burned to pure ash and smoke, rising towards Aetherius. That rumor he hoped was accurate. Though he feared to find who it was that provided the smoke of cremation spiralling high above the hull of Jorrvaskr.

Gossip had reached him while traveling back from his errand in Solitude that Ulfric Stormcloak, leader of the rebellion had disgraced himself during einvigl. Had died a poor death, though Teldryn was unsure of who actually dealt the final blow. That the Stormcloaks, who had battered themselves upon the newly raised walls like the crashing of waves, were all dead to a man. That Windhelm was in an uproar, strangled by an uprising of Dunmer, Imperial, Argonian and Khajiit who had taken over the city. That the Dragonborn had become a dragon once more, eating Stormcloak warriors by the bucketload and shitting out their bones as she flew upon the remaining rebels.

Rumors tend to be far more exciting than the truth, Teldryn observed as a group of Stormcloak prisoners were marched off towards the trade road north by some strangely familiar faces, followed by two lumbering mammoths. Warriors of Thirsk? Here? He nodded at the fighters who murmured
in surprise at his approach, as he bit back a smile beneath his helmet. Oh, he couldn’t wait to hear the blow by blow account of all this from the source.

If only his employer and her kin were actually residing in Jorrvaskr when he came to call. “Where is everyone?” He questioned the Nord girl occupied in sweeping the floor. Alsbet, if he remembered correctly. Tilma’s replacement. Though who she was tidying up the hall for, he could not tell. There was no one else present, no food set out upon the typically bursting tables. In the uncommon silence, the smoke that pervaded Whiterun floated in whorling curls of grey even here. Odd.

“They’re all at the Temple of Kynareth, sir. The...the funeral pyres still burn, from this morning. Had a ceremony and all, for the honored dead.”

Teldryn felt his gut tighten in sudden alarm. “Who died?”

Alsbet scoffed softly, eyes still focused upon her broom. “Who didn’t?” Noting his bewilderment, she took pity on the Mer. “Njada Stone-Arm. Along with half of the new bloods. Many lost at least one or two loved ones. And Harbinger Sigrid and the others have hardly left Farkas alone at the temple the last few days since he fell in battle. Go on and see for yourself.”

Taking the steps two at a time, Teldryn Sero rushed past the Gildergreen. The Hall of the Dead was crowded today. Families gathered around newly stacked graves of stone and earth, standing still and solemn as the priests continued chanting their dirge.

Who else died that I know? Pushing open the doors to Kynareth’s temple, the sellsword took in the scene before him with incredulity. Laughter echoed in the temple, merging with the sounds of children babbling and giggling. Danica Pure-Spring brushed past him bearing a basket full of bandage strips, her face lined in weariness. “Go see if you can’t talk some sense into them. I’ve had enough!”

Unsure of his welcome, Teldryn crept in a bit further. Paying close attention to the banter flying back and forth as his thin lips slowly stretched into a wide grin.

“So, how do you get a one armed man down from a tree? Well. You wave to him, of course.”

Farkas’s voice grated like a rusty hinge. “Boo. Hiss.”

"Shield-brother, I'm trying to think of more one legged jokes...but I find myself stumped!”

A chorus of groaning greeted the Harbinger’s pun as she stuck out her tongue, bouncing one of the tow-headed twins on her lap as the girl made a silly grimace in return. “Alright. You’re up, Carlotta.”

The Companions of Jorrvaskr were all gathered around a corner of the temple that had been cordoned off with woven screens. The Harbinger sat next to her husband, who was currently leaning away from the grasping fingers of his son. Thadrig had grown fat, Teldryn thought distantly, as the bairn reached over, tugging at the bandages that covered his da’s face. Smiling crookedly, the man dangled a toy of carved bone, trying unsuccessfully to distract him.

The Imperial woman, Carlotta, held the other twin on her lap with one hand, as the other was currently occupied with stroking Farkas’s dark tangled hair. Her husband lay prone on the raised stone bed, pillowng his head upon crossed arms, his tattooed back visibly tensing as the Dunmer drew nearer. Thick furs covered him from the waist down, a strange flatness in their bulk confirming Teldryn’s sinking suspicions.

It didn’t hurt that Athis sat nearby, carving a fair recreation of a wooden leg from a burled stick of wood. Shaking his knife at Teldryn, the mer’s newly scarred face lifted in a smile. “Greetings, serah.
As you can see, Farkas hasn’t got a leg to stand on.”

A deep rasp of a voice grunted out, “...Bastard. Still got one left to kick your ass.”

“That should keep you rather occupied, staying upright while doing so brother.”

“Guys, guys…” Sigrid chortled as Carlotta sent a glare that promised pain towards Athis. “Hey Teldryn. Glad to see you made it back, safe and sound. Fill me in later on the dealings of Balgruuf’s court. Since you just arrived, it’s your turn.”

“My turn?”

“Aye, friend.” Lurching for the infant as Thadrig fell over straining to reach his face, Vilkas stood the child on his lap. His mouth held a sardonic twist. “We’ve been taking potshots at each other all day, ever since we sent off Njada this morning. Your turn.”

“Something actually funny.” Carlotta offered, with a roll of her eyes as Farkas huffed a rough laugh, turning his head to push against her fingers. “Best of luck.”

Teldryn Sero blinked. Not at all unfamiliar with gallows humor, it was still a rather untoward proposition. It was as though the laughter and merriment was the bubbling skin on a churning cauldron, simmering beneath the too-bright smiles of those assembled. Keeping at bay the deep emotion he could sense vibrating through the room. He wasn’t sure he was the right mer to poke at the layers, to peel them off.

Teldryn could not abide thinking about it now. Later. After he had the chance to become inebriated, he would think about his erstwhile Companion friend then. “Very well. I saw a one legged woman outside of the Winking Skeever.”

They all stared at him, waiting for the rest as Teldryn cleared his throat, uncomfortable. His voice was muffled through the chitin helm’s mouthpiece. “She was the bouncer.”

“Oh man…” Ignoring the boos, jeers and clapping of hands, Sigrid stood up and walked over to Teldryn, pushing him playfully. “More like a hopper. Seriously.”

“Oh no.” He wasn’t done yet. He held one long finger up, bidding them to wait. “Her name…” Teldryn paused for effect.

“...Was Ilene.”

“Right. What was the name of her other leg?!?”

“I think we’re done here, aye?”

Snickering and sighs echoed, as Teldryn sat down next to Farkas on the floor with a tired thump. “Better watch out,” Carlotta cautioned with a twinkle in her dark eyes. “Vilkas has got his eye on you.”

“Just the one.” The man in question snorted, still trying to distract his son from ripping off his bandages. “Oh sister!” Putting her niece down on the floor, where she immediately wobbled off to pat her pa’s back, Sigrid began clapping solemnly. “That was an actual joke. I’m proud of you.”

“Did you know, Teldryn? Did the rumor mill spread the word that Carlotta is a total badass now?”
Taking off his gloves and helmet, the sellsword drew in a deep breath of air unscented by netch leather. The air was heavy with humidity and the smells of a sickhouse - bitter healing herbs, the fainter scents of blood and rot, washed away with the smell of water from the pools. “No, I haven’t heard anything about that. Heard plenty of other tripe, though. Tell me.”

“Well. She only killed Galmar Stone-Fist, Ulfric’s right hand man. Cut his bloody head off and sent it to us, right as we were negotiating terms in Dragonsreach.”

“I helped!” Chirped Lucia, who was sitting in the corner, cuddled up next to Lars Battle-Born who was currently snoring away.

“You certainly did.” Shivering at the memory, Carlotta smoothed down her husband’s hair. Pulling out a carved bone comb, she began sorting the knotted strands with gentle, practiced movements. “Seeing you face him like that…it gave me the courage to take up the sword and…and stop him. Though I was terrified the entire time. Never thought I’d ever have the strength of will to…to kill anyone.”

“Weell,” Drawled Sigrid lazily, as she pointedly winked at her husband who sighed in response. “I feel like killing people all the time. Bad people!” She added hurriedly as Lucia began to laugh and Carlotta clucked her tongue in resignation.

Tying Farkas’s hair back with a cord, Carlotta’s fingers began tracing the loops and whorls of the intertwining tattoo he bore upon his back. “They were going to take the children. Maybe…I don’t know. I couldn’t just sit there anymore, screaming.”

His employer’s face was serious as she looked over her sister in law. “You did the right thing.” The Harbinger shivered all of a sudden, her hazel eyes distant. “It could have all played out very differently.”

“Sigríð!”

They all turned to see Anoriath limp into the temple. The sellsword noted that while he sported bandages around his shoulder and ankle, Anoriath seemed more or less his usual cheery self. “They’re all ready for you now. The Jarl, the court…everyone is attending! Ribs and steaks are seasoned and cooked, casks are broached. Let’s go celebrate!”

Farkas made a groaning sound. “Let’s not.”

“None of that.” Handing Thadrig off to Sigrid’s open arms, Vilkas stood and walked over to his twin. “You’re going if I have to haul you there myself.”

“Here.” Returning from another corner of the healing house, Carlotta held out a pair of crutches. “They’re a bit short for you dear, but it’s not far.”

Standing as the group prepared to leave for what Teldryn assumed would be a vulgar and noisy Nord wake (the best kind) he shuffled awkwardly as Athis and Vilkas helped their shield-brother sit up from the bed.

As Farkas eased himself up to an upright position, the stub end of what remained of his left leg became visible as the furs fell away.

Teldryn kept his face smooth as the men lifted him to stand, propping the crutches under both arms. The Dunmer had seen many such wounds from encounters with veterans of the Great War. They must have seared the stump, for the end still bore blackened scorch marks upon the flesh. Neat, even stitches stood out darkly from the pale skin of the Nord. Not too shoddy. The cut had been made
right below the knee, which was a relief. The Companion would enjoy a greater range of motion than if the cut had been unfortunate enough to be taken above the joint.

Altogether not bad. As long as he did not catch a fever from infection, the outlook was hopeful. He would be able to walk upon that prosthetic Athis was fashioning soon enough.

Farkas made a face of disgust as Vilkas pulled up his pants for him, wobbling with the strain of remaining standing on one injured leg. “Aaugh, brother. Enough fussing. Let’s get a move on.”

“If you say so. Don’t blame me when your pants fall off from being improperly tied, though.”

Passing by with Thadrig fussing at her breast, Sigrid clicked her tongue. “You’re right. Make it nice and tight. Don’t want everyone to be jealous, do we brother mine?”

The brothers both scoffed simultaneously, as Carlotta started laughing. As the conversation devolved into a puerile argument over the size of their respective ‘weapons’, Teldryn kept an observant eye upon them, grabbing Gydda before she could mouth an unattended knife much to her mother’s gratitude. Cock jokes got Farkas out the door and hobbling up the steps, his face white with pain. Vilkas and Carlotta supported him near every step of the way, the twins toddling after with Athis talking quietly with Sigrid behind them.

“...leave too soon. We will miss you, Athis.”

Teldryn Sero tried not to eavesdrop. Much.

“The Statue of Azura is not so far. I’ll do the pilgrimage and offer thanks that so many were spared.”

“I wish I could say something that would make it better for you, my friend. Njada was...one of a kind. And dear to me. I miss her.”

A ragged sigh was the Dunmer’s only response.

In single file, they began the slow march to Dragonsreach, where the bonfires of celebration did their damndest to drown out the night.

********

*Njada Stone-Arm of the Companions. Dead.*


*Dead, dead, dead.*

They had lost roughly half the new bloods that had joined Jorrvaskr in the last couple of years. Some of their names, she still couldn’t recall even after scanning the list she had made, months ago. Their losses, while not nearly as substantial as the fallen on the Stormcloak’s side, were still staggering. There was not a soul in Whiterun who had not lost a sibling, or parent. A cousin or friend.
Sigrid sat on the bench close to Vilkas, snuggling their sleeping son closer to her chest. The wake was in full swing, and would probably run late into the night. The drafts blown in from the main doors gusted with every opening into the throne room, bringing with it the taste of rain that she now finally had the chance to enjoy. Though the thunderstorm that had shrouded them all in fog during the battle was poorly timed, Sigrid loved the weather this time of year. The smell of decomposing leaves and upturned earth. The heat of summer turning cooler, heady with the smells unique to fall. Rain, washing away the blood, ash and dust as if it had never been.

It was now the last week of Hearthfire, and the cold of Frostfall would soon be upon them, slowing down the pattern of life in Whiterun to a crawl. She was not looking forward to being mewed up indoors all winter, and had told Vilkas so.

Her husband had merely pulled her closer to his side; his uncovered eye shining brightly in the warm firelight of Dragonsreach.

“Remind me to tell you about the marvelous invention known as snowshoes, woman.”

“Oh. I’m quite familiar with snowshoes. Not going to kill myself waddling with the baby though. Hey, do you think the stables do sleigh rides? Thadrig and the twins would love that around Midwinter.”

The autumn harvests had been brought in early this year, thanks to the preparations made for war. A very good yield of wheat, root vegetables and berries, this season. Now the tables overflowed with the bounty of Whiterun and those men and women who lived, farmed and fought for her.

Stacks of rolls, pies, cakes and loaves of bread. Seeded, crusty, soft and white, dark with nuts...it was a veritable cornucopia of a bakers dream. Special casks of spiced wine had been opened for this gathering. Dark and frothing, it had a flavor reminiscent of cloves and apples. Gratefully she had toasted the victors of the battle for Whiterun; smiling proudly as her husband stood to receive a standing ovation at the behest of the Jarl.

Watching him adjust his headwrap, she wondered not for the first time how much of his sight he had lost. He was being curiously tight lipped about it.

Carlotta, Lucia, Anoriath and many others were also called to stand and be recognized. Sigrid herself had bowed out of the spotlight, claiming she had done nothing of note this time around.

Which was true; the glory went to those who had been maimed and had drawn first blood. Like Lucia. Who somehow had managed to stab her sword into both Galmar and Ulfric, and now proudly bore the right to brag about her prowess to the other newbloods. Though she didn’t seem to be taking advantage of that perk now.

The girl had disappeared at some point after her blushing, stammering speech the audience had roared for her to give. Probably off to make out with Lars in some dark corner. That’s what she would have done, after a victory like that.

Blinking drowsily, Sigrid reminded herself yet again to talk to Lucia about the birds and the bees. Particularly about birth control. And to have Vilkas or someone equally suitable to take aside Lars Battle-Born for the same awkward-as-hell talk. The poor boy had lost his father and his aunt, all in one day. He needed someone to step in that wasn’t his ailing grandfather or grieving uncle, to make sure he kept it in his pants just a bit longer. Sigrid was not eager to see the Imperial girl become Jorrvaskr’s next Teen Mom, Dibella save them all. They dealt with enough drama as it was.

Though it seemed like most of Whiterun had turned out for the event, there was still an abundance of
food, hours later after all pomp and ceremony had turned to drinking and song. And at Vilkas’ prodding (and Teldryn’s put upon sighs, really, she was breastfeeding, not eating for the entire hall!) she tried bits of everything.

Every jazbay and yam pie was sampled. Gourds, vegetables and all manner of cheeses had been combined to create several potted meals that reminded her of funeral potatoes. In fact, Sigrid had nearly gorged herself earlier on a pepper-salt combination of potato, cabbage, onion and eidar cheese that left her burping (and trying unsuccessfully to hide it, as Teldryn threw bits of roll at her mouth to ‘close that noxious pit of vapors’). Note to self: reevaluate that fetcher’s pay rate and wring him for all he’s worth if this attitude continues.

Hopefully Thadrig wouldn’t mind the taste of the sharp spice in her breastmilk. There had been a bad experience with canis root tea that she was not eager to recreate. Ugh...she had nearly run out of breechclouts that night from her poor baby being sick at both ends. So much for pain relief from period cramps.

But roast, steak and liver were probably quite safe. They had butchered the mammoths that had fallen during the battle for their meat and pelts. Very sensible, she had thought later, as she helped the townsfolk who had survived the pounding attack of the trebuchets to cut, salt and store what was not going to be eaten that night for the long winter.

Her shield brother and best friend had been awarded one of the tanned and cleaned mammoth pelts with a flourish. As though, she had thought wryly, seeing his face pinch as he accepted it without a word, it would make up for being crushed underfoot by the great beasts.

If she tilted her head back a bit, she could see Farkas right now smearing soft goat cheese over one of the split buns, adding cabbage and steaming slices of mammoth roast to create what Sigrid would have termed a reuben sandwich. His wife was nearly nodding off next to him, holding Fjora who had passed out earlier on her lap. Gydda was currently playing with Vilkas’ beard, running her chubby hands over the smooth bristles; occasionally giving his hair a hard yank as he manfully ignored his little niece.

“What do you say we turn in? Help Farkas back to the temple and sleep at Jorrvaskr tonight?”

Holding Gydda with one arm, her husband nodded and stood. Trying not to waken Thadrig, she accepted his hand as she carefully stood.

Moving forward, she was about to hail Farkas, when an arm pulled her back against a firm chest.

“Sigrid.” A heavy sigh. “I’ve been...putting it off. But...woman. Would you help me check the- my eye, tonight?”

Heart in her mouth, she turned slightly and nodded. Feeling him place a soft kiss on her head, she went forward to wake up Carlotta. God I hope he’s okay.

********

Shor, let me have some sight in my injured eye.
If Vilkas had known what a royal pain in the ass this loss of sight would be, he would have made the tyrant's death exceedingly more painful. And drawn out. Vilkas was getting better at hiding the tells of lost peripheral vision, but Farkas knew. Athis could definitely tell. And any enemies who had the misfortune to meet him in the future would not delay to take advantage of his weakness.

He rehashed the duel yet again in his mind, playing the moment where he had opened his guard the slightest bit.

Had leaned forward, just enough for the Jarl to slice his face open with the razored tip of his steel. Head wounds hurt and bled like a bitch; this one had nearly cost him his life. Desperation had forced him on...raising the Daedric war sword that gained ten stones of gravity with every swing, until he found the grit to release his hand from his ruined eye (fuck it hurt) and end the bastard for good.

Should have known the man could not resist using the power of his Thu’um. He had swallowed down the blood, over and over as it welled up from deep inside. Trickling down his ears, pooling around mashed innards from the unearthly force of the push, until his love had saved him with a Shout of her own.

But Shouts could only fix so much.

Vilkas allowed himself a sigh of dejection, as his wife closed the door after laying Thadrig in Farkas’s old room. They were back in his quarters at Jorrvaskr. Alsbet had gone to the feasting at Sigrid’s bidding. They were, at last, alone.

Potions could replenish blood that had been lost, or mend together tears and gashes. Some stayed the growth of infection, or brought down fever. Shrines (if one believed devoutly enough) were near miraculous. But nothing Vilkas had discovered in Nirn could regrow a lost limb. Or bring back the dead.

Or, he thought as he looked at himself on the reflection of a polished shield, knit together nerves that had been severed and left to die. You used to be almost handsome, you smug bastard...though Farkas always was better looking. Now what will your woman think of you?

Small hands gently pulled the shield away from him. “Go on. Sit down. I have some clean linen, hot water and salve here. Let's see what's underneath.”

Doing as she bid, Vilkas sat heavily down upon the bed. With his right eye, he watched in pained apprehension as his wife began to slowly unwind the lengths of linen that had been untouched since the battle, near three days past.

She was solemn, concentrating on the actions of her hands as he studied her face. The freckles, while not as heavy as they had been once, had reappeared with the summer sun. Round amber hazel eyes fringed in dark lashes drew attention away from the slightly flat, wide nose and overly pointed chin. With those delicately bowed, small lips that eagerly stretched into a sunny smile whenever she caught sight of him…

Vilkas had seen far more beautiful women. Had slept with many, in fact. The trend for feminine beauty in Skyrim for Nords called for fewer scars and lighter hair and eyes than his woman possessed.

Yet she was beautiful; real to him in a way that others had never quite achieved. He supposed it must be his love that hid her flaws. Drew his gaze, again and again with wanting, as all he ever wished was to be near her, inside her. Laughing until his gut ached alongside the woman over whatever fool thing had happened in court, or on the training field. Her voice gasping out his name was one of the
sweetest sounds to grace his hearing...

*Mother Kyne, let me see her again. Watch her undress with clear sight, so I might memorize the curves of her form. The freckles like constellations on her skin. Kynareth fair and just, don't take that away from me.*

Hoping against hope to see her with two good eyes, instead of just one. *How would he fight, with such a handicap? How could he protect his family, travel or even farm with just one eye? Would he and Farkas be turned into elders before their time? Shaking sticks at whelps and complaining of aching bones, as they lingered below stairs, like Kodlak?*

As he brooded, the bandages lifted away. The skin of his forehead felt curiously tacky. As though someone had smeared honey to dry upon it. “Hmm.” Holding a wet cloth and dabbing his face, Sigrid leaned back, examining him.

“What? How bad is it?”

"Open your left eye, sweetheart, and tell me what you see.”

He had kept it closed, almost out of habit now. But it had to be done. It was now or never. And, he knew (he *trusted*) she wouldn't laugh at him if the truth proved too much to bear in stoic silence.

Opening both eyes, he gazed upon his wife.

It was jarring, the dual images that refused to line up. *Like staring through ice upon a lake in Midwinter.* His left eye now filtered what he saw through a grainy filter that was ever so slightly clouded. He blinked, willing it to clear.

It didn’t.

It could have been worse.

“Oh, love…” Sigrid whispered, as he closed both eyes and leaned forward, burying his face in her chest. Her breasts were soft and full from feeding Thadrig, and he nuzzled them, wishing foolishly that they offered the same level of comfort to him now.

Damn, but it was shite being a man sometimes. The capability he never used to question, to protect and provide for his family and his hall, well. That had just taken a massive blow.

*Damn fool. You can still see. Perhaps the clarity will improve with time.* He felt her hand stroke through his hair, as she leaned over to more fully wrap him in her arms. She smelt like milk and potatoes and spiced ale...warm and soothing as he fought the tears that pricked like cut glass at his wounds.

“Well, you want to know what I think? Here. Look at me again.”

Setting his jaw, he lifted himself up and forced himself to look straight, both eyes boldly affixed upon Sigrid.

“Well. Huh.” She sighed dramatically, cupping him through his pants. “I guess I'm stuck with you, warts and all. Too late to end this marriage now.”

“Damn straight.” Smiling himself as her quicksilver grin reappeared at his words, he gestured for the shield. “Let's see how pretty I've become.”
The gash extended from his jaw, arcing across his left cheekbone where the tip of the blade had lifted slightly...narrowly scoring the eyelid. Leaving a sharp furrow that bisected his eyebrow and ended in somewhere on his scalp, covered by hair.

The eye itself was slightly clouded and dull. But, he reasoned, even as he winced at just how transformed his face was with this new scar...at least he could see.

He hadn't quite lost the eye, after all.

“I can still see you, you know.” He spoke quietly, setting down the shield and turning to Sigrid.

She had been patient, he could tell. Giving him what time he needed to take it all in. The scar, the eye...his sight. “I suppose it all depends on if you mind seeing my maimed wreck of a face. Perhaps I should wear an eyepatch.”

“Wear a white mask and start singing about the music of the night, while you're at it.” At his confusion, she shook her head, still smiling. “Nevermind. Not important.”

Hitching up her skirt to straddle his lap, Sigrid cupped his face in her hands. Warm hazel eyes scanned him thoughtfully. “You've always been handsome. But now...”

Rubbing her face against his unmarred side, she tilted his chin to place a kiss upon his scar. “Now, you're officially scorching hot. Congratulations, love. Your face now broadcasts far and wide that you're a badass survivor. No one is going to want to spar with you now, you know. You're going to be sooo bored.”

Ignoring half of what she had said (especially the parts that used words he didn't understand, like broadcast) Vilkas read the tone of her voice and responded by slanting his mouth over hers in a deeply tender kiss. Vilkas hoped she wasn't too angry that he chose to react without words. Later. He'd find the words later, to tell his woman how kind and funny and wonderful she was, to take all of this in stride and distract him so. It was the least he could do.

But his ability to think was ebbing away fast, as her lips and tongue had their way with him. That clever, insouciant tongue...his skin pricked with mingled lust and expectation as her throat fairly thrummed with the effort of containing her Shouts. Vibrating through all of them, draped over one another as they were, until he barely recalled that clothing separated them still.

Her hands wrapped more tightly around his shoulders; legs practically bruising his hips as their movements became less careful. Less comforting and more frenzied, as he fell back upon his bed...rolling to place her beneath him.

“I...want...on top.” She panted, nearly whining as he yanked down her gown, effectively trapping her arms by her sides. Exposing those lush breasts nakedly to his view, as he stared in unabashed hunger. He could see just fine, for this.

Thank Shor my sight up close appears to be less altered. “You would deprive a battle weary veteran the right to ogle the glorious beauty beneath him?”

“Smart ass. You just want to drive me crazy until I snap and Shout us both senseless.”

“While that is rather fun…” He reached beneath her bunched up skirt and did something indecent with his knuckles that made the woman toss her head back against the furs... “I think we should take it slow, don't you? After all, I'm just a crippled warrior spending his last night in Tamriel wrapped up in the bower of your arms.”
“...blast that wretched n’wah Athis for sharing Njada’s stupid fucking friend fiction. I told her to stop that shit all the way back in Solstheim!”

Trying not to laugh at the bright red flush that was spreading over his beloved’s body, Vilkas left the dress where it was. Keeping Sigrid’s upper half immobile, he used his other hand to pull off his tunic.

And by Dibella, he just loved the way she always gawped at him when he undressed. Like she had never seen a naked male chest before. Keeping his voice conversational, he concealed just how amused he was by the turn their conversation had taken.

“Yes. The fiction. Who speaks like that, Sigrid? Oh milady…” Affecting a high soprano pitch, Vilkas batted his eyes and continued his slow, rubbing intrusion into Sigrid’s inner walls, biting back a groan as her passage slicked wetly, tightly against his fingers. *Always so fucking ready, I can’t stand it.*

“Aye, milady, let this noble barbarian plunder your dusty keep! For your hidden treasures are all my woebegone and massive plum-headed spear doth desire!”

“Oh gods, stop!” Sigrid nearly sobbed-laughed, heaving against his arms as he continued teasing, playing her like a lute as he divested himself of his pants. Kneeling on the bed, Vilkas felt his chest expand and contract, breathing ever faster as she writhed beneath him, still giggling.

Face up, he could kiss her. But she would be much more likely to Shout. And he wanted this to last.

Hands and knees it was. “Roll over, woman. This hideous troll cannot abide the moon pale beauty of your face. And orb-like eyes. Why the fuck do those trashy scrolls include so many adjectives anyhow?”

“...Brain is the best...sex organ- guh! So not funny, Vilkas…” Hair unwinding from her loosened tie, Sigrid did as he asked. Flopping over as he helped her move comfortably, easing the rest of her dress down and tossing it to the floor.

He nuzzled her neck, breathing in her scent as she whimpered. Arched against him, turning her head to try to kiss him; accidentally bumping against the jagged still-healing wound. “Oh...sorry.” She gasped as he wiped away the blood that oozed from his cheekbone.

Fixing her with a stormy glare, he felt a trickle of a smile pulling at his face as she kept watching him, easing herself back upon his length as they both caught their breath at the sensation.

It was strangely intimate, this lovemaking, as she kept her neck craned backwards to see the play of feeling upon his features as they continued to move with each other. Gradually, her arms began to shudder and she dropped - head down and hips raised like some beautiful offering only to him - as he began thrusting within her in barely contained abandon.

Guiding her legs and hips to rest at the perfect angle that would glide his cock against the center of her pleasure, he sought that hitching, telltale gasp she made again and again, as he successfully ‘drove her wild’, in her outworlder words. Back and forth, releasing his grip on the flesh of her ass to caress her back, her shoulders, to lift the rich auburn spill of hair from the line of neck that he could see, by Shor’s boon alone…

He came nearly after she did, as her tightness clenched around him over and over until he saw stars burst with his eyes closed. Bringing her to sit up- still so deep inside her as she rippled in the heat of fulfillment, he managed to catch her mouth with his as they rode out the feeling together. Tangled in a moment that branded itself into his memory that he knew he would remember, until death stole him
away and Sovngarde beckoned him home.

Near comatose, he dragged them both down to the softness of the bed, trying to hold back his yawns as she snickered and reached for the unused linen towels to clean up. “The newbloods better not barge in on us tomorrow, because I don’t feel like getting dressed. Let’s just sleep like this. Skin to skin.”

“Sure.” Silently yawning against her hair, Vilkas felt her carefully wipe the left side of his face. Opening his eyes with difficulty, he could see her turned over in his arms to watch him, as she dropped the cloth that had taken away the last of the grime and clotted blood. Placing her hand on his chin, he felt her breath sigh against him as he woke up just a bit more at her words.

“I see you, you know. After all these years…I can tell when you’re thinking about something or when you’re completely blank. When you’re happy, or angry. Scared or frustrated…”

She placed a soft kiss on his chin. Stretched up to delicately kiss his injured eye that fluttered closed at her approach. “Do you see me, now? I’m not grossed out, or frightened, or worried about any of this. See, Vilkas?”

Feeling his throat close with damned emotion, he focused upon the face that occupied most of his waking thoughts as it clouded, wavering with a slight haze. Like looking through a sheet of ice. But -

“Yes, I do see you.”

“I can see your face.”

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The next morning (after Thadrig had awakened them twice, prompting them both to don clothing before Alsbet discovered them au naturel) Vilkas and Sigrid returned to Jorrvaskr after visiting Farkas at the temple of Kynareth.

Walking into the main hall, they were jolted out of a conversation when a young man stood to greet them from where he had been waiting on the bench. For a while, judging by the apple cores and crumbs that fell from his lap as he walked towards them.

“Excuse me. This is Jorrvaskr, right? Hall of the Companions? Home of Sigrid Farstrider, Dragonborn and Harbinger?”

Sharing a nonplussed look, the couple took a closer look. Sigrid felt a niggling sense of recognition. Somehow, she knew this one. But she didn’t want to summon her Sight just yet.

Tall, for an Imperial. Perhaps he was half Nord? Sometimes it was really difficult to tell. Old enough to probably be about fifteen...sixteen? He could be a late developing older teen or a precocious twelve years old, for all Sigrid could tell. But his dark eyes held a guarded awareness that she was unaccustomed to seeing in one so young. Eyes that had seen death. Up close and personal.

“That’s me. Who are you, and what do you want?”

The young man took a trembling breath, then stood tall. “Dragonborn. You’re the one who donated nearly a thousand septims to Honorhall Orphanage every year after Greloz passed on. I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for me. For the other children. There have been adoptions. New
homes found, with help from Constance. It's a completely different place now. All due to your generosity."

“It was no problem. Happy to help.” She noticed with some trepidation that he didn't seem that hung up on Grelod and her infamous manner of death. Whoever this kid was, he had probably been young enough to be present at the time of the old bat’s demise. *To be beaten and starved.* “Again, what can I do for you?”

He smiled, his teeth white against the olive tan of his skin. Lifting what she realized was a flanged steel mace from his hip, the boy tapped it meaningfully. “Actually, its more along the lines of what can I do for you, Harbinger? My name is Aventus Aretino.”

Noting her dumbstruck look, his smile became decidedly more grim. “And I’d like to join the Companions. It's amazing how many problems can be solved by killing the right person. I'd like to help others, just as you helped me.”

“Doesn't work like that, boy.” Vilkas liked what he saw, she could tell. She'd have to corner him later, to babble excitedly about Aventus. What this meant (yay for meddling!) in the timeline she remembered.

“Companions don't just kill anyone for gold. There are rules. A code of honorable conduct.”

“...more like guidelines than actual rules…” Sigrid stage whispered, causing Vilkas to roll his eyes (which must have been painful) and Aventus to choke back a laugh.

Ignoring her interruption, Vilkas shrewdly sized Aventus up as he continued. “But you're right. We will bear blades against those who have wronged others. Take gold to protect. To rescue and defend. Is that to your liking, pup?”

A strange smile, almost wistful, appeared and vanished in a flash. “Oh yes.”

“Good. Welcome to the Hall of Ysgramor and the Five Hundred. Get settled on one of the empty rooms. Clean up, eat something and we'll talk later. Go on now.”

As he stumbled away, turning and looking in awe at the tapestries, weapons and carved pillars of Jorrvaskr, Sigrid bumped Vilkas with her elbow. “Oh my gosh. You have no idea how cool this is!”

“I have a feeling you're going to explain it to me.”

“Definitely! You will *not* believe who we just had join us, Vilkas. Wow. I'm seeing all his possible futures fly before me and *damn!*”

Turning to her bemused husband, Sigrid gave him a wobbly smile. “I am *so* glad he is on our side.”

Chapter End Notes

The Aventus Aretino I always see is Heiwaoko's creation. Check out her amazing fanfiction that deals with the Dark Brotherhood...amazing! And yes...in that dark future, Aventus grows up to be an assassin who specializes in wielding maces!

Cameo of a cameo of a cameo...'Inception'. BOM BOOOMMM
Verkningarna (Aftermath: The Tale of Farkas and Carlotta)

Chapter Summary

So, it was my birthday recently. Yay me! Another year of life down the hatch! And I figure I'd share my glee at having survived another glorious year with you in video form. Enjoy the cheesy goodness of totally unnecessary dance mods that mess with our two favorite Companions.

Like they'd ever dance like such dorks. Huh. Maybe.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_JGiQ5PC9w

Chapter Notes

This chapter is for GroovyMarlin, who has been a marvelous beta and willing sounding-board for all my farfetched ideas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Farkas awakened from the strange dream where the valkyrja had almost taken him away, he wished he had died.

Staring at the damned leg that had failed him, cut straight below the kneecap to end in a coarse fold of skin stitched closed. He did not believe it was gone, at first. Had tried, with trembling arms, to sit upright. Nearly tilted out the bed, not heeding the warnings of the healer, or of his wife as he made as if to stand. Only to overbalance and crash into the blue tiles of Kynareth’s temple pools, earning an abrasion on his cheek for his efforts. Torn stitches that Danica tutted at him for reopening, bleeding where it ached, bone-deep under his knee (he swore, he could still feel itching in the toes that no longer attached to him)...he stared in growing shock and horror as Sigrid haltingly described what had occurred.

How she had found him; pulled with Odahviing’s help the great blocks of stone off of him and Athis, who lay unconscious nearby. The Dunmer had been trapped beneath two of the stones collapsed at an angle, saving him from being completely crushed. But Farkas had not been so lucky.

He might have kept his leg, had the charge of the Stormcloak driven mammoths not rolled right over him in the fray. He listened in a kind of numb apathy as she related how she had chopped off his limb, when the blood poison threatened to end him once and for all. Seared the chopped off flesh cleanly with a red-hot sword, against the fever and the maggots. Keeping him alive, to awaken with his family around him, staring down with smiles on their lips and distress in their eyes.

Should have let me die, shield sister. What good is a Companion without his damned legs?
Apologizing over and over, the Harbinger - his dear sister and friend - held his hand tightly in hers. Eyes wide, tears threatening to spill over. Pleading, ale-bright eyes. Begging him to understand. Beseeching forgiveness for the task that had fallen to her.

Through the wool-thick apathy had come a twisting dagger of blame. For he found that he did blame her, yes...despised that she had not left him to die. Her cruel kindness had kept him alive, true, but for what? To see his family slowly lose all honor and pride as they starved, burdening his brother as he lingered in useless inaction? Unable to fight?

Only beggars and skalds lived with maimed and twisted bodies in the aftermath of war. Neither option appealed to Farkas. He had seen many of them, travelling across the breadth of Skyrim, had given septims to those who sang and played instruments in their blindness. Who dragged themselves to the rivers to drink, relying upon alms for their sustenance, their cries rising against the hubbub of the markets, the gates. Pitiful and pitiable. He would sooner die than sink to such a low.

The Companion wondered if the Halls of Shor would be closed to him, if he managed to crawl over, grasp and swallow Danica’s bottle of nightshade extract. He had heard it was a quiet death. Just some stomach pains, blacking out in a stupor to an oblivious end. Was it truly suicide, if he had been fated to die that day? For now, he was slowly coming to realize that no bloody death in battle would mark the end for him. The final chapter of his life, long accepted as part of life as a warrior. Expected, even. Old Kodlak, ill as he had been when the Silver Hand had attacked...he had chosen to depart by the sharp cut of a sword. Not dying toothless and feeble in his bed.

As everyone talked over him, trying to keep conversation light and merry, Farkas painfully swallowed the stinging words that sat waiting, at the tip of his tongue. Shamefully childish screams of rancor that swelled in his heart at the thought of the un-man he had become...

Words never came easily to Farkas, but he did force himself to speak to Sigrid. Only once, before Teldryn Sero had returned to Whiterun. “I understand, sister - you did what you had to do. Now please. Leave me be .”

That fall out of Danica’s stone bed was the first of many.

‘Fall-Over Farkas’, he thought blackly a month later as he still struggled to stand; to walk step by step, hobbling in the gravel walk of the training yard. Not long ago, Farkas remembered, he had fairly flown down this circuit. Had ran freely, ran far...careless with the strength that had always been his to enjoy. He had never minded the distant jobs, the hours of walking up and down tundra plateau and mountain ridges to reach his destination. True, he had even enjoyed the solitude. The cold winds coming down from the Sea of Ghosts, ruffling his hair as he loped across the plains...

He minded the distances now. From the first moment of awakening to the time he laid down to sleep Farkas minded each stretch of open space he was forced to walk very much, as the newbloods who came to Jorrvaskr drawn by the stories of victory, pride and glory gaped at him as he stumbled along. Like he was some curiosity put on display. An object of pity, to be treated with condescending platitudes.

Or worse, a hero. If a whelp asked him in breathless tones to relay the ‘Great Battle of Whiterun’ one more time, he would stick his crutches down their goddamn throats. Shor’s fucking codpiece, he’d take off the damn wooden nuisance that had attached itself (like a parasite) to his leg and beat them bloody with it. See how much they favored the fruits of valor and bravery then.
The scratching rasp of the crutches dragging in the softly fallen snow, digging into the rock beneath punctuated by the step-thunk, step-thunk of his foot and his false wooden leg… it was a jangling tune he could not escape.

And after the denial, the mornings where he sat up in the temple and stood, only to collapse again - then. Then came the anger.

White hot, stabbing rage. Why, he thought viciously, as his wife helped bathe away the stink of sweat he could not reach without tearing open his wounds, was this the reward the gods had seen fit to give him?

And Carlotta - his kind, brave, *beautiful* wife…

He would never forget, that first time he noticed her stare at his leg in pure revulsion. Unwrapped, left to dry from the salves Danica and Sigrid constantly slathered on it to encourage the skin to heal, it was raw and red and ugly. A scar that would never heal. Not truly.

His wife could not bear to touch him anymore… beyond what was necessary for wifely duty. Save for the perfunctory touches that cleaned, helped him dress, combed through his hair and passed him food and drink. He had felt her trace the tattoos of his back, once. Tattoos she had dragged her fingers against; sliced with her nails in her shuddering climax not a month past as he loved her in their home. He held his breath, as he prayed to Shor and Kyne and all the gods that she would linger by his side. Would not be disgusted at the sight of him, *gods* he could not help it, he was not at fault for the burden that had been foisted upon them both!


Carlotta and the babes would have fared better if that mammoth had crushed his skull.

As the weeks passed and Carlotta no longer pretended to treat him with anything but that tenderly smothering care (as though they were *mother and child*) Farkas stopped touching her in return. Tried to close his eyes against the curve of her bosom filling the leathers she now wore always as a new member of the Companions. Fought to stop undressing her in his mind’s eye, seeing the olive brown of her skin aglow in the firelight still *so damn clearly* that the erections he strove to hide became a torment. What woman would let a cripple touch her, to pleasure her?

Farkas was tired of pleading without words, reaching, trying to recapture the way it had been before.

Things would never be the same.

And unlike everyone else in the city he had grown up with and fought for, his brother knew it.

They sat together in front of the fire, most nights. Enjoying each other’s company in silence, sharing
a bottle of mead to unwind in the rare moments of peace that seemed to come more seldom as the children grew.

They were often the subject of much staring and whispering; Vilkas and Farkas. His brother wore an eyepatch during lessons now...claiming he didn’t care to distract the whelps from the task of learning. But Farkas knew. Knew that the ogling, the pitying glances bothered his twin just as much as their solicitous offers to help him up the stairs irked Farkas. His twin only went barefaced around Sigrid, or himself, the massive slashed scar fading slowly to a silvered brown in time as they became...well. Not used to it, Farkas thought idly, seeing how the fogged eye barely shifted anymore to track movement, as his brother’s right eye did.

More familiar, perhaps. Though he was sure it still frustrated Vilkas just as much as his inability to walk straight without crutches plagued Farkas.

The night a week after Midwinter Festival when Vilkas had sat heavily down next to him, bearing a nearly pure alcoholic proof of something that had once been potatoes... that had been a bad night.

“What’s the occasion?” Farkas managed to rasp out, when the vile mixture had burned its way down his esophagus. Damn, but that had a kick to it. That shit could dissolve nails.

“Mmm.” Vilkas took another swig, his good eye staring despondently across the fires at the women. Their wives were talking and laughing together at some story, watching the babes lest they fall into the fire or touch one of the many weapons that littered the warrior’s hall. “My eye.” He sighed. “Just had a talk with Danica today. She thinks the wound...my vision...is getting worse. I’m going to lose use of it. Be fully blind on my left side.”

“...Shit.” Feeling faintly surprised, the giant man shifted in his seat. A heavy lassitude overcame him, as the paint peeling brew became somewhat more tolerable the more he sipped. “Not sure what to say, brother. That’s...well.”

They sat like that for another hour, Farkas trying to ignore one of the whelps who seemed utterly focused on his leg which made him jiggle it a bit, as he brooded upon what losing half of one’s eyesight would feel like. Vilkas no longer drank, but seemed to sink into an even deeper contemplation.

Just as Farkas was about to doze off right there in front of the fire, Vilkas spoke. “Think I’ll take up archery.”

“Huh?” Rubbing his face, Farkas lolled his head towards his twin. Must not be hearing right. “Um. Why?”

Vilkas laughed softly, watching as Sigrid eased a slumbering Thadrig into her arms and stealthily creep downstairs to the living area. “The way I see it, I'm going to be shite at close quarters combat soon, with just one eye. But the eye I have left...damn, Farkas.” He took a long swallow as Farkas scratched his head, looking skeptically at his dreamer of a sibling.

“Itching my leg, Farkas grimaced as the prickling continued past the knee, where his leg once had been. “Never thought much of your archery skills, Vilkas.” Or your fool plan.

A chuckle. “Oh, aye. I'm terrible. Just gives me something to do with all this spare time. You
know…” Fixing Farkas with a pointed look, Vilkas curled his lip. “You should set yourself some goals, too.”

“Aye. I'll just go do laps around the track, then. If I just wish and pray real hard, brother, maybe Kynareth will give me wings.”

A soft scoff. “I doubt that. But doing something is better than nothing.”

Right, as usual. Damn it. Farkas hated it when his brother’s more odd ideas turned out to make sense.

More months passed. As winter slowly thawed into spring, Farkas no longer needed the crutches to get around. He still stumbled and fell sometimes, particularly in the slick mud and rocky ruts that came to trip him out of the melting snow. But it was not until he finally began sparring again out of boredom that the old longing to end his life returned.

He was slow. He was clumsy.

Couldn’t fend off his one-eyed brother to save his skin. “Get up! Up now, and try again!” His brother booted the side of his armor none-too-gently.

Refusing his brother’s offer to help him stand, Farkas carefully hoisted himself up to his knees, then stood, cringing in discomfort and shame. Gripping the hilt of his greatsword, he flicked his hair out of his eyes with a twist of his head. “Again. Fine. Come at me.”

Staring at him solemnly, his twin chewed his lip. Then reached out and, before Farkas could react, shoved him over to fall upon the ground once more. “Hey! Watch it!”

“Did you see that?”

Vilkas walked around him, seeming to study his prosthetic, which had taken a fair beating in the last few months of falling, scraping against stone...even teeth marks from the twin girls who liked to gnaw it when he wasn’t looking. “What?”

“I saw.”

Sigrid stepped from the porch where she had been silently observing their match, Carlotta standing by her side. Looking at his wife, he felt a guilty frisson of pleasure course through him at the sight of her. Her dark brown leathers wrapped tightly around her hips, waist and chest, merely accentuating what on a flatter woman would have been tightly crushed. Her hair was sculpted into a high, ridged twist of a ponytail that fell down her back. Her face was a picture of calm stoicism. Beautiful, as ever.

Jerking his gaze away as Sigrid cleared her throat, he felt himself flush as the Harbinger fixed a knowing gaze upon him. “Farkas, your wooden leg isn’t heavy enough. You need a heavier counterweight, to move properly once more. You fall over every time you swing that sword because you are unbalanced.”

Excitement flared deep in his chest. “You think so, sister?”

Smiling warmly, she nodded. Her red armor looked almost blood-bright near his wife’s more somber garb. “Yeah. I’m sure Eorlund can knock you up something in the meantime that’s better than that
old stick. For now…” Sigrid turned to Carlotta and folded her arms, suddenly all business. “I have a task for you both.”

“Both of us?” “Huh?” Farkas and Carlotta spoke at the same time, pausing to look at one another in befuddled wariness. Farkas could almost feel Vilkas being amused behind him, as he switched his weight from foot to foot.

“Yes.” Sigrid wore a look of placid determination, her usual smile missing as she took in the estranged couple. “Farkas, I want you to guide Carlotta through her Proving quest. Just as you watched out for me. She’s going to Raldbthar, to take down a Dwarven Centurion. You’ve fought plenty of those, so let me know how she fares.”

Appearing doubtful, Carlotta watched as Farkas accepted Vilkas’s hand up this time, standing upon the abused leg with muffled groan. “Are you sure that’s wise, Harbinger? Athis will be back from his pilgrimage any time now. He might be a better choice, when—”

He hunched back as the Harbinger nearly hissed at his wife, her voice thrumming with power. “Yesss. I’m quite sure, sister, that your husband is far more capable than you make him out to be. He has saved my life countless times, and proved to be an invaluable teacher and friend. There is no one better to measure your skill and bravery during this task.”

Pride warred with distrust as Farkas stood tall at her words, trying to ignore the cagey look his wife bestowed, unable to tear her eyes away from his prosthesis. “Farkas.”

“Yes, Harbinger?” He would not fail now. His brother’s heat behind him was a reassuring warmth, as a hand clapped itself on his shoulder.

“Go to Eorlund. Have him fit you a new leg. Something made of quicksilver, or steel perhaps. Be honest when the smith asks you how it feels. What the balance is like. I need you at the top of your game, brother.”

“I’ll go right away.” Nodding as she grabbed Carlotta, who looked like she’d rather be anywhere but here, Sigrid waved him a cheery smile and dragged his wife off into Jorrvaskr. What words they would share, Farkas really wanted to know. She looked furious.

“Come on.” Vilkas sighed, bringing his sword up to fighting stance. “Got plenty of work to do getting you ready before you leave for Raldbthar.”

Bringing his sword up to block the oncoming strike, Farkas grunted beneath the weight of the swing. And, feeling the wood of his false leg creak and crack under the pressure, he felt a peculiar touch of something. An emotion long thought lost, as his mouth beneath his beard slowly tugged into a rusty smile.

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As her shield and sword tore and smashed through the dwarven automatons that blocked her passage, Carlotta fumed. Dwarven oil spattered her face and hair, smearing into her skin and making her itch. Falmer blood was smellier, more foul in stench than the metallic tang of the strange machines that populated these halls. Neither fluid was pleasant, and Carlotta found herself yearning for the cleansing hot springs of Jorrvaskr. For simpler, better times.
What was the Harbinger thinking?!? Only a few months from losing a leg, and she sends Farkas into a Dwarven ruin! It’s like she wants him to die!

Finding Farkas stolidly behind her, not even breathing heavily only fed the simmering resentment and worry that swirled, like a yawning maelstrom deep inside. Ever since her husband had gained the replacement leg…

It was as though he had become a completely different man. It had thrown her for a turn, just how abrupt the change had been. Farkas now devoted nearly every waking moment to training...running in ever-quickening laps around the yard. Laughing as the newbloods cheered and clapped him on, running alongside him as he fell less and less often on the new, sturdier leg that gleamed a metallic gray. Matching the newfound fire that lit his eyes, catching her attention in the most random moments. Chopping wood, doing dishes, playing with the girls...until he caught her staring; at which point Carlotta would blush and turn away.

Fjora and Gydda giggled as Farkas tested himself even at home - lifting each toddler in his palms, he raised them up and down, repetitively using their weight to build up his arms as their high peals of laughter filtered through Breezehome. Their happiness made Carlotta grind her teeth, as she prepared herself mentally for the Proving. The clearing of Raldbthar that would make her a full Companion, at last. The one good thing that had occurred in the past winter.

It wasn’t right. She could still recall with perfect clarity the odious raw stump of his leg, the first time she had beheld it. The horror it had filled her with, and the sympathy. He needed her now, more than ever...to bring in the septims, so he could watch the girls and care for Breezehome in her stead. He needed to recuperate. Not wear himself out, attempting to regain a life he would never again live.

Though not quite the same, the situation reminded Carlotta of when her first husband Arcturus Valentia had died...leaving her alone in a strange land with a young babe and no income. Resolve strengthened her backbone, stiffening her pride as she continued to take on the jobs, clearing bandit camps and killing beasts. She had been forced into harsh independence once. Having Farkas and the girls to feed and clothe was more of a challenge than caring for Mila had ever been, but Carlotta was up to the challenge. Hadn’t she killed Galmar Stone-Fist with nothing but her own wits and a sword?

She had purpose, now. Had the respect of the Companions and of Whiterun, could stand on her own two feet. Never would she be caught needing a man to look out for her again. It was she who would be there for him, this time.

Against all imagining, Carlotta actually found herself jealous at how good he was with Fjora and Gydda. The girls absolutely loved their da, preferring him over her which truly rankled, though she’d never admit it. Never seeming to raise his voice, Farkas could bathe, change and dress them for bed with all the gaiety of a game...making them fall asleep to the deep rumble of his voice as he read them tales and sang them songs. She, their own mother, didn’t have nearly the pull with her own girls as he did. Must he excel at everything?

And just as Carlotta was starting to feel confident in herself as a warrior, as the new provider of the family...he had come back from his despondent slumber with a vengeance. Spurning her offers to bathe him, he began the juvenile practice of rolling nightly in the snow with Vilkas...both brothers taunting each other to see who could remain in the frozen yard the longest, wearing just smallclothes.
They would then race back into Jorrvaskr to dry off by the fire, where a smiling Farkas would hurriedly dry his prosthetic, taking it off right there in front of everyone.

Which must have been embarrassing, showing off to everyone the grisly sight of the stump that still made her swallow with abhorrence. His twin seemed similarly inclined - only wearing his eyepatch now during the day, as he joked and slapped Farkas while towelling off. Despite her better efforts, Carlotta could not bring herself to stare at her brother in law in the face. That scar...it was hideous! Gashing the entire left side of what had once been a startlingly handsome visage into a ruined wreck. Guilt plagued Carlotta as she compared the two brothers, feeling strangely relieved that Farkas, at least, had escaped any visible marring of his features.

Not that they’d had any chance to be close, after the battle. She had thrown herself into working as hard as she could, ignoring the lonely cravings for his warmth. His love. She could not bear to touch his leg, his hip...any part of what had caused him so much pain. And there was no escaping the changes in him. The sullen silences, pierced with days where he would take himself off to Jorrvaskr and not speak to her for what felt like weeks, with anything beyond a mere welcome, or inquiry as to her health. But that was all over and done with, now.

It drove her fairly mad, these days. Wanting to reach out to him, yet not daring to. They had reached a strange impasse, and here she stood at the cliff’s edge. Wanting to cross over, yet fearing it all the same. They had not been intimate in months.

Eventually as Farkas grew stronger, the nightly banter between the brothers devolved into a wrestling match that had the newbloods placing bets, and would often include the girls tumbling around them, squealing as they tugged on the men’s hair. More like howling dogs than sweet children, by Mara’s mercy...

That sight often made Carlotta reach out to stop them. Stop the fighting, before any of them got hurt. But inevitably Sigrid would block her from rising out of her seat; nearly sitting atop of her as she laughed, waving them on. As the other newbloods joined in the merriment, Carlotta watched with a deepening unease. Was she the only one who saw the danger in this? They could crush the girls by accident, or tear open her husband’s stitches!

And the stubborn streak of independence didn’t end there. Her injured husband began sparring daily in the training yard, only with Vilkas at first. Then Sigrid, and Athis. Even deigning to teach the newbloods again, working up to daily practice as he resumed the position of head instructor at Jorrvaskr.

Once, he had even extended his hand to her, his careful caution apparent as he assumed an opening stance, that massive warblade resting easily in his other hand.

If only it was so easy, to fix what had been damaged between them. Carlotta wasn’t quite sure how it had happened, as she had devoted nearly all her spare time to healing him. Cooking soup, cleaning what he couldn’t reach, helping him dress. He should be grateful. But somehow despite her efforts he had remained silent. More distant, emotionally unavailable than ever before. It would almost be a relief if they had found something to fight about. “No, Farkas. I don’t want to hurt you.”

His face remained passive, though those pale grey eyes snapped at her words. “You won’t, wife. If we’re to fight together, I need to see the way you move.” Gods, those words were nearly electric. Reminding her of when they had once moved together in the throes of passion, not knowing where she began and he ended - NO!

- Leather creaked as she tightened her gloves around the shield brace. “…I don’t like this. You’ve just barely recovered. I’d...feel more comfortable, if someone else sparred against me. I’m sorry.”
He stared at her for the space of a moment, making her even more uncomfortable as she felt the heavy measure of his scrutiny. Finally, he spoke. Barely a whisper, yet it still stung. “Carlotta. I’ve been all over this damn country. Seen my share of ruins and caves. I’ve been fighting since I was old enough to pick up a sword. You need to trust that I know what I’m doing.”

“How can I concentrate on fighting well, when I’m forced to watch after you!”

There. It just came out. Unexpectedly harsh, like it had been torn from her throat after being held back for so long. All the resentment, the fear…it burst up between them, like an invisible barrier that she wished so urgently she could take back, as his grey eyes slowly iced over at her words.

With a finality that almost broke her reserve, he stepped backwards from her, that stupid leg shining in the spring sun. Mocking her in its metallic perfection. “Fine, then. I’ll talk to Sigrid if you feel that way. Don’t worry about me coming home tonight…I’ll stay here.”

And he had. She hadn’t seen a hint of her husband until the day of their departure, where he had climbed into the wagon that was bound for Windhelm, utterly silent and bristling with weaponry and newly shined armor.

...And now here they were. Feeling completely out of sorts, Carlotta realized she had misjudged the whole situation very badly. For now it was just them, all alone in the twisting darkness of Raldbthar. And the bandits, she thought with a shake of her head. And the Falmer. And the constant scratching scrape of dwemer machines, clicking in the tunnels. Surprising her at every corner, as they rolled out from seemingly nowhere to lash out with serrated blades and pincers.

“Hey, watch out there.” Grabbing her arm tightly causing Carlotta to lurch backwards, by Alessia, she nearly scolded him for breaking her concentration. Until she saw it; the blades that had been folded so still whirring to life as Farkas deliberately set off the pressure plate with a single step. Mouth dry, she watched as the spinning fan blades made light work of a dry Falmer skeleton lying further down the hallway. Skittering bones rattled down into the depths. That could have been her. It could have ended right then.

“Maybe go a bit slower, yeah? Can't always see the traps real well in this light.”

Nodding dazedly, she realized he was still holding her arm, rubbing his thumb against the leather armguard. Giving him a curious look, he smiled crookedly in return.

“Better get moving. Don't like hanging around places like this.”

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Delving ever deeper, until the faint sickly green glow was supplanted by the bluish light from incandescent fungi, they cut a bloody swathe through a nest of Falmer. Growing more tired as her shield arm became almost numb from slamming against pale wrinkled flesh and shrieking lipless mouths, Carlotta spun around as she gasped in the dank air that tasted of water and metal. None left.
Just the Dwarven Centurion resting distantly ahead amidst the bronze pipes. Almost quivering in apprehension, Carlotta wiped sweat and blood from her forehead, tasting the foulness of it as she spit, over and over, to rid herself of the taste. A hissing growl escaped the last nightstalker, as it fell limply sliding off of Farkas’s blade as he gave it a disgusted shove.

Walking over as he casually cleaned the blood away with a spare rag, Carlotta was struck by how normal; how very ordinary this all seemed for him. There her husband stood, that familiar heavy lidded, almost placid look upon his face. As though they were out for a walk in the market, not leagues below the surface of the earth in an ancient ruin of pipes and tunnels (she shuddered at the thought of tons of rock overhead, ready to fall at any instant). His metal prosthetic blended in near seamlessly with the Nordic armor he favored. Just the slightest limp betrayed that he suffered from any impediment at all. Incredible.

For just a moment, Carlotta pretended that nothing had happened last fall. That this deeply awkward dungeon crawl was instead a romantic getaway - that they were still as besotted as they had been after the marriage, never wanting to be apart.

The illusion shattered as he stopped roughly three paces away, grey eyes guarded and cold. “Let’s not waste any time. Lead on, new blood.”

Right. Her task awaited.

Popping open a stamina potion, she drank it down to the sour dregs. Aware, always so damn aware of him watching, she wiped her mouth and grasped her sword at the ready. “Ready. I’m going to crush this hunk of bolts like a bug!”

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Reflecting upon her last statement before rushing into battle with the Centurion, Carlotta winced. It had not quite gone as smoothly as she had hoped.

The massive dwemer guardian had been so thickly plated in metal, her sword barely scratched it, much less made a dent. Shield bashing seemed a bit more effective. Noting the joints in the huge automaton, where rivets revealed smoothly interlocking moving parts...the Imperial decided that those would be her goal. She would have to cut at the neck, the bend of metal arms and knees, just like a man to take the Centurion down.

She continued swinging and dodging the attacks of superheated steam, keeping an eye upon Farkas who flanked her. Covering her back with broad swipes of his sword, shouting to distract it as Carlotta rolled around to the rear of the whirring, clanking thing...stabbing her sword into the raw rubbery gears that jetted a fluid that burned, ouch! dammit!

Crying out in agony, she held her burned right arm tightly as she backed off, eyes upon the slow creeping animunculi that kept advancing in slow, clomping steps. The blank golden face had fixed itself upon her, and for a moment she felt a stab of despair. How could she, an Imperial housewife ever hope to take down such a mighty opponent? For this thrice-cursed armor would not give way!
"No!" She yelled as Farkas made to attack the Centurion. Baring her teeth, she picked up her shield from where it lay. “This is my fight. My proving. I can do it!”

Not waiting to see if he would respond, she launched a flurry of premeditated attacks that halted the dwemer giant’s progress. Swiping, bashing at the head with her shield, she would then dodge the whistling steam that shot in blasts at her as she ran underneath the arms. She reminded herself not to look down as she carefully but quickly climbed the mechanism. Gaining a handhold here, a foothold there, she balanced as it leaned to and fro, swiping with heavy movements at her protected position upon its back.

As she clamped the bulk of the neck between her leather clad knees, Carlotta braced herself and stabbed down. Again and again, until a blast of hot air blew back her hair like a pennant flying in the breeze; as with a great screech the dwemer automaton collapsed. Jumping as it crashed with a clanking roar, she rolled to absorb the impact...

-Only to land in a kind of ungainly sprawl at Farkas’s feet. Both feet, real and unreal, as he looked down at her with clear admiration mixed with something she couldn't quite define.

“Huh. Well done.”

And now here they were at the end of the meandering labyrinth, doing a horrid sort of mop up with all their equipment. Cleaning off blood, scorch marks and what gore remained that had not sloughed off with the last pitched battle. Not even the dwemer creations were completely mess free. The glamorous life of a warrior, Carlotta thought as she wiped her leathers with a damp spare shirt.

They had made camp near the deep pools that spanned the network of bronze tunnels. As she set her leathers aside to work on her sword, oiling the edge with care to prevent rust, she reflected on how little had really changed. Housewife or Companion, there was plenty of dirty work to do. Shit to shovel, no matter how fancy the payout.

Not far off, Farkas had taken off his armor as well. His shirt and trousers had been wrung out in the warm water and left to dry upon one of the pipes. It was more skin than she was used to seeing from him, even during the snow baths he had taken in Jorrvaskr, and oh-

-Realizing her mouth was open, she shut her jaw with an audible click as she turned quickly away from watching his shoulder muscles bunch beautifully, as he wrung out the dark shining length of his hair.

Too late - he had seen her move. “Hey, ’Lotta. You wash my back, I'll scrub yours?”

She would have refused. Let him see how well he got along without her help, since he disdained it so. Carlotta could take care of herself...had done so for years, in fact.

But then, he had smiled. That little boy smile that tugged at her heartstrings, open and warm and caring…

“Fine. You got any more soap?”
“Sure.”

Moving over to leave more room for her on the rocky edge, Farkas handed her the bar of soap. Desperately trying to ignore the warm roughness of his fingers as he passed it to her, Carlotta caught the faint scent of snowberry as she lathered it in her hands. Placing the soap down, her hands shook slightly as they began running up and down the broad musculature of his back.

*Don’t think about it, definitely don’t think about sex, just clean him up and move on, Carlotta, WILL you stop thinking about it...*

He made a soft sound. “Harder. That tickles.”

Mouth tightening in chagrin, she began rubbing in earnest. Back and forth, she dug in with her palms, kneading the knots she knew almost by memory that endured in the fold of his shoulder blades. The thickness where neck met shoulder...even using her thumbs to push, to draw out the tension of his lower back as he groaned near indecently at her massaging.

Reaching for the soap once more, she leaned over to reach the angled planes of his waist. How he had gotten dirt and grime all the way down there, she would never know. But she washed it away (ignoring the cobblestone abs that tightened under her fingers with the grace of a saint) sluicing with cupped handfuls of water repetitively until the skin came up clean.

Farkas shuddered at her touch, as she finished with a soft, almost-caress to the visible skin of his neck. Lingering, not wanting to break the quiet spell that had nearly drawn them both into a trance, Carlotta drew up her legs from where they had rested on either side of his waist and wiped her hands upon damp pants. Quickly. Rapidly. *Don’t even think about it.*

Remaining still, Farkas tilted his head ever so slightly. “Your turn. Come over here.”

*Damn it, no Carlotta!*

She thought about it. Those large hands, touching her back. Running down the curve of her spine. And, viewing the hulk of the motionless dwarven machine beyond them, she realized…

Carlotta felt suddenly brave.

Farkas had remained tranquil, soaping up his hands and apparently deep in thought as she came to stand before him for nearly twelve seconds before he noticed her there. But she was gratified to see his gray eyes comically widen, as he dropped the soap into the water with a loud ‘plop’.

“Um. You’ve got no clothes. You should get some.”

“Do I really need them?” Standing with a hand jauntily placed on one hip, Carlotta feigned a disaffected air. Licking her lips at the heat that was slowly blooming in his face, she felt her bare skin tingle in response...until she saw it.

The leg. His...his wounded stump, free from the prosthetic. It looked -
“You’ve healed.” She didn’t realize how quickly she had moved, to kneel in front of him. To touch it. The skin beneath the rounded joint of his knee was fully smooth and pale; free of the redness and stitches. The raw, ragged appearance that had so frightened her was gone.

She heard him swallow as she trailed her fingers down the leg, hardly believing its transformation. “Yeah. It healed awhile ago. Still getting some soreness from how it digs in the leather brace. But mostly it doesn’t bother me anymore.”

Feeling a warm hand tilt her chin up, she looked into his face. The placid blankness that shrouded her husband’s inner workings was gone. In its place burned a strange intensity that searched her in turn, nearly laying her bare as her nudity did now. “Does it bother you still?”

Taking in a quaky breath, Carlotta turned her face away. Seeing his expression fall, she held up a hand as if to ward away his distress. “No. Not...like that. Just a minute. Let me think.”

“Look, if you need time to think about it, then I already have my answer…”

He began standing, supporting his weight with his hands as his face shuttered close, regaining that blank impassiveness once more.

“No, stop…” Carlotta wavered, torn between her desire to be honest and other, more base impulses. His smallclothes had tented, barely concealing the swelling beneath as Farkas continued moving away, grasping the stone of the pathway’s edge to move further away from her. *Danica did say...no. I couldn’t possibly ask him.*

Too much. The fight, his words...the smooth soap on the skin of his back.

*Lead on, new blood.*

She couldn’t hold the truth in anymore, and so she fairly screamed it. “*Yes, by the gods yes!* It *BOTHERS ME!!*”

Stock still, he hunched over, nearly rigid as she continued her rant. She couldn’t seem to stop; like some tragic comedy, the words just kept spewing forth.

-“It bothers me that you lost your leg! I can’t stand to think about such a horrible thing being real, because that would mean everything else that happened is real, too! That I killed Galmar, Farkas...killed him dead! And I’ve killed even more men since then...is that why you are so cold to me now?”

The poison of her thoughts had been released, full bore. She walked towards him, jabbing him between the shoulder blades as she spat out the rest. “Is that why you’re so distant? Because you’re threatened by me, by my admission to your precious Companions?”

“No.” At the first poke of her finger, Farkas had turned to fix an incredulous stare at her. His voice was soft; so soft. *Why didn’t he shout too? Didn’t he care?*

“*Carlotta.* Is that the kind of man you think I am? That I’d put my wife down for defending herself, to salve my pride? You’d be wrong.”

Feeling a fine fury rise within her at that perfect patience, that unbreakable calm that she just wanted...
to tear into pieces, Carlotta splashed closer to Farkas. Grabbing him by the shoulders, she leaned her neck back to look at him square in the face. “Oh really? Well, what kind of man are you? Are you still my husband? Because now, though I’ve cared for you and loved you despite not knowing what in Oblivion I’m doing half the time...if I’m hurting or helping... gods!”

She slumped forward, too tired to care that her head was resting against his bare chest. The next few words crept from her throat with pain, as she registered how sore she was from yelling.

How tired she was, of pretending not to feel what she felt. Carlotta was through putting on a good face. Of always being the sunny one, the positive thinking one. She was done.

“I don’t know what we are anymore.”

“Well, neither DO I!” Spooked by his sudden roar, she almost had a heart attack as he screamed back at her.

Fairly jumping out of her own skin, Carlotta gaped at Farkas, who never yelled. Never raised his voice. Not even when the twin girls got into his books - priceless books, painstakingly collected and paid for - and had strewn them into the fire to burn. Nor when he tripped and fell on his wooden leg, falling down the flight of stairs in Breezehome for what felt like the thousandth time. Not even when Carlotta had burned the dinner from being distracted by the girls, leaving them to eat raw carrots and apples for supper.

Never. He never spoke above a calm, reasonable tone that might have been appropriate for sharing the weather.

He was shouting now. “...take care of me, ‘Lotta! What am I, your fucking son?!” Gripping her upper arms in his hands, Farkas actually lifted her feet clear of the stone steps, out of the water and shook her like a doll in the heat of his emotion.

“Tell me, wife, because I seem to have misplaced my pride along with my leg somewhere. When did I stop being your man? Shor’s fucking balls, you won’t even let me try! Gods! Let me struggle, to better myself! Your coddling would roll me into an early grave, ‘Lotta, because I’m not your child! Less of a man, maybe, for all that you refuse to touch me or even look at me, but never that!”

Hot tears of frustration and shame coursed down her cheeks, as he sucked in deep heaving breaths, striving to regain some semblance of calm after the uncommon flow of words.

More words than she’d ever heard him speak in one sitting.

“Farkas…”

Feeling the heat of his hands once more as he cradled her face, Carlotta blinked back more of the betraying wetness to see him, her husband, gaze at her with such longing that it pricked her conscience like a thorn.

“Carlotta. I nearly died.”

She couldn’t hear this. Didn’t want to deal with it, with the reality of it all. Wars and death and
dismemberment happened to other people. Not to her, or her love; and tears continued to stream out as he spoke firmly. Forcefully.

“Listen to me. I nearly died. You...you nearly died. Neither of us did, but we are changed people still.”

Sniffing back the fluids that were unbecomingly streaming from her nose, she realized that Farkas had lowered her down and was now offering her what looked like his shirt. Gratefully she accepted it, still shaking in the throes of the awful recognition.

The acceptance of what had happened. *I’ve lived in such a gold-tinted world, crafted by my reckoning for so long. Believed that a husband dead in the Legion was punishment enough, that I didn’t see the forest for the trees. Didn’t believe other, worse things could happen to me or mine.*

“I lost part of my leg. But you…” His thumb traced her cheekbone, wiped away another tear as she lowered her head. “-You lost your innocence, ‘Lotta. You took a life. And it was the right thing to do. I know it. But no matter why it was done - killing changes you.”

“And you haven’t been dealing with it. Haven’t seen you cry once, love. Not till now. Fuck…” As the Imperial dared to look up at his great height, she realized her Nord husband was nearly smiling. A sad, strange smile...more a baring of teeth than something meant for comfort.

“...I cried when I killed my first man. I was just a young lad, and it - it felt like the end of the world. Like Sithis himself was coming for me, to drag me to the abyss for what I'd done. It’s a terrible thing, death. We can’t forget that. Never.”

Nodding, as his words sank into her soul, she collapsed onto the stone edge of the path, exhausted. Farkas followed, sitting near enough that he could take her hands in his. Staring at the water, she realized that his legs looked nearly whole as his knees touched the glassy surface. *Unreal.*

She could not reconcile the images in her head of the red, bleeding stump of her nightmares and the smooth, unformed leg that he now bore. When had the wound become so severe in her mind? A festering, pustulent rotting stump that had grown monstrous in her imagination…

Why had it kept her from reaching to him? From speaking honest words that might have stopped all this from becoming so twisted out of control?

She felt like an absolute heel.

Hardly daring to squeeze his hands back, she savored their sandpapery touch. So reassuring in the strength of their grip. How she’d longed to touch him, yet had not out of fear.

“If we forget that, it lessens us. But never forget that your life is worth preserving. And any bastard who tries to take it, well...he gets what’s coming to him.”

Soothing and mild, his deep voice was oh-so patient once more. “You have to let go of what you think you should act like, what you been taught you should feel and just feel, love.”

“Breathe. In and out. *Say something!*”

A whine emerged from her throat, as she shook her head in dejection. Massive arms wrapped around her, their solid bulk enveloping her as she melted against him, spent.

*What could she say, to make up for the absolute (as Sigrid would say) clusterfuck this situation had become?*
Nothing. And so, she would say nothing yet. Until she knew that what she said would no longer hurt the one she held most dear. She would make him believe, once more, that she felt that way.

Help him understand that even though this had all gone spectacularly awry...she was and always had been his.

Silence. The sound of water. Humming of distant pipes in the bowels of the dwemer ruin. All dimmed, faded away, compared to the thumping, steady heartbeat beneath her ear.

And she breathed. Slowly. In and out.

As she took his good advice and continued focusing on just the breathing, she felt him inhale a lungful of air as well. To sigh out what came next, so softly she could barely hear it.

“I’m still the same man I was, Lotta.” A gentle chuckle, forlorn. “There’s...haha...just less of this man here than there was, before.”

Swallowing, she pulled her head away from his chest. His arms loosened slightly, just enough for her to look up at him once more. “But...you’re still whole? Still a man, right?”

*Gods that was hard to say. Maybe I shouldn’t have said it. Danica hinted that he might have been injured...there. But not to ask him outright, unless he wanted to talk about it. Was that talking about it? Oh Mara save me from myself!*

As her thoughts spun in dizzying circles of self recrimination, Carlotta realized Farkas was trying to hold back a smile and failing. “You think - no. *Fuck no. ‘Lotta…”*

And she nearly sagged against him once more, loving the sound of his nickname for her as those hands dragged her hips closer. Lifting her bare thighs to straddle his waist as though she weighed nothing. Grinding her uncovered core against a very hale, whole part of him that definitely felt uninjured. *Oh. Oh!*

“You’re…er. Um.”

*Why it was so hard to speak, with that smiling face so close, and the heat of him crushed against her - “…you’re not up to this. Are you?”*

“Oh, I am most definitely *up to it*, wife. Are you?” He spun her question back to her, gray eyes lighting up with good humor fairly laced with desire, as they both stopped. Taking in the moment that stretched, parchment thin into a decision.

As though it were a fight about to begin, rather than a harmonic accord. A joining, after such a long, pain filled absence.

“Youe-” She barely managed to squeak an assent, before his mouth came crashing down upon hers.

Farkas tasted like potion, bitter sour and salty. She kissed him deeply anyway.

She knew - she probably tasted foul as well. It did not seem to be putting Farkas off. If anything, his hands were very busy, as they glided over every bump in her spine, curving over the firmness of her ass.
Kneading her shoulders as his tongue danced with hers. Gliding along the sides of her breasts, making her practically choke as he smiled against her, mouths still touching as they dragged in deep gasps of air, oh Mara’s *Mercy-*

-Only to flinch, as that same heat beckoned. Parting her lower folds, as she felt the tightly coiled tension in him wait upon her command.

She realizes dazedly that he is waiting for her to say something. Anything, really...holding himself back like that must have been a monumental task.

“Farkas.” Her voice was a raspy wisp. “You’re in charge, right now. I’ve been ready for months, so you-”

-Oh , too much. Too big, and it *hurt* , stretching her after so long despite her bold announcement that had him gripping her in those finely sculpted arms. His hands were bands of steel upon the fleshiness of her hips as, sensing her discomfort, he ceased to move. To breathe, really - as he paused for her to pant, to take the pain-that-was-almost-pleasure in.

Twisting experimentally, she hitched her hips. And felt herself giggle, as Farkas almost trembled beneath her, still waiting despite her words.

So she said it. Released him from his caution, with a single command.

"*Please, Farkas.*"

-And shut her eyes, as he brought her lips to his and slid her down, impaling her upon him.

Up and down, back and forth, she lost herself to the rhythm. Losing all track of who had done what in this fight that was no longer a fight, but a giving. A surrender that she gladly gave, freely to him, as the water splashed round them as they sank a step deeper.

Scrapping her elbow against the stone, she lifted her hands to sink into the damp, snowberry scented mass of hair, to pull him even closer. His breath was coming faster, nearly gasping with the fervor of it all, and she was pulled tight inside. Stretched thin like wool from a spindle upon his cock, as he adjusted his grip and -

*There.* One knowing, warm pinch and she was flying - oh, she was nearly incandescent with love, as Farkas clasped her tightly.

Feeling the mindless pleasure ebb, she wrapped her legs around him and strained to be even closer. Constricting around him as he bucked helplessly against the sudden binding of her thighs. Fairly lifting her with his hands, she laid her head against his in almost-too-close contact. Brown eyes fixed solidly to hot grey, as Farkas raised her ass in both hands and slammed her down, over and over, making her shout.

Making her beg, as it turned out. For once was not nearly enough, after such a long absence.

“Oh please, don’t stop…” Carlotta wailed, feeling a ripple go through him as he sighed at her words.
As he took what she gave. Sending it back, with a curling pressure as he buried his head in her neck and came in a glorious tense wash of joy. Thrusting in her, filling her until she was consumed by him, with him as he cried out her name, *gods never let it end...*

Later, as he teased another orgasm out with his hands and tongue, she lay bonelessly upon their sleeping furs. Too limp to do anything but sigh happily, as he rested his head upon her belly.

His weight, though warm, was making her legs go numb. “Farkas? Come up here and get warm.”

“Mm already warm, woman.” Yet he did as she asked, which fanned the embers inside of her to a burning glow. Her face hurt from all this smiling; and as Farkas raised himself over to drop a kiss on her nose, she noted that he seemed unable to stop smiling also.

“I like it when you’re feisty,” He admitted, pulling the furs over them as they snuggled closer against the deepening cold.

Giving him a coy look, Carlotta snuggled closer into the crook of his arm. Laid her head upon her chest, breathing in the scent of musk and metal. *Hers.* “Really? When did you realize this?”

His laugh was infectious, free. She laughed with him, as he whispered his response in her ear, making her shiver with delight. “Since you threw that godawful punch at Brenuin, years ago. What was that about again?”

“How.” Turning to rub the smoothness of her cheeks against his beard, Carlotta felt him palm her breasts. Which made her smile again; damn her sore cheeks. “I told you, right? That old beggar called you an ice-brain. Which was rude, and uncalled for.”

“Hmph. I liked your spirit, if I remember right. At least you can punch him all proper now. You know that I won’t be earning any high marks in matters of learning, aye? S’pose I’m an ice-brain after all.”

Scoffing, she flicked his ear as he smiled. “Oh really? Doesn't seem to matter to the girls. They love it when you read to them.”

Having just one precious second to see his grey eyes warm - like hot stones in a hearth - he captured her lips with his. Cutting off what she had been about to say, Carlotta abandoned it in favor of opening her mouth to him as his hands fisted in her hair.

And forgetting what their conversation had been about, they lost themselves once more in each other.

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“Second place! That’s my husband who got second place! Suck on that, Whiterun! Woooh!” The Harbinger crowed, dancing around the clearing as everyone cheered wildly at the conclusion of Whiterun’s archery contest.

Farkas snickered at the blush that was slowly rising in his twin’s cheeks. Rubbing his neck with one hand, he allowed Anoriath to raise the other still clasping his bow in a sign of good sportsmanship. “And with one eye! One eye, folks! Imagine if this poor bastard had two! I’d be out of a job!”

The Midsummer Festival had reached the point in the afternoon where the bulk of the competitions
were winding down. More sweltering than usual, many villagers had taken off to find shade beneath the overhanging eaves of shops and stalls. Some dangled their feet, aching from dancing nonstop, in the cool streams that trickled downslope.

As the Harbinger smugly paraded her husband down the street, she winked at Farkas and Carlotta as they walked in full armor towards the empty square. The skalds had already begun to drum, chanting in a monotone gutteral roar that lifted Farkas’s spirits sky high. Reminded him of the deep pride he felt in his homeland, in his life lived as a man of Skyrim.

What he would not do for this land, for his woman who now stood smiling beside him. Lifting her shield in a salute, she crossed swords with Farkas as the crowd began to murmur and swell in a dull susurrus of sound. Growing eager at the prospect of a fight, no matter how scripted.

“Hail the Companions! Hail them with great praise!”

“Kick ‘em in the goods, Imperial!”

“Shatter her shins, ye great brute!”

“Ysgramor and the Five Hundred! Sovngaaarde!”

And as she expertly met him, steel against steel, his two good legs unstumbling and strong, Farkas thanked the gods he had not been fated to die before this time.

He grinned, struggling not to be distracted as Fjora and Gydda waved wildly from the stands, supported by the other Companions as he continued the show. Displaying the prowess of the hall of warriors to the benefit of Whiterun, he thought about them all. His family. His friends. And gave thanks deep in his heart that it was his fate to dwell amongst them still. To live.

Farkas added his war cry, as Carlotta joined in as well; her high pitched voice echoing amidst the golden roofs of Whiterun. The city that would not fall, no matter what.

“Glory awaits! For Jorrvaskr and the Companions! Hyyaaarrgh!”

Chapter End Notes

Since it is, in fact, Independence Day...I wanted to share a bit of my inspiration for the choice to actually leave Farkas and Vilkas with bodily injuries after the battle for Whiterun.

I grew up in a military household, moving from place to place. Got to know alot of incredible people. Among them were amputees who lost limbs during Desert Storm, Vietnam and other places that they couldn't tell me. Because they'd have to kill me. Snicker.
Anyhow. I did a hell of a lot of reading for this chapter, hoping to capture just how difficult it would have been for a lifelong ‘career soldier’ like Farkas to recover from such a nasty wound. And similarly for Carlotta - a soldier's wife - to deal with the aftermath as well. Most of the soldiers who lose parts have significant depression, anxiety and PTSD. Carlotta definitely showed signs of post traumatic stress - remember how the sight of her husband’s limb spooked her so bad? Yeah. It messes with your mind.

But I gave them a happy ending, despite the odds cuz I loves them so.

I have roughly four or five more chapters in the works that are relatively long. I'm hoping it will be a grand payoff for those of you who have stuck by this story for so long. Enjoy, read, comment...it warms the cockles of me heart to see what you all think.

And Happy Fourth of July. May all those who serve the great country of the U.S. of A. be remembered, alive or dead, for the sacrifices they make on our behalf. Warts and all, she's a great land. And I'm proud to be a citizen...today and every day.

https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/05/25/new-prosthetics-keep-amputee-soldiers-on-active-duty
Mila Valentia was completely absorbed by the drip-drop of the green fluid oozing down the alembic tube. Plopping with steady increments into the beaker she held above an open flame. Watching the mixture with a critical eye as it steadily turned a bright, almost crystalline jade, Mila held her breath and counted down.

Ten more seconds. *Nine. Eight...*

"Vivienne, could you check on our supplies of mandrake root?"

She gritted her teeth, determined not to mess up the formula. *Seven. Six.*

"Which one is that again?" Rooting around in the cupboards, the Breton woman slammed doors willy nilly, the banging clap of the wood grating on Mila’s ears as she blocked it out, trying to focus. *Focus!*

Angeline’s voice quavered over the sound of chests being opened and closed. "It's the root that looks like an ugly little man."

*No use.* Mila pounded the alchemy table in frustration as the emerald liquid that could have been her first successful Fortify Health potion sizzled into a dull brownish ooze. The glowing mushroom had dissolved too early, had not been assimilated in time to bond with the moss and mountain flower. Another bum potion, wasting ingredients she could have used in further experiments.

Due in no small part to her instructors. Laughter sounded, echoing in the stone walls of the tidy shop as she sighed, removing the beaker from the flame and replacing it with a clean receptacle.

"An ugly little man? In that case, I'm pretty sure it tried to buy me a drink last night."

Rolling her eyes as Vivienne Onis handed her aunt the paper packet of mandrake roots and flounced out the door, the Imperial woman huffed under her breath. *Vivienne would flirt with just about anything that could buy her a drink. Poor Sorex. They were never getting back together. Not if Vivienne kept spreading her legs.*

*Solitude.*
Bustling, busy, filled with all sorts of strange people and peculiar smells, good and ill. Mila had become accustomed to the fast-paced rhythm of Skyrim’s capital in the last several years of living in her basement corner of Angeline’s Aromatics.

Once she had gaped in awe at the towering buildings, at the splendor of the windmill and stonework of the Blue Palace. Had gawked like a rube at every non-human, every mage she saw passing by.

Mila would say now that she considered herself fairly cosmopolitan. The Imperial woman drank every weekend at the Winking Skeever with a small assortment of casual friends, fastidiously chosen to have the least impact upon her schedule. Attended the bard performances like everyone else in town, and could hold her own in conversation about the current events of the Empire, Hammerfell and even Morrowind thanks to an admirer who unloaded shipments at the docks. She shopped at Radiant Raiment for her clothing; the occasional sight of a cloaked Altmer strutting self-importantly out of the dressing room no longer causing her to shake in fright as it might have, back when she had been an ignorant country girl.

Truly, there was too much diversity to bother overmuch about how very strange some of the citizens were here. Rainbow-scaled Argonians that argued, hissing over the quality of gems; sly Khajiit smoking their pipes with gold rings glittering in the fur of their ears. Tight-knit groups of short Bosmer, glaring suspiciously at everyone in their fur-leather garb and bone-crafted bows, trading freshly shot game for supplies. Once Mila had even seen an Alik’r warrior striding past the wineseller’s stall, wearing odd, flowing robes...even a turban wrapped around his inscrutable dark face. Bearing a strangely curved sword she found out later was called a ‘scimitar’.

**Curved swords! So peculiar! I bet Da would love to get his hands on one of those!**

Making a mental note to check out the blacksmith for any Redguard weaponry, Mila allowed herself a nostalgic smile, as she thought about her family back in Whiterun.

Mila had enjoyed her childhood, even if in retrospect it had been somewhat lacking in comforts and the greater, lasting happiness she had found later in life, when Ma had married Farkas. She realized now that they had been on the brink of poverty; starvation allayed only by the generosity of Pelagius as her mother had been allowed by the farmer to keep what she did not sell. Those leavings often fed them at nights, alone in the drafty hut that she gleaned wood scraps and bits of hay for. To feed the fire that warded off the chill seeping into their bones.

Her mother’s courtship of the Companion Farkas had been the first truly bright memory in Mila’s youth. The only father she had ever known... Mila had been overjoyed when they married and moved to Breezehome. It was so much closer to Aunt Arcadia’s potion shop than Jorrvaskr.

Not wanting to be a burden, Mila had agreed to study under her relative. Moving into the spare room of the Cauldron was merely practical, for night and day she read, measured and poured ingredients. Desperate to pursue her dream career as an alchemist.

And when her new twin sisters Fjora and Gydda had arrived not long after...well. They had grown up so fast. Become so lovely, with their matching ghost silver eyes and dark olive skin...yet so different in temperament.

Fjora was dreamy, absent minded...always wearing a smile, whereas Gydda tended to be sharp tongued and far more serious. Fjora enjoyed playing the lute and singing songs of romance. Gydda
followed Athis and Vilkas like a third shadow around Jorrvaskr. They would be heartbreakers in a few years. Not that Da would favor that opinion. He still believed Mila was too young to concern herself about courtship! Mila - nearly a spinster by local Skyrim reckoning in her early twenties, as yet unwedded and unlikely to be. Most of her old friends in Whiterun had already been married off, already popping out babies and sharing looks of sympathy as Mila was seen walking around, nose in a book...and not altogether ignorant of what they thought of her.

Let them talk. She had grander aspirations to worry about. Babies and men were all well and fine, but they weren’t for Mila Valentia.

Not yet, at any rate. Not until she managed to become a Master Alchemist in her own right. Perhaps taking over her aunt’s shop, to experiment and sell at her own leisure. Then, and only then...she would concern herself with such fluff.

Last year, her sisters had turned ten. Ten! It was true, Mila reflected, that time seemed to move more swiftly for those who had children in their lives. Every time she made the long journey back to Whiterun they were ever so much older; speaking in run-on sentences to Mila about the doings of Jorrvaskr. How Ma had taken down a mammoth at three hundred paces with a bow! That Uncle Vilkas was now teaching them how to handle daggers, and that Gydda had managed to throw ten daggers at the bullseye in a row, which had made Fjora cry and Thadrig red with jealousy! Relating at length the latest scrap of mischief that cousin Thad and his little sister Svari had gotten into now, causing them to be grounded to the confines of the training yard. Again. What was fresh in season at the market, and could Mila perhaps mix them a potion that would turn their hair sunshine gold? Fjora in particular despised the dark ashy brown their hair had darkened to with maturity. So silly. It was a lovely color. Much nicer than her own light dun brown. Had she ever been so frivolous as a child? Mila soaked it all in, hugging Da and Ma in turn as Athis, Uncle Vilkas and Auntie Siggy joined in the welcome. Bringing jazbay pie and ale along with their smiles and ever-present teasing at how much Mila had changed. And it was the same; every single time she returned.

Home. How she missed it, sometimes, when the stench of so many people living so close together rankled her nose and frustrated the peace she sought to study. She would wake up in the dark of her room, blinking awake as she tried to recall the smell of cold wind upon the grassy tundra. The slightly sulphuric, mineral rich pools that she had taken for granted to bathe in beneath Jorrvaskr. Mila had to make do with a bucket and soapy rag, now. Hardly worth a comparison.

Perhaps it was time to make a return trip, to see her loved ones. Midsummer would be here in a few months. One of her favorite seasonal festivals, with dancing and feasting and songs around the bonfires, late into the night.

She had been fortunate, the Imperial reflected as she cleaned up her workspace. Very fortunate that Angeline Morrard had been looking for an apprentice. She was grateful for the opportunity to study amidst the Breton’s staggering library of educational tomes. Arcadia may have had the more deft hand at medicines, and was probably the more skilled of the two. But the sheer amount of information here in Solitude drew her in.

And the work she was called upon to do outside of her studies was fairly easy, netting her a small but tidy living wage. Sweeping, tending the counter and delivering orders to customers was hardly difficult. The old woman tended to doze off during the day...leaving the running of the shop to the careless Vivienne, who often foisted most of her tasks upon Mila.

No. It wasn’t a perfect situation. But she had already read and reread all of Arcadia’s books years ago. This, this position was her chance to make a good impression. Connections were important in her field of study. Notes and lectures were exchanged among alchemy peers, and Mila had high
hopes of someday visiting the College of Winterhold in person to examine the wondrous alchemical lore surely hidden there. Someday.

Carefully wiping down the table, she checked to ensure no spilled liquids had soaked into the base plate of the apparatus. Didn’t want a nasty accident to ruin further products. The old Breton was cross enough with her as it was, due to her recent rash of misfortunate experiments.

Honestly. It wasn’t as though she had been completely ham-handed. If only her trainer would allow her to try something new! Something more exciting than health or stamina potions; which she could practically smell in her sleep now. The ingredients for those were inevitably gamey, often using bits and pieces of dead animal that were often rotting or effluvient in their many preserved forms. Not Mila’s favorite solution to craft. The odor lingered on her hands for days.

Not like the finely cut Frost Salts, wisp wrappings or the chiming fronds of nirnroot that had fascinated her so as a child. What she wouldn’t give for more ingredients from Solstheim to sketch and experiment with! Perhaps with more success, Angeline would tutor her in more interesting concoctions. Something to look forward to, Mila thought. Mentally groaning in boredom, she walked behind the counter to grab some more powdered leaf of mountain flower, dried glowing mushroom and ground wheat. If you don’t succeed…try, try until the potion commingled and the substrate dissolves. Gods, what a morning.

The front door creaked open. Her back turned to the door, Mila continued grabbing her supplies as she hummed beneath her breath. Where was that dratted mushroom? “Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with.”

A deep, rich voice chuckled. “I’m certain you can. When you’re ready, miss...there’s something I’d like to ask you about.”

Huh. Some male, probably here to pick up a ‘stamina’ potion. No one she recognized by the sound, thank the Divines. That was always awkward.

“...Yes?” She turned, arms full of boxes and packages that she promptly dropped, as she nearly collided into the stranger who had silently crept up from behind.

“What are you doing back here?” Mila stuttered, frantically picking up the ingredients before the contents slid from their wrappings. “Customers are supposed to wait at the counter!”

A leather gloved hand reached out to grab her jar of powdered wheat, deftly placing it upon an empty shelf. Placing her ingredients upon the counter, Mila struggled to cover just how flustered she was. What a skeeve-shit, scaring her with stealth! “If I’m to be answering your questions, sir, some basic manners would go a long way. Just a thought.”

Dark, gleaming eyes examined her curiously, as the man’s face broke into an easy smile. “Apologies, miss. I was wondering if you knew anything about invisibility potions.” Leather armor creaked as he slouched back against the counter, effectively trapping her at the mercy of his attentions. He looked like a fairly typical rogue, she thought as she sized him up. Confident. That cocky smile gracing features that were appealing, without being overly refined. A brace of lockpicks attached to his belt, along with a sheathed dagger also tended to give the sneaky types away.

Mila wasn’t sure about the flanged mace, though. Not a typical sneak-thief, then. Perhaps a city guard off duty? A sellsword?

She blinked. Invisibility potions? Not much call for that here. “Sure. Typically crafted from chaurus eggs or nirnroot, perhaps the wings of a luna moth. It takes about a month to properly prepare, as the
mixture must be boiled, strained and turned into a tincture that is then added, drop by drop to a purified aqueous salt-nitrate solution.”

Smirking inwardly as the man looked fairly dumbstruck at her explanation, Mila added “But we don’t have any in stock today. Afraid you’re quite out of luck.” Stepping towards him, she narrowed her brown eyes to slits as that white smile flashed at her once more. For whatever reason, he seemed amused by her pique of temper. Definitely a skeever-shit. “Now, if you’ll excuse me…”

A footstep scraped outside the front door, tapping twice then one last time. Deliberately.

Suddenly she found her mouth covered by a gloved hand. The smile was now missing, as was the warmth in those dark eyes. He mouthed the word ‘quiet’.

Waited for her to acknowledge him, as she reluctantly dipped her chin. Hyperfocused in sudden trembling fear, as the man scanned the room grimly, his gaze brightening as he spied the far end of the counter where they stacked barrels and boxes for later use.

*A thief, then. Who else would be interested in invisibility potions?* Still muffling her in that tight grasp, the stranger slithered past her to silently open a large storage cupboard. Making no sound with his padded footsteps, he urged her to get in with a pointed nod.

Her breath coming fast and tight, Mila crept into the cupboard as quietly as she could. Worrying about the calculating appraisal she saw of herself in his eyes. The dagger and mace, *so close*, as he followed her in. *Could she grab it and make a stand?* Not now. Wedging himself around and behind her, the man reached out with his free hand to gently pull the wooden door shut.

In the dark, tight space their breathing mingled; slowly heating the air to an uncomfortable degree. Struggling to slow her indrawn gasps to an acceptable rate, Mila swallowed against the crispness of the leather glove. Pulling her tightly against the hard form she was now fully flush against.

They waited, so still and silent, for something. Anything, she thought frantically. Any distraction that could help her break free and alert the guards patrolling outside. Could she reach his dagger that was currently poking into her hip? Mila realized with some discomfort that she was fairly sitting in his lap, wedged between his legs and the cupboard door. And though it was far too black in the musty space to see, she was *sure* she could move her hand without being spotted -

- *Damn.* It was like the stranger could read her mind, as suddenly a bar of steel seemed to wrap itself around both her arms, hugging her even closer to him. Mila ground her teeth in vexation. Dare she bite the hand currently mashing her lips against his glove? Or should she bide her time?

Footsteps whispered outside in the shop. Mila prayed against hope that it was Angeline, or even Vivienne. They would look for her, no doubt desiring to set her to a new task. Would find her missing and begin to search. Saving her from whatever this scoundrel had planned.

“*Don’t move.*” Her skin prickled as he breathed, ever so softly, into her ear. His lips brushed the hair that lay tangled against her cheek. Making her shiver in what was surely fright. “*I don’t want to hurt you. Stay still.*”

Doing as he bid, Mila held her breath as the footsteps continued outside, slowly meandering until they grew slightly more audible. A tinkle of glass announced the intruder - for surely, it was this one’s accomplice- sifting through the shelves of poisons and remedies. Further noises of metal
rustling against glass, tinkling as she listened in her captivity to the sounds of stealing.

Feeling her breathing quicken once more, this time in ire...Mila twisted in his arms. She couldn’t allow this bastard to hold her against her will, as some fetcher stole her hard labor, ruining her reputation!

Something sharp dug into the softness of her neck. A blade. Stiffening, Mila felt his head come to rest upon her shoulder. Warm breath, smelling of honeyed mead wafted across her face. No words, only a growl deep in his chest. She could feel the sound reverberate against the thin cloth that separated them, feel it in the blades of her shoulders as she was fairly smothered in his zeal to keep her quiet. Leather straps cut into her ribs, her thighs as he curled around her; making his threat even more apparent.

Her chest rose and fell quickly against his binding arms, as she felt hot tears trickle down her cheeks. This...this was humiliating! She had been raised better than this. What would her Da think, to see her so reduced? So easily taken unaware.

Once more, her skin crawled as the man breathed into her ear. “Not long now. Be good.”

-And with a surge of incredulity, she realized that the thumb holding the dagger so carefully to her neck was now stroking her cheek. Soft, measured strokes. Meant to lull her into cooperation.

Just you wait, she thought in renewed displeasure. The heat, the closeness of the cupboard was making her head spin. The gloved hand loosened upon her mouth, a single finger tapping her lips in an unspoken warning.

Hearing with a thrill of foreboding the front door close shut, as whoever had stolen from the shop departed, Mila continued to hyperventilate. White stars were beginning to burst in the corners of her vision, and she jerked convulsively as the cupboard doors opened. Revealing a shocking rush of light and fresh, sweet air.

Taking in deep draughts of what tasted like liberty, Mila realized that she had not quite escaped her captor just yet. The dagger had been removed from its threatening position, but the arm that held her upper body in static inertia remained.

“Let me go.” She whispered, not daring to turn her head as her sight readjusted to the brightness of the shop.

She felt, rather than just heard him chuckle. Which caused her to stiffen even further, as she realized he was laughing at her!

Remembering something her Da had once lectured them on during a family dinner, Mila felt a tiny smile curl unpleasantly upon her lips. Whenever you’re confronted by a creature larger, more fearsome than you...hit it in the head. That will stun the beast, giving you time to flee and fight again.

As the man’s breath tickled her neck, Mila knew she had to be fast. Faster than she had ever been, removing dragonfly wings from the firescreen with tweezers to prevent undue desiccation, or stirring a pot of ash cluster and ectoplasm before it collapsed into dust.

One swift, hard direct hit from her head, as it jerked back against that pretty nose. Bam.

The steely arm holding her tightly loosed as he stumbled backwards, almost crashing into the boxes and barrels. Ow... Mila cradled her skull, hissing at the pain of rebounding off what was surely the thickest of heads in Tamriel.
Not that it had done her much good. For no sooner had she taken a couple of steps than suddenly the room went dark, as a black hood was lowered upon her.

_She couldn’t breath!_ Struggling furiously, Mila cried out. Muffled by the hood as she fought to be free. “Let go of me! Let go now, before I tell everyone about you!”

He had her in his grasp, just one of his hands spanning the entirety of both her wrists. Mila tried kicking him, aiming at where she imagined his legs to be, rewarded by a coarse oath as again the bastard pulled her tightly against him. Wrapping her arms at her side in a bear hug, preventing her from doing any more damage.

“Clever, aren’t you?”

The voice spoke again, dark amusement coloring his tone. “Sorry about all this. I promise that I will cover the cost of whatever goods were taken.”

Through the fabric of the hood, she heard the clink of septims hitting the counter. Her mouth dry, she licked her lips, tasting the cotton and accidentally sucking part of the hood into her mouth.

Spitting it out, she spoke angrily. Her voice sounded funny, bluntly muted by the hood. “What in gods name are you playing at, you crazed bastard?”

His foot scraped the floor, and suddenly she found her head tilted back, as what felt like a mouth branded her with heat upon her lips through the thin cloth of the shroud.

Stunned into a blank shock, Mila stood there limply. Like a doll. Hardly believing what was now happening, as this odd stranger who had pulled a knife; had threatened her into a closet and tossed a sack over her face now leisurely kissed her like they were out on...on a picnic or something.

He was a good kisser.

She could feel her resolve slowly siphoned away, as despite her better judgement shrieking at her to kick him in the balls...Mila responded with a gentle pressure of her own. Shaping her lips against his through the hood, as the most exciting thing that had ever happened to Mila in her life gripped her until she squeaked.

He made an inarticulate noise, crushing her even closer as heat and damp turned the cloth nearly transparent. Hardly any barrier at all, as his tongue glided against her lips, causing her to shudder.

Gasping, leaning towards him as he drew away, Mila felt a sudden spike of shame. _What in Mara’s name was she doing? This man was obviously some criminal. She had just made out with a criminal!_

When the man spoke after some time, during which Mila panted like a horse run ragged, he sounded puzzled. “Huh. Definitely didn’t expect that. Clever and passionate. Aren’t you a rare find.”

Suddenly, Mila felt herself being picked up. Beginning to struggle anew, she bit out a sharp yelp as her body collided with the soft sacks of flour in the kitchen.
“Stay there.” His voice came from far away, warning her as footsteps receded to the front door. Hearing it close shut, she managed to scrabble at the laces holding the hood closed. Tore it off, her hair flying every which way as Mila began to swear up a storm. Even using what Dunmer slang she knew from dining with Athis when he was drunk. *That no-good, lying n’wah pus-bucket of drooling netch filth! What in Dibella’s blessed name does he think he’s doing?*

Her angsty tirade stopped short at the sight of a pile of shiny gold septims, lying there upon the counter. Carefully scoping out the cupboards, Mila realized only a few potions had been taken. Small ones that healed, a couple of Cure Disease vials. Hardly enough to justify the gleaming wealth that mocked her with its presence. Her jaw jutted out in stubbornness, as she swept every last septim into a bag that she hid with alacrity, deep in the recesses of her sleeping mat.

She’d pay for the losses out of her own pocket. This...this was *war*.

If it took all year, even into the next - Mila would find that asshole. Track him down and make him *pay* for the humiliation he had heaped upon her in spades. That *kiss* he had stolen.

The single dragon's tongue bloom he had left upon the septims, Mila had pressed carefully into her worn copy of *De Rerum Dirennis*. She could question her own motivation for doing so later. Much later. After she had found him and beaten out the answers to the persistent questions that circled, like slaughterfish in a barrel, round and round in her mind.

*Why set up a shoplifting sting, only to pay back the amount that was stolen later?*

*******

Months later as Mila sipped her mead in Jorrvaskr, she realizes that she hasn’t thought of Frothar in ages.

Frothar, Jarl Balgruuf’s son. Now High King Balgruuf, wed to Jarl Elisif. Which made Frothar a prince, she thought. Or was it duke? She had never paid much attention before, when Frothar had chased her around Whiterun, yanking on her hair and throwing snowballs at her face.

Idly tapping on the table as some damn fool began playing ‘Ragnar the Red’ to a chorus of groans, Mila pondered this new development. Frothar had been her only crush...the single unattainable object of desire in her heart for so long, she hadn’t even begun to consider supplanting his place with anyone else.

But lately, as she daydreamed while pounding canis root into a fine powder with mortar and pestle, her thoughts had strayed to darker things.

Dark eyes, flickering hot and cold in equal turn. "*Clever, aren’t you?*"

If she truly were clever, she’d have found him by now. It was nearly Midsummer’s Eve, and she had gotten no closer to her goal than the day she had hidden a golden flower, gold coins and a burning desire to find him once more. If only to get some damn answers.

Truly, there were too many Imperial men about to single out just one young man with laughing eyes
and a taunting grin. She had been flummoxed to discover that hardly anyone in Solitude could match her description. And so far, she had not had the chance to ask around in Whiterun.

“Mila, dear! Have you met the newest Companions?”

Starting from her sulky thoughts, Mila reluctantly smiled at the Harbinger. Or Auntie Siggy, as she had now come to be called, particularly by the twins. “No, I haven’t. Introduce me.”

Standing, she tried to remember each new, fresh face as the Harbinger introduced them. An orc maiden named Zarkgrash. Gruff, green and seething. Mila nodded, but didn’t offer to shake hands. Zarkgrash was followed by a two bored looking Dunmer, an Argonian and finally a skittish looking Nord who was so pale he looked like he would blow away with a puff of wind. “Name’s Jorthulf White-Hand,” The boy lisped, looking as though the very act of speaking pained him.

Aunt Siggy clapped a firm hand on his shoulder, audibly rattling his teeth as she grinned mischievously. “He’s more drawn to stealth, our Jorth. Perhaps he can teach us something new, stalking the mammoth in the high grass next week?”

“I-I-I can do that.” He stammered, bowing out in relief as Mila bit her lip, trying not to laugh. Aunt Siggy had no such compunctions, chortling as she wrapped Mila in a warm hug. “**White-Hand.** That’s one hell of a surname for such a weedy lad. Bet he has hairy palms. Oh, I’ve missed you so. Goodness, look how lovely you are! You really put in some effort tonight, didn’t you?”

“I do try sometimes.” Mila managed to get out, as Aunt Siggy released her and seemed to scan the crowd. Jorrvaskr was full tonight; the rough assembly of warriors milling about in a cacophony of sound. As she smoothed the dark teal skirt of her gown free of crumbs, Mila saw only a few recognizable to her. Jorrvaskr hosted a revolving door of fighters now, attracting sellswords, soldiers and random citizens from all corners of Skyrim and beyond. There was now intense competition for positions within the Circle.

Ah, the Circle. Consisting of the Harbinger, Uncle Vilkas, Athis and her parents. Mila knew that the honor of belonging to the Circle was reserved for those who had proven themselves trustworthy. So far, she wasn’t going to hold her breath, if these were the newest recruits.

Standing by her aunt’s side, Mila watched as the Harbinger jumped up and down, waving her arms. The almost childlike action brought a smile to her lips. No matter how old Aunt Siggy became, Mila would swear she never aged. “Well, damn. There! I knew he was around here somewhere.”

Signaling frantically, the Harbinger pointed towards herself and Mila. “Ah! Aventus! Please come and meet my niece, Mila Valentia! You may have seen her around Jorrvaskr before. She’s Carlotta’s girl.”

A dark head turned at Aunt Siggy’s call, the broad figure pushing its way through the revelers to stand before them.

**Speak of the Daedra, and he shall appear.** Feeling like someone had clocked her in the head with a warhammer, Mila gaped at none other than the sneaky skeever shit who had assaulted her that spring.

He wore no armor tonight. Just a long, plain tunic covered by a vest and soft tooled boots over leggings. The clothing did nothing to cover the fact that he was fairly stacked with muscle; the hard definition of his arms pulled at sleeves that had been rolled back nearly to the elbow. Studying him, she saw that he was clean shaven...the barest hint of stubble revealing that he worked to keep it that way. For someone who couldn’t be much older than she was, he bore an unusually grave
countenance that abruptly changed upon taking her in.

And *damn* if he didn’t recognize her on the spot. Those *eyes*. That knowing *smile*. “Well, well... Mila Valentia. I think I’ve already had the pleasure of your acquaintance. Nice to see you again.”

Staring dumbly, Mila stood frozen as the Harbinger rattled on, blithely ignorant of the undercurrent of emotion currently seething between them. “-and Aventus Aretino is the newest member of the Circle! The youngest ever, since Vilkas and Farkas joined. Oh, I’m so glad you made it in time for the festival, sweetheart. I have a feeling this will be one to remember!”

Mila forced herself to remain calm, as Aventus lifted an eyebrow at the sunny statement. “Of that, I have no doubt, Aunt.”

*No doubt at all.*

**********

Anxiety warred with eagerness as Mila searched Jorrvaskr, striving to corner this Aventus Aretino.

Not that he made it easy. After that tense introduction, he had disappeared as Mila had been shunted off to embrace other family members. Quelling her impatience, she managed to make it through the necessary small talk. Smiling at the right times, laughing shrilly as she kept glancing into the smoke and firelit faces, searching for him.

Her Da, she could tell, knew something was up. “Mila, whatever is wrong, you know you can tell us.”

“Oh honey, is there someone special back in Solitude?” Her Ma gushed, her enthusiasm causing Fjora to sigh dreamily and Gydda to scowl.

“No, Ma!” Mila’s eyes darted around the hall, not seeing anyone she recognized. *Thank Dibella for that, at the moment.* “Just...studying as usual. Don’t break out the wedding crown yet!”

“Well...alright. I was sure by now you would have found *someone* in a place as big as Solitude.” She could tell that had not been the answer her mother had wanted to hear.

*Give it up, Ma.* Da gave her a warm, knowing smile... chucking her on the chin as she breathed a sigh of relief.

His voice was a comforting bass growl. “Well, enjoy yourself lass. We’ll see you later. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, eh?”

Tearing away from her wonderful, nosy, suffocating family, Mila looked all around. Desperate to get answers of any sort. *Aventus Aretino? Why does that name sound familiar? And why has he become part of the Circle...I mean, don’t they know about what he does in his spare time?*

*Threatening shopkeepers, playing mind games...hah. Little better than a scoundrel.*

“Looking for me?”

She could see nothing. The Nords surrounding Mila all but dwarfed her diminutive height, and she stood on tiptoe, struggling to look past the smoke and the dim flickering light of the fire pit.
A large hand threaded itself through her fingers. “This way!”

Barely making out the pale beige of his tunic beneath the red vest, she held on tightly as he dragged her through the crowd. Several times Mila had to apologize as she stepped on toes, forcing her way through as Aventus led her somewhere, until all of a sudden they plowed into the vacant training yard. Her hand was released, and the smoky interior filled with the sharp tang of alcohol and off-key singing rapidly became open sky.

And stars. So many stars, with the shifting of the aurora borealis a deep indigo blue and lavender. Dancing around the swell of Masser and Secunda, both moons visible in the vast expanse of night. Beautiful.

Skin prickling with unease, Mila sensed that someone was watching her. Spinning around, she beheld the stocky blur of him leaning against the shadowed walls of Jorrvaskr, arms crossed.

His eyes were mere pinpricks of light in the gloom. “Go ahead. Ask.”

*************

Closing her mouth, she thought better of what she had just been about to say. Seeing her waver indecisively, Aventus laughed and stepped forward. Pausing as he stood a mere handspan away. “Really...I’d be peppering myself with questions, were I in your shoes.”

Reaching behind her, Mila’s hands clung to one of the wooden support beams that held up Jorrvaskr’s wide porch. The rough, weather beaten wood was a solid comfort, as she stared back at this stranger who had wormed his way into her thoughts.

“Who. Why…” Clearing her throat, she tried again. “Why let someone steal potions, if you were merely going to pay back what was taken?”

Slowly nodding, Aventus pressed his lips tightly together. “So you put two and two together. I knew you were smart.”

That tone. He paid her the compliment to her intellect almost begrudgingly. As though he wished she hadn’t been quite so smart. How infuriating.

“Well?” Mila demanded, releasing the wooden beam to stand squarely in front of him. “Why were you there, then? Who was it that you were covering for...and-”

“One thing at a time.” Sucking his lower lip between his teeth, Aventus seemed to examine Mila from head to toe. Beginning at her practical, tightly braided hair that swung down to her waist, his near-black eyes took every detail in - working their way down the richly colored cerulean dress to linger upon the bodice laced in ribbons. Ending with his examination of the scuffs on her travel-stained leather boots.

Feeling herself flush under such intense scrutiny, Mila fist ed her hands. “Anything else you want to check? Want to open my mouth and see if I have all my teeth?” Bastard. Only he could make her feel so low.

As though he had made a decision, Aventus relaxed his stance and smiled. “I wouldn’t mind seeing more of you, yeah. But, first things first.”
Ignoring her sputtering at his matter-of-fact statement, the fellow Imperial leaned against the wall once more, watching her closely. “Yes, I was covering for someone that day in Angeline’s Aromatics. Since you were paid back for what was taken - and yes, the extra septims were for your silence, which I can tell is dearly purchased - I can’t tell you much more than that it is a private affair, carried out under orders by Harbinger Sigrid herself. You’ll have to take it up with her if you want to know more.”

*Of all the...* “No. There is no way you are leaving without telling me everything, you jackass.”

Untroubled by her name calling, Aventus quirked an eyebrow. She could never manage just the one to arch like that. And she had practiced alone in the mirror for hours. Damn him. “Everything? That would take far too long.”

“Well, start!” Feeling a fine rage begin to swell beneath her breastbone, Mila stalked towards him, murder on her mind. “The Harbinger...my aunt...she’ll certainly be interested to discover just how you ‘handle’ your marks during jobs. If what you were doing was actually one of her paid tasks, which I doubt. You don’t look much like a courier. Or a warrior, if I’m being honest.”

“The Harbinger has enough skeletons in her own closet without my adding to them.” He spoke cryptically. Gazing upon Mila with what she realized with exasperation was humor, as she squeezed her hands in manic repetitions until they ached.

“She loves me. Practically helped raise me. If I asked, she would tell.”

“Possibly. Why does it matter so much to you?”

“I just want to know the truth, Aventus.”

Those dark eyes that seemed to swallow the light looked back at her, untroubled. Suddenly his lips twitched, as though he had just gotten the punchline to some joke. “Wait. You think I was ‘handling’ you?”

Nearly indignant, Mila stamped her foot. “You were and you know it! Why else would you distract me with that...that kiss, so you could make your getaway?”

Oh, he really was laughing at her now, as he slowly walked even closer. Distracted by the way he moved, nearly gliding as though the rough gravel underfoot didn’t exist, Mila found herself cornered against the timbers of the hall. Trapped once more, as he loomed over her. Placing his hands upon either side of her head, still smiling as he leaned in with a wicked gleam in those eyes.

He wouldn’t fool her twice. This time, she would have her answers. “Don’t make fun of me.” She rasped, fingers digging into the carvings behind her as Aventus blocked out the light. Leaving her with nothing to look at but his face, probing her with the keenness of his gaze.

A finger traced down in a line, from her forehead all the way down her nose to her chin. He wasn’t wearing gloves, this time.

“Maybe I wanted to know just how you would taste.”

_Surely_ he jested. “And you thought, what? Kissing me through a hood would give you an informed knowledge?”

“Well. You’re the alchemist. I should probably obtain said knowledge directly from the source.”

And with that his lips slanted over hers, fairly scalding in the depth of their concentration as he drank
Somewhere outside of the burning puddle of need Mila had melted into, her logical mind began evaluating the cause and effect of her situation with efficient rapidity.

Aventus clasped her waist, lifting her higher against the wall. She arched against him, making him moan helplessly into her mouth as she squirmed in his arms. One point for Mila.

Hooking one of her knees in the elbow of his arm, he pressed her against the wall with the lean length of his body, causing her to toss her head back, gasping as something tantalizingly hard and close rubbed against her in a long, dragging tease. Burying his face against the juncture of her throat and neck, Aventus breathed what felt like fire as he did something. Some lewd movement she didn’t have a name for that sparked a coiling pit of delicious tension, deep inside her most private of places.

One point to Aventus. As she mewled in desperation, grabbing his face to kiss her properly, Mila had the wherewithal to figure that if this was handling her, then what had occurred behind Angeline’s counter had been a faded, greyed out prelude to this...this-

Thud. A door slammed open. Light and smoke escaped, as four fighters drunkenly stumbled into the yard.

His tongue was still in her mouth as they froze in their very exposed, very compromising position. Feeling him curl his tongue back into his mouth, she chased it with a quick bite to his lower lip; feeling an echo of her former annoyance as he shushed her. Holding her still, so tightly against the wall as the warriors began urinating. She bit back a giggle as one of the men let out a boisterous fart. Felt Aventus shake silently against her too, as the utter ludicrousness of what they were doing made her bury her head in the warmth of his shoulder as she tried - desperately tried so hard - not to laugh.

Finishing up with much hoisting of pants and wiggling, one of the men hummed the last strains of Ragnar the Red, as one by one they reentered Jorrvaskr. Passing the two of them completely unnoticed.

Which was some sort of miracle, if she spared the mental capacity to think much on it. Her skirt had been dragged up clear to her waist, small clothes embarrassingly damp against the cool night air as ever so carefully, Aventus eased them both back down.

Setting her cautiously back on solid ground, Mila took in his flushed, wildly triumphant expression and felt her own face heat in response.

Tongue in cheek, she thought about what next to say. “You still owe me an apology.”

His chest rose and fell. Mila smiled to see just how affected Aventus had been by that little encounter. His eyes fairly snapped as he spoke. “Wouldn’t you say that was a rather passionate plea for mercy?”

Mercy. “Not unless that plea includes a full explanation of recent events.”
Throwing his hands in the air, Aventus took a step backwards. Then another, as he called out his response while retreating down the path that led away from Jorrvaskr. “Sorry, Mila. I truly am. You want to know more? Ask your ‘Aunt Siggy’.”

“Oh I will!” She called out after him, as he turned to jog away to gods knew where. Didn’t he live at Jorrvaskr? Where was he going?

Just as well. She didn’t entirely trust herself to not search for him tonight. And the jam-packed sleeping quarters of Jorrvaskr were not exactly the romantic location she would prefer to lose her maidenhead in.

Tenderly tracing her swollen lips with her tongue, Mila grinned.

One way or another, she would get results. When one ingredient failed to produce the desired result, another surely would suffice.

Mila simply had to try a different venue. One that would reveal the hidden truth of things.

Patience was a virtue for alchemists.

********

Her aunt was less forthcoming than she had hoped.

It wasn’t until the following evening, as Mila occupied herself amongst the chatter of her family at Breezehome, that she was able to request some privacy with Sigrid.

“I can’t tell you what’s going on, Mila. Honestly, I’m not even sure how you got tangled up with this in the first place.”

Shrinking beneath that hawk-like stare, the Imperial woman prayed that her aunt would not pry unduly into her motivations for asking after him. She had intentionally absented herself from Jorrvaskr despite her Da’s urging to join in the fun; choosing to distract herself with the familiar chores of cooking and cleaning.

It wasn’t working very well. Every time she brushed up against a wall while sweeping, her skin tingled at the memory of warm hands, lifting. Kneading the curve of her legs, her ass as they braced her against the planed timber walls, lust pooling at her core as he-

Stop. Bad enough that Ma is constantly nagging me to find a man. If Aunt Siggy joined in...

Spooking herself at the thought of the combined might of their motherly interference, Mila put on her blandest expression. “You said he just became part of your Circle. Your most trusted advisors. I’m just worried because he seems a bit…stealthy. Sneaky, for a warrior.”

Fixing a gimlet look upon Mila, Sigrid looked as though she didn’t buy it for a second. “And this bothers you…why?”

Mila shrugged. “He basically hid me in the cupboard while someone stole potions. I managed to stay
out of trouble with Ms. Morrard...no one else knows what happened...but he really seems more like an assassin, all cloak and dagger than any warrior I’ve seen.”

Of all the reactions to her inquiry, Mila had not expected her aunt to become so upset. She had gotten nothing further from her that day, as Sigrid moodily waved her off. Looking back, Mila watched the Harbinger stomp away, seeming to mutter under her breath as she took off for Jorrvaskr. So many secrets. Why is this such a big deal?

And no one else had anything else to add. Well...nothing pertaining to what she had an invested interest in.

“Aventus? He’s amazing!” Thadrig squealed, tugging at his sister Svari who toddled behind him sucking her thumb. “He swings that mace like a giant’s club! Bam! Smash!”

“Such a nice boy, doing chores for our Harbinger.” Her Ma Carlotta sighed, sharpening her shield upon the grindstone. “Really, you could do a lot worse.”

“He’s sooo fine,” Sighed Fjora, fluttering her eyelashes as Gydda kicked a rock across the garden, hitting the stone wall with a whoop. “And he kicks ass, too.” Gydda added almost as an afterthought; causing Mila to shake her head at the antics of both sisters.

Yes. So damn charming, he has all of Whiterun under his spell. Including me.

********

It was the snoring that eventually drove her upstairs to get a drink.

Aunt Arcadia was entertaining a man friend. If Mila had to take a guess, she would have pegged the hooded, mysterious visitor as Farengar the court mage. But no one asked, so she did not tell.

And since her presence was politely directed elsewhere for the night, she had tried - and failed - to make a spot for herself at Breezehome.

But the noise! The shouting, laughter and boisterous storytelling that Uncle Vilkas and Da indulged in with their guests drove her up the wall, as she tried to concentrate on reading alchemical formulas when sleep would not come.

“I’m going to Jorrvaskr, where they hopefully have some spare beds. Quiet beds.” She told her Ma, as she packed up her belongings and slid out the door.

But to no avail. For the preparations for Midsummer were in full swing. Shoving past the singing, dancing fighters as they feasted the night away, Mila made her way to the basement to spread out her bedroll upon the floor. Near the bookshelves that graced the end of the hall, close to the flight of steps leading upstairs. Fairly quiet and free of the belongings of others, she fell asleep in moments.

-Only to be awakened by the grating sounds of snoring, as the horrid symphony drifted from the newblood’s quarters. Other than the sounds of men and women sawing logs, it was relatively quiet.
No one stirred in the halls, or as she creaked open the door, was awake upstairs.

Grumbling as she padded up to the main floor, Mila rubbed at her eyes and tried not to trip upon her nightgown. She could have taken a drink from the heated pools that were much closer, but the night was muggy. Overly hot, even for midsummer. She craved cool rainwater, collected in barrels and stationed at every door.

Pulling out a dipperful of water, Mila drank her full. Savoring the clear, refreshing liquid as it stole down her throat, she pulled the weight of hair away from her neck, allowing the sticky sweat to dry. Awareness rose inside, as she realized with a jerk that she was not alone. She was-

“Don’t move.” A woman’s voice threatened her, just as surely as the blade held to her throat stopped Mila in her tracks.

As her eyes slowly focused in the dark, Mila could see that the woman before her was no Companion. Short, garbed in dull, tight fitting leathers that hooded everything but watchful blue eyes; the woman nearly scratched Mila’s throat with her blade as she hefted the burden she carried beneath her other arm.

Eyes widening in recognition, the Imperial’s breath caught in her throat. She was making off with the Shield of Ysgramor.

Ysgramor, First Harbinger and Leader of the Five Hundred Companions. Founder of the Hall of Jorrvaskr and the SkyForge. That shield had been retrieved from the grave of the Atmoran King by none other than Harbinger Sigrid, her Da and Uncle Vilkas, long ago. She remembered when it had been hung with pride, right in the place of honor where the Shards of Wuuthrad once had been placed. That had been a celebration to remember...back when Njada and so many others still lived. When life passed by so simply, so peacefully from season to season.

She couldn’t allow it to be taken. No. It would kill her parents, her aunt and uncle if this priceless artifact were to be lost to the hands of some unscrupulous buyer. Not even her friends back in Solitude would be able to track it, should the shield be released into the underground market that dealt in stolen goods.

Her voice was the merest sigh, yet it caused the dagger to dig more deeply into the skin. Feeling something wet trickle down her throat, she swallowed. Aware, as she had never really been before with Aventus, of the trembling hand that held the knife. His dagger had never shaken like that. Ah. You even favor the way he threatens you. Break out the wedding mead, you absolute prat.

“Let go of that shield. It doesn’t belong to you.”

Laughter, cool and mocking, greeted her statement. The woman’s breath released in a near-rush of sound, as Mila stood completely still. Not daring to make a move.

Roughly accented, the thief’s whispered breath smelted of onions and beer. “Why? Yer no
Companion. Y’come with me, bitch, ‘til I can get away from here without a fuss. Then I’ll figure out somethin’ to do with ya.”

Following the steely diamond prick of pain as the woman took cautious, measured steps down the stairs, Mila trailed alongside her despondently. What could she do but follow?

A shadow far off coalesced into a more defined blur. Feeling elation rip through her, Mila sighed aloud in relief as Aventus suddenly appeared at the far set of doors, wearing a full set of ebony armor aside from the helmet. In his right hand dangled a vicious looking mace. Upon his left arm, he bore an ebony shield.

There he stood, directly in the middle of the exit the thief had been making her way towards.

Stopping, the thief shoved the knifepoint deeper into Mila’s tender throat. The droplets running down her skin became a steady stream as Mila tried very hard not to quiver at the feeling of blood. So much blood, staining her nightgown. Dripping down to stain her bare feet.

Aventus kept his distance, eyes hooded as he watched the thief click her tongue, beckoning the Imperial closer. Nearly gagging, Mila goose-stepped to reach the woman’s side, led by the threat of cutting pain. Once she was close enough, the thief made quick work of her. Sticking a gag in her mouth, she approached bearing an armful of rope. “Don’t try nothin’. I’ll gut ye like a fish, I will.”

As the woman expertly tied Mila up, hands and ankles bound, she guided her to sit upon a spare chair...giving away nothing more than a stern nod, as Mila did as she asked.

Picking up the Shield of Ysgramor from where she had carefully laid it, the woman stepped towards Aventus who even now blocked her path. “C’mon on, now. Lemme pass.”

Aventus sounded regretful as he spoke, stepping slowly towards them. Causing the female thief to bristle and saunter backwards, coming closer to Mila. “I can’t do that Runa. Let it go. Give back the shield and we can go somewhere, to talk about this.”

“No! You don’ unnerstand, Aretino! How could ya?” Still a hoarse croak, the thieving woman’s voice carried just enough so that Mila could hear every word. “You left us! You left us, ya bastard! Too good to suffer, so ya went back home, didn’cha. Left us to starve, let Grelod beat Samuel t’ death! I had t’ bury him meself, when Hroar ran away an’ got drowned in th’ canals, you fecking blockheid!”

More bitter than vengeful now, the thief gripped her stolen prize with both hands. Brought it closer, tucked to her chest, as she eased her way forward to freedom. “You lost what pull y’had when y’left, Aventus. If yer not gonna help no more, then stay outta my way.”

Seeming to grow even larger as he took a deep breath, Mila shivered at the numbing chill that slowly seeped from someplace deep within the man, replacing the light in his dark eyes. Black eyes; implacable as the void, as they focused upon the thief who treaded lightly towards him.

“Runa, Runa, Runa Fair. Why won’t you let me comb your hair?” He sang in tune, almost like a nursery rhyme.

“That won’t work, ‘Ventus!” The thief snapped, flashing her dagger at him as he continued to stare accusingly at the cringing, restless woman. His words when they came were a rumbling accusation that rang, bell clear, in the air.
“You think it was easy, leaving Honorhall? Easy? I nearly died, Runa! Had to run from wolves, from bandits and guards! I sneaked through the Hall of the Dead for my own mother’s bones and heart, trying the Black Sacrament for weeks. Months, to raise help for you all! It wasn’t fucking easy to leave you and the rest of them!”

Mila thought she detected sadness. Almost a tangible grief, as Aventus raised his flanged mace in warning.

His voice was feather soft, like a prayer. “Don’t make me do this, Runa. Don’t make me kill an old friend.”

“If ye were true hearted, you’d a’ come back sooner! Not left to pray to the darkness, lotta good that did us yeah?” Runa sniffed, circling about as she tried to find a clear cut way around her solemn opponent. “Tell ya wot, ‘Ventus. Lemme go, for old times sake. We did a number o’ good jobs together. I’ll let ya slide, this time. Vex won’ care if you’re a no-show, ’slong as I appear with this shield, I get paid.”

Silence, as all three weighed their options.

Mila tested her ropes, finding them tightly knotted as she chewed the gag that tasted like sweat. Old, manky sweat. Probably some old scrat’s hanky, with her luck.

Runa and Aventus faced one another. Whatever their history, neither seemed particularly eager to push forward, to raise a weapon against an old friend. Not for the first time tonight, Mila wondered just how far this past extended for them. Obviously they had been children together at some point, but the rest? It sounded very familiar; a tune she had heard once, playing in a loop that was missing but one note. Aventus. Runa. He left us. Grelod. Never came back.

Grelod, murdered at Honorhall Orphanage over eleven years past. Such a wonderful Headmistress, the children call her Grelod the Kind.

Aventus Aretino, the cursed child of Windhelm. Shunned, summoning the cult of assassins with the Black Sacrament.

Blinking back tears, Mila felt something give way inside as the melody jangling discordantly in her memory slowly fell into sync. That boy she had heard whispered about in every tavern, inn and stable...that was him?!?

It was Runa who ran out of patience first.

Deciding against attacking the man who grimly guarded the exit in front of her, Runa elected to try the far doors. Running back towards Mila, with Aventus in hot pursuit, she could see the thief’s blue eyes dilate in the dimness, as the woman raised her dagger. Preparing to slash at her as she ran past.

Nearly choking in fright, Mila’s heart pounded in her throat as the thief lunged with her blade—and missed, as Mila flung herself off the chair, tripping the thief as she rolled upon the floor.
“Gah! Damn ye, ya horker fucker!” Runa yowled, the shield bouncing and rolling away as Aventus stood over her, mace extended as he watched her recoil from him in wretched misery.

And suddenly, light flooded the hall as torches lit up the space all around them.

“All right. I think we’re done here. Let’s get her up and off to a prison cell to reflect upon her actions, shall we?”

Harbinger Sigrid’s voice rang out pleasantly in the night, punctuated only by the sobbing breaths of Runa. The ragged panting of Mila, as she struggled against her bonds to right herself.

Aventus Aretino made no sound. Almost woodenly, he leaned forward and cut Mila’s bonds. Removed her gag with little fanfare, as she crawled away towards her Da, who was holding one of the torches. Beckoning her closer, as she ran with a cry into his waiting open arms.

Safe. Da patted her back in soothing circles, saying nothing. Just holding her tightly, making her feel small in the great bulk of his arms. Feeling like a child once more, protected and secure.

Looking around the ring of firelight, she saw the other Companions of the Circle, as well as a select few newbloods who somehow had been called to witness the action that took place. The she-orc Mila had met yesterday gave her a slow, lingering blink as Mila started upon recognizing her. Others walked away even as she strived to remember their names, going back to bed now that the excitement was dying down.

“How did you know?” Mila whispered, as Carlotta - Ma - joined Farkas in a family group hug.

As Sigrid helped Aventus bind the sniveling, ranting thief in the remnants of rope, she marvelled at the strangeness of it all as Jorrvaskr echoed with quiet murmurings. Uncle Vilkas pressed a hot mug of tea in her hands, gesturing for her to drink. She took one sip to mollify him, as he smiled wryly at his niece. “You’ve many questions, I can tell. Don’t worry. You don’t have to be kept in the dark any longer.”

“You know your aunt Sigrid has the Sight, aye?” Seeing Mila nod her head awkwardly, Vilkas continued on. The pale grey of his right eye seemed fixed upon something distant. A memory long since past, brought back into clarity as he spoke. “Well. Turns out, it was she who killed Grelod one night in Riften, a long time ago.”

“What! But why?” Mila interjected, shaking her head in confusion. “Who just decides all of a sudden to take out an old woman who runs an orphanage?”

His good eye pinned her with its steely glare. “None of the Dragonborn’s decisions are made lightly, Mila. What you saw tonight...well. This is the end result of several years hard work. A combined effort, spearheaded by Aventus. Runa Fair-Shield is the last child of Honorhall Orphanage still living on the lam.”

“I’ll be damned. They were all in on it. “It’s not what you think, dear.” Her mother’s brown eyes were warm, sorrowful. “We were trying to save the children from themselves. Not all of them were resourceful, like Aventus. He eventually received a payout from Sigrid’s will. Moved back to Riften, only to find Honorhall completely changed and his friends long gone.”

“Athis spoke next. “We couldn’t find all of them. The children of Honorhall who had suffered the most under Grelod’s harsh hand, they escaped into the Ratway. Seeking a new home with the
Thieves Guild, among other trash. That young fetcher is responsible for our success in finding so many as it is. Knew just where to look, to track them down and offer them honest employment.”

“But we saved the ones that wanted saving.” Her Da finished, looking unnaturally serious as he pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes.

“A man can only lead a horse to water. Can’t make them drink, Mila. Not everyone wants to live free of a burden carried for so long. Some drown.”

And somehow, as she stared stupidly at the circle of faces, all of them patiently waiting for her to get it...it all clicked.

“So, this was about redemption. Because Aunt Siggy didn’t - what? Didn’t kill Grelod fast enough?”

Uncle Vilkas cracked a smile. “You heard a bit of what Aventus and Runa went through under Grelod’s idea of ‘kindness’. Wouldn’t you feel guilt, if you had the chance to right a wrong, but chose not to...for whatever reason?”

Mila frowned. There was a reason she favored alchemical formulas. Metaphysics set in space and time made her head hurt. “But it wasn’t her responsibility. That job belongs to the Jarl of Riften. Aunt Siggy didn’t have to kill Grelod, she could have...I don’t know. Lobbied for a replacement?”

“...From a Jarl who was influenced by a corrupt steward.” Her Ma finished, shaking her head at Mila’s stubbornness. “Come. Enough talk...it’s late. Let’s get you settled in an actual bed, dear. I think Farkas’s old room downstairs is available.”

Following her Ma’s prompting in a daze, she felt the warm grasp of familiar hands patting her back as she lumbered clumsily down the stairs.

Blinking up at the familiar golden tapestries and the old wooden bar still stocked with ales and mead; Mila thought she would like to examine these strange new feelings for a bit longer. Realizing that everything that had happened since that first chance encounter with Aventus had been for a reason. To help Runa; to keep her from turning back to a life of crime and petty thievery.

And to think she had once thought Aventus the worst of men. Rubbing her feet against the softness of the sleeping furs, Mila sighed. He must have been following Runa around. Paying off the shopkeepers she robbed. Trying to gain her trust by being her lookout as she completed guild jobs for the infamous band of thieves that ruled Riften’s seedy underworld.

Mila flushed in shame at the memory of yelling at him. It was disconcerting, to realize just how much of the truth she had gotten horribly wrong. And he said nothing to correct me of the notion that he was a thief. An utter scoundrel. I kicked him, didn’t I? Damn it. Going to have to say sorry, for that and...other things.

For years, Mila had prided herself upon her calm, rational nature. Her feelings were as carefully regimented as her daily schedule, hardly allowing any time for wild displays of emotion. Or men. Only to have all her careful rules and standards fly out the window, sold for the price of a kiss.

It had been quite a kiss, she remembered. Distracting her from her studies, leading her to seek him out. To crave other things. Her skirts, hiked up clear to her waist as he ground himself against her. Even the memory of it tightened her deep inside, making her swallow. Never...she had never felt that way before. And sadly never would again.
I just helped send his childhood friend to prison. By Zenithar...he must despise the very sight of me.

He had only tried to help her. Someone he had born years of guilt for, seeking to call the darkest of assassins to Riften, to save the other children. Only to return to find his friends gone, completely changed by the harsh choices foisted upon them by circumstance and necessity.

And by the Nine, how horrible would it be...to know that so much evil was happening all around, and be unable to stop it all? Not for the first time, Mila fervently thanked whatever gods were listening that she didn't have her aunt's job. Dragonborn and Harbinger and Seer seemed an insurmountably tall order to fill. Given the same responsibility, Mila was not sure if she would have been half as charitable with her Sight. Poor Aventus, praying to the Dark Brotherhood over nightshade, heart and bones...his own mother!

Unable to remain awake to ruminate any further, she felt herself slide into a dreamless sleep.

******

The Midsummer Festival came and went. And still Mila could find no trace of Aventus Aretino.

He did not show up in the crowd when the Jarl announced the beginning of summer, pouring wine upon the roots of the Gildergreen. Though she stood on tiptoe, scanning the mass of festively cheering, dancing villagers, she caught no sight of him in the revolving circles of dancers. Normally she shunned dancing, having as her Ma laughingly called it ‘two left feet’...but for him, she would have tried. Given it a decent attempt.

But he never showed.

Not there, performing feats of strength, or heaving at coils of rope as the men did a mud-splattered tug of war. Aventus was nowhere to be seen as the Companions performed to roaring applause, curdling the ale and cheese she had eaten in sour disappointment as the day drew to a close.

Mila drew the line at eating salted oatmeal. Not even for superstitiously fueled dreams. The twins gasped in an ensemble of feminine horror, while Auntie Siggy snorted with laughter as she sniffed in disdain. Tipping her bowlful of inedible slop into the rubbish heap. Her Ma rolled her eyes, passing her daughter a bottle of summer ale. “It couldn’t have have hurt, dear.”

No over-seasoned gruel could tell her what she wanted to know.

Where are you, Aventus?

It was as though he had vanished into thin air.

******

Three weeks later, as she was preparing for the wagon ride back to Solitude to reassume her internship, Mila spotted him training. She drew a shaky inhalation as she spied upon him; shirtless
outside in yard of Jorrvaskr, sparring along with the rest of the Companions in the torrid heat of midday.

Nearly dropping the armfuls of hanging moss she had harvested for Arcadia, her lip worried between her teeth as she wavered in indecision. Watching with longing as he sparred with Athis, their lean forms dipping and dodging gracefully as they boxed bare handed, punching and kicking...Mila found that her vanity was currently fighting its own battle.

Against her own, inborn pragmatism.

No. No way. Mila was soaked, sweaty and disheveled from the hours she had spent cutting the tender green furls of moss for her aunt’s ingredient cabinet. How long would he stay out there, before he disappeared again? Long enough for her to get cleaned up, maybe?

Gods. There was so much to say.

Breaking into a run, she nearly tripped on her own feet as she rushed towards Arcadia’s Cauldron; green strands of moss flying behind as she nearly dropped her burden in her hurry. “Aunt Arcadia! Quick! Do you have any spare dresses here in the shop?”

*************

Head still ringing from the double tap Athis had delivered with typical elven dexterity, Aventus held up his hand. “Enough. I’m done.”

Blowing hard, as he leaned over grasping his knees, the Imperial took the dipper of water Athis offered with a grateful nod. Took two sips, then poured the rest over his head. Gods that felt good.

“Not bad, young man. Try to keep your fists even higher next time. Let the arms take the hit, instead of the head...you’ll live longer that way.”

Groaning in acknowledgement, Aventus walked to the edge of the yard to avoid the other sparring matches. Making his way to the rain barrel, he lifted the lid. His reflection stared back as he paused, the rippling recreation of his face taunting him as it disappeared. Just like his fucking common sense.

He knew. He knew going back to Riften had been a terrible idea.

After that chaotic mess in Jorrvaskr, he had left Runa sitting sullenly in prison. Wracked with the omnipresent guilt, anger and irritation - really, how many times had he covered for her? Shown her he had her best intentions at heart?

Only to throw all his efforts, all his hard work into the privy like shit.

Breaking the news to Francois Beaufort had been one of the hardest things he had ever done, Aventus sighed inwardly. Counting the terrifying trip he had undertaken as a boy, fleeing from Grelod and the beatings that had steadily grown worse with his defiance. The old bat was going to kill one of them, soon. So naive and full of optimistic hope he had been. Utterly convinced that the Black Sacrament would work. It had to work. Had to…

But nothing had turned out quite the way Aventus had planned, despite all the years - years! - of convoluted scheming.
At least Francois had survived the raging tirade Grelod had unleashed upon them at his absence. Poor Samuel, he thought numbly as he lowered his head into the rain barrel. Holding his breath, he gritted his teeth at the cruelty of water. The knowledge of another friend he had been unable to find, to save. Long gone, drowned in the stinking canals of Riften’s waterways. Poor Hroar. Samuel. Runa.

The cool liquid was soothing against the sunburn he could feel pulling at his skin. Closing his eyes, bubbles tickled his face as he recalled his friend’s reaction to the news that Runa had made her choice.

“Well.” Beaufort had sighed, shaking his head as he polished the tankards at the Bee and Barb. “Can’t say as how I’m surprised, Aventus. That Nord gal always had to do things her way. Not even Hroar could shake her, once her mind was set on something.”

Sipping at the mead Beau pushed his way, Aventus felt his eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. Swallowing, he forced himself not to spit out the sickly sweet concoction. Talen-Jei’s trip to Blackmarsh had left the quality of the Barb’s fare a bit...flat. Despite his better efforts, mixing drinks was not one of his friend’s best qualities.

But Beaufort had other redeeming talents. “As to that other thing you were looking into...here.” Pushing an envelope across the dented wood of the bartop, Aventus casually picked it up while pretending to drink (shit, this swill was so bad, he didn’t even want to pretend) placing it in his leathers to read later. “Thanks, mate. I’ll put in a good word for you to the Harbinger.”

His friend laughed hollowly, scouring the horn cups and mugs with renewed vigor. “Sure. Whatever keeps the gold flowing and the good work going, Aventus. I’ll keep my ears open for any more news. Blacklight is stirring the pot, so I’m sure I’ll be sending you a courier in no time.”

“Good. Keep me updated. I’ll return around Frostfall.”

Francois Beaufort had been the first orphan Aventus had found, dying in an abandoned Riften alley of starvation...hunger brought on by a helpless addiction to skooma.

He had hardly recognized Aventus at first; the solemn Imperial who had taken the time to nurse him back to health. Set aside limitless stores of patience to help Beau through the shakes and hallucinations of withdrawal; the poison that had ruined so many lives finally drained out of his system before they did it. Joining forces with Riften’s Jarl, the former orphans had gone into stealth mode...first to a dog-fighting ring, and then sneaking to the dock warehouse under cover of night to find and destroy Riften’s source of skooma. Killing the smugglers from Morrowind, ending the deadly supply to Skyrim. Once and for all.

That sting operation had granted Aventus a new title and a new property. Thane Aventus. It sounded strange even to him.

Honeyside was more of a way stop than anything he would consider a home. Of all the cities in Skyrim, Riften was probably the last place Aventus would have chosen to settle. Too many bad memories.

But Francois had found the familiar setting comfortable. Reassuring. Aventus moved him permanently to Honeyside, revealing over the course of weeks the tale of his past, as Beaufort
listened in increasing astonishment at the near-unbelievable story Aventus had taken part in.

The Harbinger’s hand in Grelo’s downfall was explained haltingly, in constant interruptions as Beaufort shook his head. Continued shaking it in disbelief, as Aventus tried to explain the strange foreknowledge Sigrid possessed. How she had sent Aventus to make amends to the orphans of Honorhall, for not having the means or time during the revival of the dragons to save them sooner.

A Seer...fuck, it hadn’t taken much prodding after that to enlist the grateful Francois into the ranks of the Harbinger’s secret network.

As a bartender, Beaufort was passable. But as a spy, the shrewd Imperial excelled. Now, Beaufort was the main contact Aventus visited, to obtain information in Riften and the surrounding lands of Eastmarch.

Sigrid knew, he was sure, of his new status as Thane, but she never bothered to talk to him about it. Only sparing the occasional dig whenever the subject of honey, or bees came up. Often in some gods-awful pun. Damn, but he loved the Harbinger...crazy as a Khajiit high on raw moon sugar with her strange jests and knowing smiles. She was the mother he had often dreamed of, the one would come to take him away from the dark nightmare that had been Honorhall.

And she had, he thought as he pulled his head free from the rain barrel, shaking it wildly to dry his hair. After a fashion. This job suited the Imperial. He preferred the anonymity, the peace of being no one. It gave him greater freedom to go where he needed, to maintain the delicate web of information keepers, gossips and braggarts who supplied the Companions with the most up-to-date news in all Skyrim.

Knowledge was power. Power kept the enemies of the Dragonborn, of Jorrvaskr and even Whiterun on their toes. It was a worthy cause, a pleasant diversion from the more mundane jobs he was often sent out upon, as one of the Companions.

His time spent on the run, sneaking around the streets of Windhelm and Riften still served him well. Aventus spun, hands fisted at the ready as someone touched the bare skin of his back without warning him.

“...Aventus?”

Mila Valentia.

Catching his breath, he forced himself to stand tall, ignoring the frisson of lust that seemed to waft like perfume from the dainty woman. He was fairly tall for an Imperial; was half convinced his mother had lain with a Nord, and not the legionnaire she had always told him was his father.

But Mila was small, even for a pureblood. Barely reaching his shoulder in height, as she blinked up at him with those liquid doe-like eyes. Her wet hair had been hastily combed. Falling in damp waves to the small of her back, it was a fine ornament to the plain linen dress she wore. Far better than any jewel. How would that hair feel, bunched in his hands. Trailing over his naked skin, as the length of it fell, silken and shining across the furs he hoped to see her sprawled utterly naked upon?

He swallowed, wishing his trousers were of a stout winter weight, instead of the near silken thinness
of summer cloth. “Mila.”

“What have you been? I’ve been...I mean. I needed to talk to you.”

Digging her heels into the gravel, Aventus could see her nervousness in the fine tremors of her hands. “You want to do that here?”

Oh. He was hit hard by desire reborn, as her face that bore such intelligence and goodwill creased in a wide, white smile. All for him. “No. I don’t think so. Too hot. Are you done for now?”

“Yeah. Come on.”

Sitting in the shade of the porch, Aventus popped open an ale and pushed an unopened one to Mila. “So. What’s wrong?” He took a sip, studying the changes in her as he did so.

The alchemist seemed...not troubled, exactly. Thoughtful, or pained might be a better word to describe the way Mila stared at him. “What isn’t wrong, Aventus? I - I...“

She struggled for words, as he watched her throat swallow in rapt attention. Wishing there was a storage cupboard, a good excuse to pull her away from whatever was vexing her so. The feel of her curves pulled flush against him had played quite a part in his sexual fantasies of late. Getting under his skin. Distracting him from the more depressing facts of his life.

He owed her a favor for that, if nothing else. “I’ve heard that Runa is still doing time for her crimes in Dragonsreach.”

“Yes. Apparently there was a meeting amongst the Jarls. She’s been stealing valuables for years, and no city wants her back. So they’ve elected to keep her incarcerated, for now.”

“Good.” He took another drink, the sharp tang of ale refreshing. “She needs to get her head on straight, before trying to live apart from the Thieve’s Guild. Too easy to slide back into old ways, unless she chooses to change for herself.”

Mila’s next words nearly made him spit out his drink. “Is that what happened to you? Did you decide one day to change into what you are?”

Wiping his face, Aventus looked at her. Hesitantly weighing what had been said, against what remained unspoken. “Do you mind?”

Picking apart one of the rolls that had been left out to grow stale, Mila seemed utterly focused upon her hands. Blushing, he noted with a curl of his lips, as she strenuously avoided eye contact. “Oh, I don’t know. I think you would have made a great thief, or assassin. You certainly hide well enough.” She commented acidly, not seeing the smile he covered up with another pull of his ale.

“No from you. You seem to find me, wherever I go.”

Lifting those wide brown eyes to his darker stare, she delicately bit her lower lip. Damn. He wanted to bite that lip. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. In fact...” Scraping his chair so that they were now sitting close, legs pressed together, Aventus pulled her hand away from where it was destroying all the rolls into fragmented crumbs.

Feeling her tremble at his touch, he reminded himself to go slow. Don’t fucking scare her, you idiot. “...I’d like for you to find me more often.”
A breeze pulled a wet strand of hair across her face, where she was currently staring at him, mouth open. “Really? I mean…” Straightening, Mila tossed her head back. Gaining a faceful of damp locks for her efforts, as Aventus chuckled at the sight. “Mmph. Ugh.”

“Here, let me help you with that.” Setting his drink down on the table, he used both hands to lift the weight of her hair up and away. Picked the last few strands off from her cheekbones and nose, as she seemed transfixed by his closeness.

A strange tenderness swelled inside him as Aventus cupped her face, freed from the mass of hair now drying in clumps around her head. It made her look nearly wild; some rare songbird with ruffled every which way. Those round, shining brown eyes staring so trustingly up at him.

“You know, you kind of look like an owl, all mussed up like this.”

“An owl? Really? That’s not - I mean…”

He laughed as she faltered in her speech, holding so still as he leaned ever closer. Bringing his forehead to rest upon hers, tracing his nose against her as he nearly salivated at the closeness of that mouth. Hot breath, sweetly spiced with ale and what smelled like apples, as he breathed into waiting lips. “I like owls. They’re adorable, small and very intelligent birds.”

Her exhale made him shiver. “Oh good. Because I like you too. I mean...damn it.”

Taking pity on them both, he closed the distance and covered her mouth with his. Luxuriating in the way she eagerly responded, her arms rising up to rest upon his biceps, his shoulders. Twining in the thickness of his hair, as her head lolled back as he pulled her more tightly against him. He deftly traced her teeth with his tongue, sliding it against hers as she made a muffled chirp.

...Aventus, ruffled feathers and quick wit, giving freely of herself as he lost himself to the ever-increasing frenzy that soon had her neatly wrapped around him. Almost breathless, as neither wished to come up for air, as he rubbed helpless circles against the dip of her waist, wishing the damn dress was gone.

That they were alone. For, oh, he could tell that she was innocent, in the way that she never seemed to notice the bulge in his trousers. Remaining firmly fixed upon kissing him senseless, she draped her arms around his shoulders and parted her lips, daringly giving him the smallest of bites to his upper lip. Sucking in his tongue almost fully into her plush mouth, as he stiffened with a groan he failed to reign in, as his hands climbed further up, brushing the sides of her breasts as she gasped in turn.

-A bit too loudly, if the growing laughter and cheers were any sign that they were all too exposed. Again. “Hey Aventus!” Athis hollered, standing next to Vilkas who was shaking his head slowly. A crowd of newbloods had ceased training to stand and clap as the amorous couple now became the focus of the entire training yard.

“Get out of here, you silver tongued s’wit before Farkas sees you there!”

Shit. Envisioning that mountain of a man coming for him, pounding the gravel with his metal leg, death in those grey eyes - like some Dwarven centurion on a rampage -

...hurriedly Aventus pulled away from Mila with an audible pop. She was laughing, nearly bent over as she snickered. “Your...haha, your face!”

Breathing out a frustrated sigh, Aventus slouched in his chair. The rain barrel was looking better and better, at this point. “You have seen that mammoth you call your Da? I’d like to give him every reason to let me live, Mila.”

Still laughing, she stood. Pulling at his hands to make him stand with her. “Come on. I need
something sweet, to get the taste of your nasty sweat out of my mouth.”

Offering Mila his arm, he escorted her out of the yard. Giving the warriors who were still yelling catcalls and jeering a silently mouthed ‘fuck you’, as Athis collapsed against a bemused Vilkas, laughing fit to burst as they left Jorrvaskr, traveling without a care in the world towards the Plains District.

“Sure. Let’s get to the market. Though I’ve got to say, for an alchemist you’ve got the sweetest mouth I’ve ever tasted.”

She whistled. “Athis was right. You are a silver-tongued rogue. I think you missed your calling, teaching Speechcraft. You should come back with me to Solitude. Train as a bard.”

He laughed at the very idea. “Are you joking? I’d be kicked out for writing the dirtiest songs imaginable. Aventus the Apprentice, the ribald bard.”

“You’re doing it again. Nice alliteration, by the way.”

“I don’t even know what that is. Stop acting like you know so much.”

“Oh, but I do.” Squeezing his arm, Mila looked up at him with a little smirk. “You see, I brew potions for a living, right? You wouldn’t believe the questions people ask me about a particular type of stamina potion.”

“Ah...I don’t think you need to worry about fixing a batch of anything like that. If you know any regeneration recipes, on the other hand…”

The sound of their laughter lifted in the breeze, carried in the air to where Farkas and Carlotta had been eavesdropping, hidden behind the Gildergreen.

Sharing a look, Carlotta ecstatic with glee and Farkas shaking his head in resignation, they both spoke at the same time.

"Yes!"

"...No."

“Damn!”

Chapter End Notes

Ahh...here's one of my favorite tracks from Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. Perfect for this chapter.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9WudJDkeBI

Let me know if you guys want to see more chapters like this. As I've mentioned before, Vanished Without a Trace is drawing to a close. But I plan to keep writing. Comments are very inspiring to me. So chat away.
Spåra (Track) - Lucia and Lars, Part One

Chapter Notes

Yes, there is smut. And yes, there will be more.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQWmryiLcxY

"Battle-Born is a name out of legend, sung in the songs of old and heard in deeds of valor for a hundred generations. Don’t fail us now, boy. Do your duty...and no more backtalk!"

Waving a wrinkled hand irritably, Jarl Olfrid shook his head. “Council dismissed.”

Tamping down on the frustration he felt, Lars Battle-Born stood with the other advisors and Thanes of Whiterun. Silently watching as his grandfather shuffled from his throne, assisted by his mother Alfild. The old man was growing more feeble by the day. Not much longer, his mother never ceased to remind him, and his would be the brow upon which sat the circlet of Whiterun’s rule.

He didn’t want it. Shor’s beard, Lars had to convince himself (for the hundredth time that week) as he strode towards the stables that he didn’t mind his duty. Duty to his family, his mother...grieving and stern still after so many years from the fateful battle that had stolen so many lives. Duty - to marry a suitable Nord maiden in pomp and ceremony; filling her with his noble seed to provide an heir and a spare.

And more importantly to Olfrid, he thought resignedly as he saddled his horse, it would bring yet more gold into the family coffers. Wealth, pride, honor...a poor replacement for those they had lost.

His father, Idolaf. His aunt Olfina - the Grey-Mane lass his uncle Jon had wed, to the uproar of both clans. Countless friends and cousins, long gone and buried in stacks of stones. Filling urns and covered by decaying shrouds somewhere deep in the Hall of the Dead. Could have been him. Easily.

Lars had earned a number of scars from that fight; marks that had worn down from the raw red freshness of bleeding wounds to dull silvery streaks over the years. Scars - and the hard earned respect of the men and women who had fought alongside him. He could still see Lucia’s appraising gaze, making him blush as she smeared salve upon the deep score marks on his chest. “Nice, Battle-Born.” She had winked, as he sat there completely tongue-tied. “Keep at it, and maybe you’ll be as amazing as me someday!”

He hadn’t spoken with Lucia in years. Not since his childhood friend, the first girl he had ever been brave enough to kiss - had left for Solstheim, to test herself against the harshness of the northern isle.

He wondered what she was doing, right at this moment in Jorrvaskr. She had returned to Whiterun a while ago, much to his surprise.
Not a word of what she had been doing, all this time. No response to all the letters and gifts he had sent every Midsummer and Dark Day. *Should have known better than to hope.* To truly believe that the feelings they had borne in their youth would endure the test of time.

Walking along, he allowed himself the liberty of daydreaming...a habit his mother despaired of. Had Lucia mastered the shield and the sword? What mountains had she climbed? How many men and beasts had she killed or spared? During their sporadic courtship Lars often thought that the Imperial beggar-turned-Companion seemed even more Nord than he, at times. Certainly she outstripped him in her gusto for life.

Lucia had left him years ago with a lingering kiss and a happy grin...no promises made. Just the sight of her, young and free, galloping off to the north as he stood upon the Dragonsreach porch...feeling somehow as though a chapter of his life had closed with bleak finality.

_{You should have followed her, you horker-for-brains. Ignored Ma and Grandda, grabbed your sword and armor and taken off to make your own adventure. One life, that’s all Shor and Kyne gave each man. You? You’re squandering yours._

_{Be content with your place,_ his mother had urged him in years past, as he sat rebelliously in his room. Stolidly refusing to join the council that did nothing but argue; rarely accomplishing more in the space of a night than to drain several barrels of mead and create work for the servants. *Pointless.*_}

Eventually, Lars reminded himself harshly, one had to grow up. After so many years of unwilling attendance, he was used to the tedium of court now. Amidst the blather and bickering, he had discovered that the men and women who ruled Whiterun often had their own agendas. Though he had made many mistakes along the arduous path, the Battle-Born had finally settled into a secure blend of alliances with several other like-minded officials. Thanes, nobles and warriors who agreed that the time had come for more structure in the Hold. Schools for children, to teach basic reading and writing. More funds allocated to the Temple of Kynareth, to train future healers. More good, and less greed. It was a shame his own grandda did not number among his supporters.

He had listened to Olfrid berate him as an idealist and a simpleton often enough, Lars thought glumly. Though he had grown more certain of himself with the coming years that had added two stone of muscle and inches of height to his stature, sometimes Lars wondered if he wasn’t still the same terrified boy inside. Shying at his own shadow, giving way to anyone with a stronger will than he. Braith, Frothar, *fuck* even Mila at times had been such a torment to him. Teasing him about his love of books. Laughing at his stuttering, the difficulty with speech that sealed his mouth when he was in a temper, still.

_Irritable at the turn of thought his mind had taken, the Nord tightened his horse’s saddle and mounted up. *No point in looking back, now.* He had come so far from the browbeaten timidity of his childhood. True Nords (Olfrid impressed upon him often enough) did not linger overmuch on the pains of the past._

_Lars flattered himself that he had matured enough to stand on his own two feet in most matters._

_But his mother..._

As his white mare trotted onto the path, Lars clicked his tongue and dug in his heels. Whinnying, his mount took off at a thundering gallop towards the western horizon, chasing the sun as he reflected...
upon his mother.

During the depressing aftermath of war, during which he had helped lay out the countless bodies of friend and foe alike, it had been his Ma who stood strong. Had not wailed, collapsed or given up like so many of the other war widows and orphans. Her strength had been his support, as his tears cleansed the warpaint that he had so painfully earned. Marking him as Blooded. A child no more; too old to cry over something so commonplace as death. *True Nords never weep openly, boy. Cry in the quiet of your room, if ye must. But not where other men see, you ken?*

Allowing the mare to slow, as he reached Gjukar’s Monument silhouetted in the dying day; Lars shook his head at himself. For he knew...he could deny his mother nothing. There was so little that she ever asked for, content as she was to work upon the family farm day in and day out despite their ever-increasing hoard of septims. Never complaining or fussing except over this one, pivotal life event.

Marriage wasn’t the end of the world. Just the death of the last choice Lars sought to make for himself.

Dismounting, he walked up to the stone monolith. Traced his hands along the weathered inscriptions, as the mare pulled up tufts of grass, champing and snorting as the wind picked up over the plains. Sighing, Lars looked up. The constellation of the Warrior glowed bright tonight. Like everything else lately, it reminded him of her.

He had been stunned to see the changes wrought in Lucia, gazing upon her from afar as she walked across the training yard of Jorrvaskr. Lucia had always favored light armor - brown leathers that hugged her whip-thin body tightly, allowing for greater freedom of movement with sword and shield.

Her use of light armor was the only similarity she bore to his memory of her, now. Swathed in an odd collection of furs and nearly patchwork leathers, she had shaved the sides of her head. Leaving the long, wheat gold ponytail that had been ornately knotted and adorned with bone beads high and bare enough to display the rows of silver earrings that winked from the curve of her ears. Warpaint streaked across her sharp tanned face (strange, to see her without the lingering baby fat of childhood) in sooty grey gashes, leaving only the barest expanse of skin untouched.

He wasn’t sure if there even was a part of her that remained unblemished by scars, woad or tattoos. While discussing troop positions with the guard captain, he had spied Lucia running laps...wearing only her breastband and a fur pelted pair of breeches.

-And had swallowed, pathetically entranced at the multicolored tangle of art - almost like sleeved gloves - inked drawings that poured down from her shoulders to her fingertips. Wolves and eagles, fire and salmon, woven like ribbons across her back. Wrapping around her calves and ankles.

She looked more like a barbaric stereotype of a Nord savage than most of the Companions.

*This won’t do.* No letters. No response. Not even a notice that she was returning to Whiterun, so that he could perhaps make time in his schedule to catch up with an old friend.

Feeling a familiar ache in his loins, Lars churlishly kicked the stone base of Gjukar’s memorial. *At least you won’t be a virgin much longer. There’s that. You’ll be wed soon enough.*

Aye, he knew... Knew what woman he would have picked for his bride. It was just his fucking luck that she had so obviously moved on in heart and mind, though he had seen no Amulet of Mara. It frustrated him to know that he had looked.
Duty. Honor. Fealty to clan and land. Leaving him trapped forever in Whiterun - the home he both loved and hated in equal measure. He’d do it...he told himself as the wind blew the hair back from his face, numbing his skin. It would be stiff and joyless - marriage to complete stranger, but that was duty for you. Be grateful for the blessings you have, heedless of your luck and surprised at what boons you may earn. Ma and her neverending quotes.

His family had born his fascination with the Imperial Companion in stoic discomfort. He knew his uncle and grandda - but most especially his mother - had been relieved to see her go. And had been crestfallen at her reappearance, particularly at this point when he was shopping for a wife. Despite their leanings towards the Empire, he thought in bemused bitterness, they showed a strange reluctance to allow Lucia - an Imperial dog - into their bloodline.

What was that other thing Ma had said? When what you most desire is the most expensive item on the menu, sometimes one must settle for the daily special.

Shit. Guess I’m settling. Though I’d love to see that bitch smile at me, one last time.

*********

“So. This big party at Dragonsreach that you’re invited to - why aren’t you going again?”

Lucia harrumphed, flicking the tail of her hair away from the flour as she helped roll out the pie crusts they were all laboring upon. “Because then I’d have to wear a dress, Sigrid. And what’s the point of working so damn hard on my armor if I can’t even don it to show off? A foolish waste of time, that’s what it is. No. I’m not going.”

The women of Jorrvaskr were up to their arms in jazbay, snowberry and apples. It was the end of Hearthfire - right in the middle of the harvest rush- and Harbinger Sigrid had roped Lucia into assisting with the bottling of preserves and baking, much to the Companion’s dismay. Others had helped earlier with the neverending chopping, boiling and peeling, but as the day drew to a close only a few - the Harbinger, her daughter Svari, Carlotta, Mila and Lucia - remained.

Wiping a sticky black streak from her forehead, Lucia wrinkled her nose. Blood would wash off better than this muck. The fruity scents were near overpowering; suffocating in their sweetness. With longing, she thought of Solstheim; the cold white expanse of snowy glaciers and fresh salt sea air. More than ever, Lucia wished she had remained at Frostmoon Crag. With Aela, and Majni. Hunting in the whispering pines with silent Akar and cheerful Rakel.

Fuck, Lucia would even bear the haughty company of Hjordis, just to escape the past that had come unwanted to bite her on the ass.

A teasing smile tugged at the corners of her Harbinger’s lips. “I should think you’d want to stake your claim, Lucia, before all those other ladies tempt away your man!”

Carlotta pressed the rolling pin in neat, even strokes to flatten out the doughy crust. “All the noble daughters are coming. That Dagny from Solitude, Idgrod the Younger…”

“More like Idgrod the Older,” Lucia muttered, steadfastly refusing to think of Lars bound to the Morthal-born oddity. She of the crazy eyes and long, raven locks. Idgrod must be in her late thirties, now. I guess this is her last big chance to land a man. Poor Lars.
Not that Dagny - spoilt, selfish Dagny who had thrown rotten fruit at her as she begged near the Gildergreen - was much better.

“Even other common born Nord hopefuls have been invited, from other cities across Skyrim. All trying to bag a future Jarl for themselves. Your man better watch himself, or he’ll be wedded and bedded -”

“...Probably to the richest bitch, if I know Olfrid. I’d warn him if I were you, Lucia. I almost want to attend myself, just to watch it all blow up spectacularly in their faces as he spurns them all for you. Hah.”

Scoffing, Lucia continued to breathe through her mouth, vainly ignoring the dizzying array of smells that Jorrvaskr fairly stank with. Something burning in the chimney flue that probably was bird droppings. The scent of juniper soap from the floorboards melded with odors of sweat, wool, leather...all spinning amidst the heady syrup of the fruit-scent. Ugh. “He’s not my man, Sigrid! And he can do what he wants. I’d make a piss poor Jarl’s wife, if that’s what you’re after.”

“Deny all you want. We all saw you attached at the mouth before you left, you know. He’s not altogether bad looking.” Mila pursed her lips, winking as the fellow Imperial gaped at her in disbelief. Smothered chuckling turned Lucia an even deeper shade of rose, as grimly she decided to ignore them all. Meddling witches.

“Not bad at all! Those arms …” Carlotta fell back in a fake swoon, as the other women laughed, egging each other on as Lucia seethed.

“That illustrious lineage!”

“Those big, brown puppy eyes!”

“Do his scars cover anything...important, Lucia?”

“And he’ll give you aaall the sweetrolls you could ever eat!” Svari added in childish glee, as peals of indulgent laughter ended the conversation. Shaking her head, Lucia blew out a breath and began filling the pie crusts with heaping spoonfuls of berry filling. She would not be baited into this.

If Lars knew what she had been up to in Solstheim, he wouldn’t have issued that expensive-looking invitation, sent by courier. Wouldn’t have sent those flowers that were now perfuming the privy, rotting in the muck. She felt like shit, herself. Kyne damn you, Lars. I can’t be what you want. Not anymore.

Hazel eyes glinting as Lucia’s rough handling of her spoon tore through the flattened dough, Sigrid waved a flour coated finger in the air. “I know why you’re skipping out, sweetheart.”

“Oh?” Pinching the dough together, Lucia tightened her lips. “Tell me then. Since you know everything.”

“True. Good for you, respecting your elders.” Sigrid intoned virtuously. “But seriously. You think I, of all people, wouldn’t know your little secret?”

Stiffening in fear, Lucia stood up from the table. “You...how could you know?” Mila looked up in curiosity, as Svari hummed; sneaking bites of uncooked pastry as Carlotta pulled her away. Unaware of the sudden tension between herself and the Harbinger.

Damn, and double damn! Aela said that no one would be able to tell, except for perhaps Vilkas and Farkas. And they’re out hunting. Fuuuuck. Thought I’d be safe, here...no no no-
Carefully crimping the crusts of her pie, Sigrid focused upon her task, carefully not looking Lucia in the eye. “Seer superpowers, remember?”

“What do you know that we don’t? Please share with the rest of us.” Carlotta politely inquired, as Mila began taking the trays of unbaked pies to the ovens.

Sigrid merely shrugged, as Lucia slowly sat down and fixed the Harbinger with an accusing frown. “I foresee with my mystical all-knowing eye that we’d better get to canning these preserves...before the flies start landing in the jam and ruin them all.”

Svari made a face. “Bleugh! Fly jelly!”

“Not my favorite either.” Giving Sigrid one last look of apprehension, Lucia started sorting the different varieties of honeyed fruit to go into their respective clay jars, after which they would be sealed with wax and corked. Ready to be smeared on bread, cakes and rolls during the long winter ahead.

“In Solstheim, they have a kind of jelly harvested from netches that can be eaten or used for alchemy. It’s very pretty, Svari - a pale violet hue, all wobbly and see through. And it tastes like what fruit would, if it came all briny from the sea.”

“Really, Lucia?” Svari’s pale grey eyes shone brightly up at her. “I want to try it!”

“Maybe later.” Wiping her hands of flour, Sigrid looked solemnly at Lucia. “It’s a full moon tonight. I think Lucia should fill me in on what’s happening in Solstheim. I can’t recall the last news I’ve heard from Aela, or the Frostmoon Pack…”

Gulping as those amber-green eyes narrowed (making her feel like a child once more) Lucia managed to remain silent as the Harbinger led her away, still smiling despite the coldness in those eyes. _Dragon eyes._ “It’d be a _shame_ to miss catching up with my furry friends. Keep canning, ladies. We’ll be back before you know it.”

**********

The candle burned low, as Lars continued writing out copies of the guards roster at his desk in Dragonsreach. It had to be updated and sent to every town and watchtower in Whiterun Hold, preferably by morning to accommodate the changes in scheduling. Unlikely that he would finish tonight.

His hand was cramping from holding the quill...irritably he shook his wrist, spattering ink spots upon himself and the page. _Damn._ He had just changed to a clean tunic after his nightly ride. _Where was that spare shirt?_ Leaning forward, he carefully pulled aside a towering stack of books…

-And nearly screamed as Aventus appeared from nowhere, a black clad blur more like a wraith than a man. The volumes tumbled over, one landing directly atop the paper he had just laboriously written out. “Divines take you, Aretino! Stop doing that!”

“It has its uses. Like getting past your housecarl unnoticed.” Curious black eyes scanned his desk, noting the piles of furled parchment and crumpled balls of paper. “A bit late for catching up on your workload, Battle-Born.”
Pinching the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb, the Nord tried desperately to ward away the headache that had plagued him all day long. Removing the book from atop the page he had been working on, Lars was gratified to see that the ink had dried just enough that it had not smeared. “Work never sleeps. Now what do you want?”

“Temper, temper.” A crisp sheet of parchment slid onto his desk, nudged carefully away from the ink stains. “Think you’d better take a look at this.”

Blinking away the dryness of his eyes, Lars picked up the page and began reading. It was a report from the Rift and Eastmarch. Waving idly at Aventus to help himself to refreshment, Lars continued scanning the document as the Imperial spy uncorked a bottle of wine and poured the vintage into two glasses, waiting for him to finish. “Surilie, 176. Very good year. You done yet, or shall I summarize?”

“No. It’s clear enough.” Handing the page back, he accepted the wine with a nod. “So the Thieves Guild is stirring up trouble once more. They’ve been threatening to make a serious comeback for years, Aventus. Why should I worry about them now?”

Sipping at his own glass, the Imperial lifted the paper report from the desk and made it disappear somewhere in the folds of his blackened leather armor. “My contacts say that someone with ties to the guild is being prepped to attend your matrimonial ball. Which means that someone here in Dragonsreach has friends in the Ragged Flagon. Not that I need to warn you, but be on your guard.”

“It could be a play for power - getting someone in as a fence, or advisor to the Jarl’s court. Or perhaps this is just a simple burglary. We’ll know more soon enough.”

The candle burned out completely, casting the two men in near darkness. The only illumination now came from torches, further down the hallway. “Good luck, by the way, on drawing all the eligible ladies of Skyrim to swoon over you. Should be a good bit of fun.”

Greeting his friend’s cunning smile with a sour frown, Lars drained his drink and stood to place his empty wineglass down. Immediately, a ring of red from the wine began staining his papers, as he growled once more; Aventus snorting gently as he struggled to mop up the mess with the sleeve of his shirt.

“...No thanks to you and your ‘friends’. Couldn’t you lot do something useful? Like drug all the women into an enchanted sleep while I make a break for it?”

“And miss out on all that grand humiliation as you dodge kisses left and right? Never.”

Holding back a yawn, Lars peered through the dim light, gauging the remains of what work he had left to do. “Thanks for the warning, I guess. Trust no one, as usual.”

“That’s the motto I live by.” Clapping him on the back, Aventus smiled brightly. “Now, get some sleep. Wouldn’t want you to look anything less than your rugged, manly best for the womenfolk.”

“Do you think if I shaved my head, it would put them off? Perhaps paint my scalp with egg yolk and profess a deep desire to worship Sheogorath?” Rubbing his face, Lars left the small room that doubled as his office, walking down the halls to the living quarters. Aventus followed silently at his side, seeming to merge with the shadows of the torch lit corridor.

“I’d keep that lush mane intact, if I were you. Try taking the more strident ones aside and telling them you’re poor as a Forsworn...completely dependent on their dowry. That will thin the herd. Goodnight, friend.”
Staring moodily at his very empty and cold bed, Lars didn’t mind as Aventus faded, disappearing to wherever he skulked between spying, fighting and courting that Valentia girl. He was used to the Companion’s oddities by now. “To you as well.” He spoke quietly to the empty air.

*I am so doomed.*

********

“I am *so* doomed,” Moaned Lucia, as she stiffly marched up the steps to Dragonsreach.

Sigrid had been...well. Not particularly happy to confirm that the girl she had fostered since childhood had elected to become a werewolf.

“Seriously. How the fuck did you know?”

“Aside from your face looking all pinched, as though you were walking in a cloud of passed gas? It was the way you kept sneaking to the Underforge. Just like Aela, thinking no one would notice. Except that she had Skjor as a reasonable excuse. You just disappeared every full moon. Or whenever your temper took you.”

Lucia wanted to kick herself. *Aela always recommended the cave tunnel entrances beneath the Skyforge. Of course, she didn’t care that practically everyone could see her coming and going. Damn it. The face-thing is true though. People smell fucking awful compared to weres.*

“It was *your* choice, though right?” The Harbinger had released her from one of those bone-crushing hugs, holding her at an arm’s length to look at her in concern. “No one - not Aela, or Majni, forced you into taking the beast blood? Tricked you in any way?”

“No, Sigrid. Honestly I...I love it.”

And she did. Lucia had never felt more alive; aware of her body than feeling her limbs burn and break, pounding into the snow on four legs. The world was clear and filled with colors and smells her other body simply couldn’t comprehend. It was glorious, and she told the Harbinger so.

“Tell me this, then. Have you eaten anyone yet?”

Taken aback, Lucia traced the tattoo of the wolf and moon that covered the back of her left hand. *Yet? Ugh.* “I...don’t think so. I stay mostly with the pack, and we hunted boar and elk. People don’t usually make it that far up the mountain.” She wouldn’t mention the solitary trips she often took to clear her head, attacking the Reavers hideouts and riekling nests that popped out of the landscape like weeds. She had earned a good living, selling off their bits and baubles to the merchants of Ravenrock.

Lucia also would *definitely* not be mentioning the nights when the moon seemed to press heavily into
her mind; searing her with a woman’s desire. Akar accompanied her on her runs, then. Hunting in
the heat of the blood until they brought down game. Then, after the hunger of the belly was sated,
other needs would be fulfilled as well. Akar was silent in this, as in most things...but so skilled with
his hands and tongue. **Who needed words when touch could hold so many meanings?** Lucia no
longer shied away from the dirty jokes that got swapped among the Companions, trading old barbs
for lewd quips that had lifted her foster mother’s eyebrows to practically merge with her hairline.

She wondered if the Harbinger could See her lust-colored memories, now. Those draconic amber
eyes were hard, penetrating straight through her like she was made of glass.

**Seer who sees all.** “Good. Remember that all power comes with a price, my dear. Why don’t you
find the time to talk to Farkas or Vilkas about being moon-called, when you get the chance. See it
from another perspective.”

Suddenly grimacing, Sigrid scratched her ear. Lucia still wasn’t used to the wide streaks of grey that
banded the dark auburn of Sigrid’s locks...accenting a face that remained youthful, unwrinkled still
on a woman that had to be nearly in her fifties. **Wonder what Shout or spell she uses, to keep her skin
like that.** “Just - don’t ask Farkas about Hircine’s Blessing. Or horny goats weed. Trust me - you
don’t want to know.”

Lucia had nodded, distracted yet again by the smells filtering into Jorrvaskr from the outdoors.
_Upturned earth. Smoke. Vomit. The scent of cold snow born on the wind from the Throat of the
World._

“I will. Thanks...for understanding.”

Gracing Lucia with an earsplitting grin, the Harbinger clapped her on the back. “Of course. You’re a
big girl now. I’ll proudly stand up for your right to screw up with any mistakes you choose.” She
added, poring over Lucia’s tattoos with an arch scrutiny that made the younger woman stare back
defiantly. “Speaking of which...been thinking of getting a dragon tat, right here on my stomach to
cover the stretch marks. That would be awesome.”

Lucia’s stony demeanor softened. “No. Do a dragon egg, all cracked. With a wee dovah popping
out. I’ve got some needles and ink...we could make a night of it. Just...break out the oldest mead.
**Strong** mead. It hurts like a bitch.”

“Oooh...yeah! Carlotta could get a big heart on her tits. With a sword through it, inscribed with the
name ‘**Farkas**’...” Sigrid spread her hands out wide, a saucy grin on her face as Lucia cackled at the
thought.

“What would Mila get done?”

Sigrid hmmed in thought, her eyes lighting up. “Got it - we could write the words ‘Bad Girl
Brewing!’ With a little cauldron and potion bottle crossed over a skull! Perfect. That little snob
would never do it anyways. But I’ve gotta say...” Sigrid became serious once more.

“You really should attend that party.”

“Why? And don’t tell me to do it for Lars. We’ve been over for years.” Feeling her chin jut
stubbornly, Lucia folded her arms.

“Yes, but does he know that?” Sigrid reached out and traced the silver studs and bits of bone that
ringed her ears. Silver...the only metal that kept her skin from closing over the piercings with her
supernatural healing. “Old flames don’t normally send invitations and flowers to a matchmaking
shindig unless there is still a spark. Somehow, I think both of you care a bit more than you’re letting
on.”

“I really don’t.” Stepping back, Lucia scowled at the Harbinger, who sighed and fixed her with a flat
look. “If you don’t go, you’ll regret it, kid.”

“Are you saying that as my Harbinger and Seer, or as my friend?”

Scoffing, Sigrid leaned forward and gave her another hug. Lucia winced as she got a faceful of
greying hair, smelling strongly of lavender and smoke. “Both. I’ll tell you this...closure is a
wonderful thing. Go, even if it’s just to convince yourself that you feel nothing.”

"For old time’s sake. You were friends, once. Say hello. Drink and dance. And remember to act your
age and tell him congratulations, when he picks a wife.”

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Right. She’d be lucky if she made it through the first course. This was so not her scene.

As Lucia pushed open the heavy doors of Dragonsreach, she flinched at the storm of smells and
distractions. Turbulent as voices of strangers, the scent of silks and alcohol bombarded her senses.
Get in, say hello! Good luck! And then get the fuck out before it’s too late.

If the level of noise (a mingling roar of gossip and overly enthusiastic bards) was any hint, she’d
guess the party was in full sway. Other guests caught a glimpse of her, some backing away from the
carefully crafted appearance she had chosen for tonight.

She sauntered in, armored in the black tipped furs and leathers of Solstheim’s mountainous climes.
Fully decked out in warpaint, shield and sword, Lucia had also added a special touch - blood.
Soaked into her ponytail, streaking her hands. Flaking from her face as she grinned at the spice of
fear wafting from the crowd. No one will mistake me for anything but a Companion tonight.

“Wow. Uh...are those tattoos real? Or paint?”

Turning, Lucia looked down to see the young woman who had addressed her. Short for a Nord and
a bit plump, wearing the robes and hood of a mage. She stood, jiggling one of her feet to the beat of
drums, as her taller friend gave her a world-weary smile and a nod. “They look real to me, Sissel.
Well met, Companion. I am Idgrod Ravencrone, the Younger.”

Clasping shoulders in greeting, Lucia gave her a considering stare. “Lucia Heart-Fang. Just arrived
from Solstheim.”

“Yes...the furs do give it away.”

Idgrod the Younger was thin and bony, with sunken circles beneath tired eyes. The elegant blue
velvets she wore seemed to weigh her down, giving every movement a sort of sweeping lethargy. As
though she walked only under great duress. Lucia felt sorry for her. Didn’t Sigrid say that the ruling
nobility of Morthal bore something similar to the Sight? “I hope you’re enjoying the party. It seems very...festive.”

Sissel nervously bobbed her head. “Oh yes. The Battle-Born Clan have been gracious hosts. You’re a bit late, Lucia...they just gave word that the guests will be displaying their talents soon. Will we see you perform something? A ditty from the isles, perhaps?”

Lucia hadn’t considered the ramifications of actually being considered as one of the potential brides. Lars is going to laugh his ass off. “If I have to.”

Idgrod tilted her head. “You will. I’m looking forward to it. Sissel, come. Let’s find a good place to sit. Until later, Companion.”

“Later.” Watching as the odd pair wandered away towards the tables, Lucia scanned the crowd. There was Dagny, tossing her head back in laughter at some jest her priggish noble escort had imparted. Looking fat as ever. She barely recognized most of the guests, probably from out of town.

There he was.

Completely mobbed by a bunch of girls. It brought a smile to her face, seeing that familiar, almost hunted expression as Lars cordially spoke with each and every lass his parents had roped into coming tonight. It was strange seeing that face on a man. When she had left him, he had still born the gangly stretched look of youth despite his growth spurt. Spots and all.

Age and maturity looked well on Lars Battle-Born. He had filled out now, brawny and hale, standing roughly a foot above most of the tittering girls. His long, walnut brown hair had been pulled back with an unadorned bone clip, revealing mild features that bore a neatly trimmed beard. Dark soulful eyes remained uncovered by warpaint, and she snorted to see the poncy, ornate outfit they had stuffed him in. Nearly stiff with silver threading through the doublet...it looked as uncomfortable as he smelled, shifting from side to side. As though he were seeking escape from the colorful cloud that trailed him wherever he walked.

The stink of their collective perfumes, stained with nervous sweats and hair oils...it should have put her off.

Naw. As her childhood friend caught sight of her, she could see Lars tense. Flashing her an incensed look, as pushing her way through the crowd, Lucia scattered the flock of ladies...many of whom grew wide eyed and wary at her presence. The whispering only increased, as Lucia strode forward and smacked her hand against Lars’ chest.

“Hey. Long time no see.”

“Who are you again?” Polite as ever, he removed her hand from his chest. “You can’t be Lucia. She would have answered my letters at least once, to let me know she was alive.”

Lucia smirked, aware of the death glares many of the girls were lobbing her way. “I was busy trying not to get eaten by lurkers and frost trolls. You understand, right?”

“Right. Lucia, meet the...well. There’s too many. Let’s start with someone whose name I can actually recall.” Bringing forward a lovely young woman, who blushed as he touched her arm to propel her forward, he crossed his arms. “Meet Sofia Windrime, late of Windhelm.”
The chit barely looked at Lucia, taking in the tattoos, scars and woad with a genteel bob of her head as her attention focused unwaveringly upon the Battle-Born heir. “Well met, Companion.”

“Charmed.” Ignoring her, Lucia promptly took his arm and dragged him away, towards the tables that practically groaned beneath all the food and drink. “Come on, Lars. Ladies, I’ll steal him only for a bit. You just stay gorgeous, now. Try the rabbit.”

“What are you doing.” He hissed at her, as she plunked herself down in a seat. Following suit, he pasted on a bland smile and waved at none other than his Ma. The older woman returned the wave, giving her a coldly affable nod. Alfhild.

Alfhild had never liked her much, Lucia thought distractedly, as she piled up their plates with roast venison and gravy. Onion spiced mashed potatoes, carrots and small finger pies that looked mouth watering. “Here you go. A man needs his strength for bedding all those wenches. What else is good around here for stamina? I bet you know which mead isn’t watered down swill, so I’ll let you fetch that.”

It was cute, the way he struggled to maintain that gracious facade. She could almost see the angst pouring off of him, as he sat down next to her. Trying not to cause a scene, no doubt. “I only need one.”

“Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever heard a man allow those words to escape his lips. Congratulations. You’ve set some sort of record.”

Waving down a servant, Lars retrieved two bottles of Honningbrew. And even though she knew he was annoyed (his jaw was clenched so hard she wouldn’t be surprised if a tooth cracked) the man opened her mead for her. Such a gentleman. “What are you doing here, Lucia?”

“You sent me an invitation. I had to show, just to see you all dolled up.” Giving him an overly obnoxious leer, she managed to draw a laugh from him as she took a swig from her mead. “I’m sorry I didn’t write to you. I was...distracted.”

“Must have been some distraction.” Busy watching the flitting emotions rush over her old friend’s face, Lucia missed the announcement that heralded the beginning of the nightly entertainment. “Hey. Stay with me, for a moment.” He grabbed her wrist, as she made to get up and leave.

Looking down at him, Lucia released a dramatic sigh. “This really isn’t my kind of place, Lars. You should relax. Pick a bride. Pick two...between them, you’ll have an actual brain to converse with. I shouldn’t be here anyways.”

His look of panic was unmistakable. “Stay, or I’ll accidentally slip that story of you pissing yourself, that one time Braith locked you up in the Gray-Mane’s shed.”

Asshole. “Fine.” Slouching down next to him, the hall quieted suddenly as the girl she had just been introduced to (Sofia? Saffir?) walked towards the center of the hall and sat down on the chair provided before the firepit.

Tuning her lute, the Nord maiden began singing a pleasant, if wistful folk melody about a sea maid who sold her voice to gain legs to walk upon the land. It wasn’t long before she had cast the entire hall under her spell, as her fingers plucked expertly the wavering melody that reminded Lucia of ebbing waves, splashing upon the shore.

“...She’s good,” Lucia whispered to Lars, who was currently staring with contemplative speculation at the Nord, as she finished. Bowing to a polite round of applause. “Sweet. Nice teeth. Polite, like
you. Do you think she’ll call you ‘sir’?"

“Hush. People can hear you.”

“Nah. Definitely more of a ‘milord’ type. I can tell. Oh Milord! Take me! Claim me now!”

Kicking her underneath the table, Lucia began tucking into her food with a suppressed grin as that bland mask cracked, betraying a thread of impatience as he nodded for the entertainment to continue. Dagny was up next.

No self accompaniment for the daughter of the High King. Hurriedly, a band of instrument players; flutists, drummers and lute players all assembled behind her, as she struck a pose.

And began something that might have been singing, to the dismay of eardrums everywhere. “This love wounds my heart, with a sweet taste, so gently.”

Lucia cringed backwards, wadding up her napkin in her hand as she debated whether or not to throw it. See if it would land straight in Dagny’s gaping mouth. “Oh gods.”

The song continued, her thin voice dreadfully off-key as the musicians stoically played along. “I die of grief a hundred times a day!”

“Just once would be pleasant,” Lucia murmured darkly, surprising a bark of laughter from Lars. Looking over, she realized with exasperation that he had his noble mask of patient interest on, once more. “This is terrible. You’re not seriously considering her, are you? How are you not throwing things?”

“This is Whiterun, Lucia. We only waste food heckling after everyone is good and drunk.”

“Well, the night is no longer young.” Reaching for one of the tiny pies, she was stopped by his fist around her arm. Shaking his head, he prevented any further movement by pulling her hand down from the table, holding her tightly as Dagny continued to sing.

Blithely unaware of the pain she caused, as dogs somewhere in the castle began to howl along. “What else can I do, if Love takes hold of meee. And no key but pity can open up the prison, where he has put meee…”

Leaning over so that her lips brushed his ear, Lucia breathed. “Let me toss her into jail. It would be a favor to music lovers everywhere.”

“Then the guards would have to endure it. I can’t condone cruelty.”

Sliding her hand up, she clasped his fingers with hers. Squeezing his hand as he turned ever so slightly. In surprise, she thought with hidden mirth. Releasing him, she reached for more mead, as she felt his eyes study her in turn.

“...-ow good will be the good, when this suffering is done!”

The clapping of applause for Dagny’s voice was much more sparse than it had been for Sofie, punctuated by coughing and a murmur of voices. Flouncing away, Dagny was replaced by a wispy redhead who began to play the drums.

They continued eating, unable to speak more than a couple of words here and there, as random guests came up to claim the Battle-Born’s attention. The drummer was replaced by a tall Nord lass who made shapes in the fire with handfuls of colored powders. The crowd oohed and aahed, as
ribbons of smoke became dragons, soaring eagles and bears.

Lucia watched it all with rapt attention, silently laughing at some of the requests that were levied to the Jarl’s heir, as her friend was constantly distracted by the flow of loudly whispered complaints.

“-by Azura, I beg you to forward the rolls to the captain soon. My men haven’t had a good night’s rest since First Seed.”

“-This venison has been blackened! Overdone! My mistress can barely tolerate it, would my Lord mind if this humble servant troubled the chefs for a different plate?”

“...really, enough is enough. This pageantry is foolish. Why would Whiterun need a Jarl’s wife to sing, when what we truly need is competence? Skills? Something actually useful?”

“...Can’t say I disagree.” Lucia whispered to him, as the last bemoaning courtier left. Rubbing his forehead with his hands, Lars straightened at the commanding look old Olfrid shot him, all the way from where he sat practically drooping on his throne.

“Nothing for it. We’re almost done anyways.”

Lucia picked at her teeth, watching as Idgrod made her way to the center of the makeshift stage. *Hope she doesn’t keel over. That would be a spot of bad luck,* she thought with an inward roll of her eyes, as the older woman leaned heavily upon Sissel, gasping with the effort of crossing the small space of floor.

Wobbling as she stood, the Morthal spinster smiled tightly. Her raven black hair fairly gleamed against the deep blue of her gown; a beautiful foil against the earthy tones of Whiterun’s throne room. “Begging your pardon, Lars Battle-Born. For my talent, I would have you stand before me.”

Breathing out a weary sigh, Lars stood and walked away. Lucia watched him go, refilling both their plates with the fish course. Salmon steaks drizzled in butter sauce and frost mirriam, with steaming bowls of clam chowder. Bringing a mouthful to her lips, she burned her tongue. Sucking on a piece of fruit, she watched curiously as Lars stood before the amassed guests. *Wonder what her talent is. If she sings, I’m done. I don’t care how creamy this soup is - mmm. Nevermind.*

Idgrod’s voice rang out, stronger than any sound Lucia would have guessed to come from such a thin rail of a woman. “I have no voice of beauty, for mine is the caw of the raven. Come to bequeath an omen upon the Clan of Battle-Born. My talent comes from the gods. My visions their gift, at times my curse.”

Turning to Lars, who merely blinked at the dramatic monologue, Idgrod held out her hand. “Let me see your palm. And I will tell you what the future holds in store.”

The audience went silent, a hush of expectation as Idgrod grasped his hand in hers. Sissel stood directly behind, a slight frown on her face as the Ravencrone began to weave upon her feet.

Vacantly staring at something just past Lars (so politely blank, how did he do it) the woman made a noise of pain.
“A knife. Blade crafted from night itself, darkness.”

The guests shifted nervously, as Idgrod’s voice climbed in pitch. Nearly reedy with stress, as she shimmied and swayed. Caught up in whatever portents she saw, as her hands grasped those of Lars until the knuckles turned white.

“Spiral of light. A dead skeever, hung by its tail. A sky filled with stars falling...a full moon.”

Collapsing back, Sissel rushed forward to support her as Idgrod released a quavering sigh. “Apologies. I see nothing more. The images are gone.”

Lars cordially offered her his arm, helping her back to her seat at table as the guests slowly began clapping. Almost, Lucia thought, as the weak cheering thinned into more bold conversation, as though the bizarre spectacle they had just been treated to was not worth much. Interesting. I wonder if she truly sees signs from the future. Because that would fucking suck, from what Sigrid has told me. Must be hard on her. She looks like a good gust of wind would blow her away.

The murmuring of the hall continued, as there seemed to be no other performers. Lars returned to his seat with a well-concealed yawn. “Bored already, Battle-Born? It’s not every day a seer makes a pass at you.”

Lars seemed utterly focused on cutting his fish. “Idgrod shouldn’t have come. She’s ill.”

Lucia leaned back in her chair, mindlessly nibbling at a sweetroll. “She’d better not walk over any of the sewage drains. She’d fall right through the cracks. Schploop! Farewell, fair maiden.”

His voice was quiet, almost remote. “Hush. You’re still too loud.”

“Better loud than dead.”

With a sudden start, Lucia realized that the first performer was standing silently before them. “Yes, Sofia?” Lars folded his hands, all patience and calm.

Lucia wondered what it would take, to snap that mask of indifference. She could see the flex of tendons turn his hands white, as he pressed his hands together. A sign of anxiety that he masterfully hid. How tedious has his life been here, while I’ve been away? I should have written him back, at least once. “My lord, there is but one more performance we are waiting for.”

A quirked eyebrow was the only emotion Lars betrayed at the news. “Who is left?”

Almost choking on frosting as Sofia pointed at her, Lucia swallowed with difficulty. “What? Seriously?”

Sofia nodded. “You received an invitation. Jarl Olfrid has asked that you provide the guests with a performance of skill, talent or song. If it isn’t too much to ask.” The Nord pointedly looked her up and down.
“Fine. They asked for it.” Lucia soothingly patted Lars on the back, as he opened his mouth to contest the issue. “I have just the song to end this little affair. You can thank me later.”

Snapping his lips shut, her friend gave her a withering squint. “Don’t break anything.”

“Would I do that?” Flicking her blood matted ponytail out of the way, Lucia ducked beneath the table and waltzed over to the musicians, looking bored in the corner. “Skalds, drummers. Lutes. Play the tune ‘O’er the Haystack, please’.

Walking towards the middle of the room, Lucia felt the vastness of the vaulted hall press in on her, as she found it suddenly difficult to breathe. All eyes seemed pointed her way; the cross examination nearly making her feel naked. Looking straight forward as she assumed her starting position as the drums began to pound, she spied Lars.

Arms folded, the man looked annoyed. And ever so slightly worried.

Feeling herself crack a bold smile, as the audience shifted at the impact of the percussion, Lucia launched into the first stanza of her song. Drumming continued as she gestured grandly, seeing Lars sink back into his chair with a groan. Hah, that face. She was doing him a favor, breaking him out of his shell like this.

She sang.

“Warships crash on a foreign shore;
Hear the water’s mighty roar!
Feel the bite of ice and snow!
Kill and plunder where’er we go!”

Guests began clapping along, as the rhythm of the beat caught on. She saw several already drunk nobles swaying, some tapping their feet or bobbing heads as she drew her sword with a flourish. Laughing, she twirled the weapon into a figure eight pattern, light flashing along the rune-carved steel as she danced around the room. By now, everyone was standing or cheering, caught in the heat of the moment.

“Axes clash and longswords swing!
Hear the war-horn’s mighty ring!
Storm the tents and breach the walls!
If death is dealt, then Sovngarde calls!”
“Sovngarde calls!” Someone shouted, as the dancing began.

Still working the sword, Lucia could see several of the girls hold hands and form a ring, kicking up their feet with red, smiling faces. At some point, the flutes and the rest of the musicians had joined in. What had begun as a pounding war chant was ending more like a fast paced, jigging reel.

Catching sight of her friend, she rather thought Lars looked nearly sunburnt; he was so red in embarrassment. Just for him, she took a leaping jump and landed upon a bare space of table, shaking it as guests laughed and dishes cracked. *Oops.*

Carefully stepping between platters of meat, fish and vegetables, Lucia did a little hopskip, ending up directly in front of Lars as he stared up at her, dark eyes veiled.

Singing uproariously, Lucia waved her sword above her head.

> *Shield brothers round and foes before,*
> *Soak the earth with blood and gore!*
> *Sound the charge and shout the cry!*

...And as she finished the last line, she dared to swing the sword down, pointing her blade tip directly at his heart. *Lighten up, boyo.*

She bared her teeth in a fierce smile as countless voices joined her in war cries of their own.

> *How many of them can we make die!!*

*********

“Don’t talk. You’ve already done enough.”

“But Battle-Born, you know you had fun. Your guests certainly did. I think I saw three marriage proposals already taking place out there, right against the wooden pillars. Success!”

“Do you take *anything* seriously?!? My grandfather is furious! I wouldn’t be surprised if his heart gave out from the strain!”

Lucia sighed. “I didn’t notice any hearts popping in chests. Except for Sofie. I think that girl has it *bad* for you.”

“Lucia-” Biting off whatever he had been about to say, Lars rustled through his desk. Ink bottles and
quills rattled as he took out his temper upon the sturdy wood furniture. “Just go.”

He had dragged her away as she ended her final note, fuming, as the hall burst into applause behind her. Marching her with long, furious strides all the way to a private room that looked almost like -

“Hey, is this your office or your bedroom?”

Determinedly, Lars unrolled a sheet of parchment and weighed it down with stones. “My office. I keep a bed here for convenience. I have too much work to do, fixing this mess you’ve landed me in. You’ve probably offended half the ruling class of Skyrim by now.”

“Woof. How dull, if that’s what they’d consider offensive. I wasn’t even trying.” Sitting on the bed, Lucia bounced experimentally. Lifted her hands to trail them along the bunched up drapes, admiring the heavy fineness of the fabric. “Do you sleep here often?”

“Sometimes.” Dipping a quill into a pot of ink, she could hear the soft scratch of writing, as she pondered what, exactly, had her friend so tied up into knots.

*Oh.* Well, wasn’t it obvious.

“...So, you sleep alone then.”

Spilling the bottle of ink with a sudden jerk, she snickered as he righted it, turning to face her. “What.”

Standing, Lucia folded her arms behind her. Gave him a cheeky grin. “You’re wound up tighter than a springloaded Dwemer trap. One touch…” She mimed an explosion, seeing his lips turn white beneath the darkness of beard, as he shook his head at her.

“Well, *fuck* Lucia, I wonder why? Could it be because tonight was an epic disaster?”

“Oooh, naughty Lars.” Walking up to him, she looked over his shoulder as he wrote, studiously ignoring her.

He had nice handwriting. Hers resembled chicken scratches more than the calligraphy he was practically painting across the page.

She watched him work as the moment stretched on. It was relatively silent up here in the upper level. The candles lit in sconces on the desk and bookshelf flickered merrily, providing the only cheer to an otherwise dreary room. Looking around, Lucia wondered if she hadn’t made a mistake, taking off alone so many years before. *I should have taken him with me. He would have had so much fun, hanging out with the Skaal and the warriors of Thirsk. If I had known that he would turn into such a high-browed prig…*

*Hold on a sec.*

“Lars, why did your grandad and ma feel the need to throw a party, to find you a wife? Haven’t you, erm, found someone yourself? You’re not completely unfortunate looking.”

Setting the quill down, Lars looked up at Lucia. He smelled like tension and angst, the mead he had drank giving his sweat a distinctive odor. “Because I wasn’t attending to my duty fast enough for them.”

Gazing upon her with something akin to regret, Lars tapped the top of his desk and huffed, as her eyes widened upon hearing his words. “Since you left, I haven’t spared the time to properly court
anyone. It’s been years, Lucia. Years of hearing nothing back from you, despite my many attempts. I’d honestly given up hope that I’d ever see you again.”

That finger tapped repetitively. *Tap tap tap.*

“Wait. So, You’ve never…”

He flushed beneath her incredulous stare. “I’ve occupied my time in other ways.”

”*Boring* ways. No wonder you always look so serious.”

A pounding at the door. “Lars! Lars Battle-Born open this door right now, or you'll be sorry!”

*Shit. Dagny!*

***************

“What does she want? Another chance to deafen us all?”

“Sshh.” Looking around frantically, Lars couldn't see a space that would provide adequate cover, to hide Lucia. Under the bed perhaps? Behind the drapes? At least her armor wasn’t made of metal, that would clank and give her away.

“*Lucia. Hide!*” He hissed at the Imperial, still standing there with a perplexed frown on her face.

The banging on the door intensified, as Dagny gave it a booted kick. No longer listening to the imperious commands being flung outside his door, Lars stood up from his desk, preparing to shove Lucia out the slotted window if she didn't listen to him, for once. “*Go!*” He mouthed, feeling a bolt of adrenaline speed up his heartbeat as with a roll of her eyes, Lucia bent down and disappeared into the space beneath his desk.

Taking a cursory look, to ensure his reckless friend was completely covered, Lars straightened and walked over, unlocking the door with clumsy, almost numb hands.

The bolt gave way, revealing the Nord noble as she swept into his office, head held high. Her gown of slashed plum silk dragged against the stone floor, catching upon the knotted rugs as she testily yanked it free. “What took you so long, Battle-Born? Honestly, it's a miracle anything gets done in this drafty heap of a castle.”

Gesturing for her to sit, Dagny waved him off. “I'll stand. I feel a need to examine your furnishings and draperies. When we marry, I'm going to completely overhaul this dump, brick by brick. I think I'll start with these tapestries by your bed. This isn't where you sleep, is it?”

Watching her carefully, as the plump woman sniffed in disgust at the heirloom carvings and paintings he had chosen to place over the fire, Lars sat down at his desk with a sigh of despair. This, *this* was all he needed to end the night. After enduring the non stop questions, the gossip and coy glances, the clothes Ma had picked - ending on that *song* that raised his ire even now, as he recalled just how flushed and happy Lucia had looked- it had to end with Dagny and her delusions of grandeur.

Why it was his lot to be saddled with handling cases like this, he would never know. What would it even be like, he wondered as he watched Dagny snoop around his bookshelves, to feel as free as
Lucia looked dancing upon his tables. He wasn’t sure he’d ever know.

“Dagny, this is my private office. If you want to discuss things, I’d be happy to go over the contract tomorrow. Please leave.”

Tidying his desk, he heard her snigger as he took the time to straighten each roll of parchment, replacing the upturned quills into their cup. “Right. Like we both don’t know that I’m your only hope, here. Let’s just cut to the chase, Lars.”

Summoning his last stretch of patience, Lars prepared to stand and escort the High King’s daughter out of his space...

-Only to go rigid, as a pair of hands playfully slid up the inner length of his thighs.

He couldn't see. Didn't dare to look down and give away Lucia’s hiding place. Keeping his breathing steady, he affected a look of bored disinterest as Dagny turned back to him.

Striding forward, she dumped an armful of antiques upon his desk; scattering his papers and chipping the edge of his grandmother’s treasured candlesticks. “Hideous things. How long until the wedding, do you think? Your mother wants to wait until spring, since it’s tradition. Which may be just as well, since it will take that long for my decorator from Solitude to come here and, well…”

_This hagraven had already gotten ahold of his mother?_ Dagny made a casual gesture to the entire room. “We need to update this place to the most recent century. Honestly, Lars, it truly needs a feminine touch. You are sooo fortunate that I am here to help.”

Gritting his teeth, Lars carefully righted the candlesticks. “Nothing is certain yet, Dagny. I like this room the way it is. Why would you marry me anyway, if you so despise Whiterun?” Below the table, hands continued stroking his thighs in smooth, sure movements, one of them briefly palming his stiffening length through the fine fabric.

He nearly threw the desk over when he felt a hot, damp mouth breath wetly over his cock, still covered by his pants. Clamping his knees together, he grunted as the woman in between them forced his legs wide open once more with her elbows, biting at his knee in retaliation as he looked up to the ceiling in a silent prayer, oh sweet Dibella, make her stop...

Dagny didn't seem to notice his reaction, still perusing the entirety of the room as though she were listing the faults of everything in her mind, in alphabetical order. “Well, isn't it obvious?”

_He hoped not._ What was it that Dagny was speaking about? Something concerning his decorating style. “No. Please, go on.” _Gods please don't stop._ Breathing shallowly, he folded his arms, resting one hand to cover his chin and mouth to disguise his erratic, heaving breaths.

Below the table, he heard a faint rip and suddenly, there was a draft as Lucia’s hands steadily divested him of his pants, pushing aside his torn smallclothes. Feeling his cock throb, standing straight at attention, Lars closed his eyes as Dagny launched into a torrent of offended chatter. He tried to listen, blanking out briefly when something warm and wet licked the tip of him.

Gradually bearing down on his length, a warm silky wetness enveloped him as he hunched over his desk. Forcing himself to follow along to Dagny’s diatribe, as Lucia began to suck him off with her mouth. “...and it's so not fair, really, that Frothar would inherit the position. I'm just as capable as he is! I've been well trained by the finest tutors! But no...Daddy's boy gets the crown. Elisif says-”
Managing not to make a sound as a velvet tongue swiped him from root to tip, Lars bit down on his knuckle as one of Lucia’s hands fondled the tightness of his balls. His breathing was coming faster, more ragged now, as silken lips swallowed him down. Bathing him in heat, as her teeth scraped the delicate underside of him, nearly setting him off then and there. Shor save him, he was going to cum right here, in his own room with the two of them present. *Shit shit shit*...

“...And Whiterun is the second most wealthy and powerful Hold, now that the Stormcloaks are gone. Are you even listening to me? Hellooo, Lars?”

“- need to finish.” He managed to bite out, as the woman commanding the breadth of his attention between his legs seemed to agree. He could feel the curl of her lips as she pushed her face fully flush against his hips; the head of his manhood bumping the back of her throat as he scrambled for something to hold onto.

Paper. Where was a damn book or something - anything - to leaf through?

Clearing his throat, he shuffled through a ream of papers and grasped a sealed ink bottle, nearly breaking it in his fist as hands (wicked hands) cupped his ass against the chair. Bringing him nearly to the edge of both chair and sanity, as the mouth inflicting such devastation increased its torturous pace, bobbing until he felt his throat keen with it.

Turning the helpless whine into a fake cough, Lars lifted his face to Dagny, who had turned away to fiddle with his shelves of books, rearranging them to her satisfaction. And out of order, he noticed with a gasp, as Lucia pinched his ass. How his oblivious guest was unaware of his struggle, he had no idea. The wet noises currently driving him mad were barely covered by the scrape of his boots, the guttering of candles as they snapped in the drafty breeze.

“Finish work. Need to finish my work, Dagny. See you tomorrow.”

A put out sigh, as Dagny tossed the book she had been inspecting onto his desk with a thump. Causing Lucia to lose that delicious suction, popping off him completely as he struggled with all his willpower not to reach down and shove her mouth back onto him. “Tomorrow, then. But if you keep ignoring me for those commoners, I tell you, I probably won’t hang around.”

Hands slid away from his ass, scratching furrows down his thighs as Lars waited the interminable stretch of seconds that it took for the haughty Nord to strut out of his office.

*Creak.* The door clicked shut.

As soon as it did, Lars pushed back on the chair. Digging his heels into the stone flagged floor, sliding the seat back a pace to reveal the Dibella blasted temptress who was currently smiling at him, hands still rubbing along his naked thighs. What was left of his pants clung to a mere strip of cloth around his waist, as they rested in torn lengths along either side of him.

“You. Did-” He swallowed, shaking as Lucia leaned forward to graze his cock with her lips. Looking up at him with heavy lidded eyes, as her tongue lapped away. Her mouth felt like sin.

“*Lucia.*” Reaching his hand down, to pull her off as propriety demanded (manners be damned, his libido screamed!) yet she would not be moved.

Grasping his outstretched fingers, Lucia placed them atop her ponytail. “Hold on.”
Unable to speak, he wrapped his hands around the fistful of blood streaked blonde hair as she took him in turn, the base of her small hand pumping him languorously as her mouth kissed the tip of him, licking the excitement currently leaking away as he trembled in her grasp.

He should be stopping her. They needed to stop, for surely this was exploiting her in the worst way—“Please don't stop.”

Fiery hot breath, tight hands. Twisting now, as his own lubrication provided the slickness Lucia was working into him with each pass, him thrusting helplessly against her as those talented digits twirled and teased. “Not going to, Lars. You said the magic word.”

Leaning his head back until the muscles of his neck stood out like cords, Lars turned his head back and forth, not believing this was really happening. “...Stop?”

“Please.”

And almost in a flash, it was over. All over, as he cried out, pumping his hips as her mouth milked him. Hands gently squeezing his sac, pressing against the muscle of his thigh as pleasure carried him away; sharp and bittersweet. As though he had wakened from a dream, Lars realized his hand had been gripping her ponytail so hard, it had fairly yanked the damn thing out. Her knot had come undone, spilling strands of golden hair to lay soft - like downy feathers upon his bare skin.

Lucia laughed under her breath, leaning back as he watched her in a hazy sort of relaxed bliss. With abrupt and immediate lust, he realized she had a trail of his semen smeared upon her mouth. Watching him, she blinked lazily. Licked at the white fluid, making him moan. “By the gods, you actually taste good. Did you have some jazbay grapes lately?”

His mind remained fogged. “Wine. I prefer jazbay wine.”


Still trying to get his breathing down to something less than a galloping draw, in and out, Lars grabbed her hand. Pulled it to him, dragging that delectable finger into his mouth, where he could tug at it with teeth and tongue. He tasted himself - sweat, musk and grapes. In sudden craving, Lars realized he wanted to taste her instead. “Let me try, Lucia.”

She gazed upon him in slowly shifting mirth and incoming solemnity. “No, Lars. That was...” oh, and didn't it feel good, to see her shiver at the sight of him. He could see the scraps of his destroyed garments on the floor, near the knife she had cut them with where she sat.

“-Good.” He finished for her. Drawing her nearer, as she hesitantly pushed away as he tried to drag her closer.

“Er...wow Lucia. Even though I was terrified Dagny would see you, that was so worth it. She would have called the guards to drag you off in chains, for daring to rise above your station.”

“Well, something was certainly rising tonight. And not the full moon, either.”

He felt himself redden as Lucia stood, stretching her back with a sigh. Entranced, he watched the
shape of her in that armor, the strange black tipped paleness of fur somehow fitting the crazy quilt of random leathers. “Lars...you know that was a one-off, right? I’m not - um. Not hanging around.”

Steadfastly ignoring the first part, before his heart could sink any further in his chest, Lars looked at her solemnly. “Why not?”

Chafing beneath his gaze, she stepped from foot to foot. Almost as though she were trying not to run, then and there. “You wouldn’t understand. I... - I don’t belong here.”

His eyes widened as she continued on, gesturing irritably to him as he sat there. Like an idiot, pantsless. “You’re right. I completely ruined what was supposed to be a special night for you. I may have saved you from Dagny, that bitch...  

-Which made him smile a bit, but not for long as she continued hurriedly. “... But you know. You know you have to find a wife.”

“And I’m not her.”

Vehemently shaking his head, Lars reached out to her. “But you could be.”

Taking a wobbly step back, and then another, Lucia stared at his hand as though he had offered her a poisonous snake. “Lars. Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” He stood, careless of his nakedness as he walked around the desk. Pursuing the woman who hastily made for the door. “No, Lucia, wait-”

Her face was a picture of agony. “Sorry Lars. I thought it would make things better, seeing you again. I’m sorry I didn’t realize earlier just how much I don’t fit into your world anymore.”

His lack of trousers prevented him from chasing after her, as she raced away - footfalls nearly silent - down the hall. Faint sounds of singing and talk echoed, as he closed the door with unsteady hands.

Sliding down to the floor, Lars pulled his knees to his chest and began banging his head against the door in chagrin. An angry groan tearing itself out of his throat, as he let himself be miserable. Just for a little while.

Seconds tick by, as he mentally lists all the ways he fucking screwed up. Just in the last few hours. You’ve really outdone yourself, Lars.

Should have said something. Something better, more romantic. Something that would have made her stay, made her see.

Why does she run from me?

Far off in the distance, a wolf howled.
"Love is a kind of warfare." - Ovid

The moon hung full and round above the tundra of Whiterun.

Like a fulsome pearl it shone, filtering through clouds to rest upon Lucia as she gulped and tore at the elk buck she had taken down. The rich tangy meat was savory, as it slid down her gullet. Ridding her of the taste of sweeter things. She would not, refused to think of him.

Not caring was so much simpler in her werewolf form.

If she was hungry, she ate. If she was tired, she slept. None of the complex, layered feelings that so consumed her attention on two legs.

Shaking her head to dislodge some of the blood coating her muzzle, Lucia looked around. The plains spread as wide as the eye could see, disappearing into distant mountains. Dragonsreach rose, a far off shadow. Such a small thing, to cause so much heartache.

Better to leave. Better to hunt and fight, than stay in chains.

Lucia remembered when Aela had spoken those bitter words. It had been a frigid night in Evening Star; so cold that the lining of her throat froze with every indrawn breath. All water had been iced over, and the pack been forced to melt snow over the fire. They had all gathered, huddling in a tangled sort of pile as they warmed one another. It wasn’t sensual; not in the least. Not even Akar, who had wrapped her in his sinewy arms to warm her, smelled like desire in this killing weather.

“How are men chained?” She had asked curiously, feeling Akar’s cold nose brush her cheek as she giggled. Hjordis had sniffed, curled up at her feet atop the piles of furs. “They chain themselves.”

Green eyes glittering in the night, Aela focused upon the fire. Majni slept near her, his chest rising and falling in slumber. “There’s a purity to being moon called, little Heart-Fang. It means waking up every day knowing that you could die, and having to earn your life by clawing for every breath. I don’t know how those cozy lords manage to drag themselves out of bed every day. Why bother if you’re not living?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

Raking the coals with a stick, Aela’s weathered face smiled sharply. Teeth glinted, curved where the huntress had filed them into sharp points. “You’ve felt it? Fear? Anger?” Her voice lowered an octave to a low purr. “...Desire?”

“...Yes. Who hasn’t?”
“Well then.” Satisfied now that the fire was licking at the new logs in its unending hunger, Aela leaned back on her haunches. “If you wish to hunt with me, your feet need to be quick, and your eyes quicker, pup.”

Akar spoke, his voice a baritone growl. Lucia startled to hear him speak; it had been months since she had heard him utter more than a grunt or single word response.

“You know it well. The speed and strength of the beast. The thrill of the hunt. The triumph of the kill. This is our purpose, our way of life.”

“Humans muddy it with reasoning. Too much thinking, and the fear will overwhelm you. Fear of losing, fear of loving. Better to not think. Better to be beholden to no one but Hircine and the pack.” Aela spat into the flames.

Lucia shifted, uncomfortable with the conversation as Akar chuckled, so close. His hands rubbed down the chilled flesh of her upper arms. “I don’t understand, Aela. The pack cares. The wolf feels. Don’t we reason, to flush out the fox and rabbit for eating?”

Clawed nails tapped against the stones of the firepit. “Aye, we do. But there’s a distinction that I don’t think you’ve quite made yet, girl.”

Sitting back, heavy with the meat of her kill, Lucia wasn’t sure she had ever learned what her mentor had so struggled to teach her over the span of years. She had learned to kill beasts, to tan and mend fur and pelt. Learned the ways of the flesh; first with Akar, and later with nameless Dunmer and Nords. She had even passed the time with an orc hunter who had been smitten with her. She still recalled the longing on his tusked face when he had asked her to return with him to his longhouse. Be his smooth-faced bride, back in the Wrothgarian mountains.

She had laughed blithely, thinking the orc was having her on. He hardly knew her, after all. Even Akar, whom she had been in and out of bed with for years, held no claim upon her, sleeping with others of the pack as the whim struck. And he had not found their encounters lacking, she was sure.

Unlike Lars, with whom the term giving pleasure had taken on an entirely new meaning, in her mind. Was it truly that different, fucking someone you cared about?

She rather thought not. Lolling her tongue as she sniffed the cool autumnal air, Lucia snorted at the scent of rotting plant and mudcrab not far from her kill.

Sex was a fun diversion. A pleasant way to stay warm in the long dark of winter, when growing things slept beneath their blanket of snow.

But one man, in one house for the rest of her life? **Gods no.** Used to roaming, to a constant change of shifting horizons, sights and smells, Lucia feared she would go mad from the boredom, the same thing day in and day out. How Lars withstood it, she’d never know.

*Family. Friends. Roots.*

*Chains, all of them. Love had not kept her mother alive. Had not saved Lucia when her aunt declared her a burden and had tossed her, alone out in the cold to beg for scraps.*

The Frostmoon Pack had the right of it. They eschewed all contact with others, tending to attack on
sight anyone who made it up the steep mountain slopes.

To be fair, Lucia thought as she licked her paws clean, most of those who traveled were brigands. Reavers, rieklings, even some draugr had wandered once into their camp. Easier, perhaps to lay down a flat law of killing everything and anything that wasn’t them.

It had been lonely. More and more often, as the years passed on, Lucia found herself taking off on solitary jaunts. Exploring the caves, the forests of the northern island. Watching hidden in the trees as the Skaal sang and danced, their shaman calling out in heartfelt pleas to the wind as they sacrificed beasts to the All Father. Flecking the iron-red blood into the snow; like a spill of snowberries against bleached linen.

Ravenrock smelled strange. The Dunmer she encountered there were even stranger, so preoccupied with their houses and Daedra, their morose perspectives; yet Lucia found that walking on two legs and speaking were sensations she did not wish to give up altogether. She possessed almost a small fortune, now, from selling the East Empire amulets to the merchant who always smelled so desperately eager...for what, Lucia did not care to discover. She had buried chests of gold and jewels all over Solstheim; taking the bulk with her when she traveled south, back home.

*Home*. Was Whiterun home? Everything had changed. Even Lars. Timid, thoughtful Lars who stammered and smiled like it wasn’t quite proper had become stiff and cold with time. Like a dead deer she had once spied in the woods, that had died standing straight up. Rimed over with ice, its dark eyes seemingly alive still, as she had prodded it curiously.

Had he truly been telling the truth? Did he want her, Lucia? Scarred and marked, her skin telling the stories of her bravery? She looked nothing like the soft, well fed sweetlings that had flocked to court her old lover.

Or perhaps, it was just she who had changed. In more ways than one.

“Hello there. Care to have a chat?”

Spinning on her hind legs, Lucia growled to see a man, his silver streaked hair gleaming in the moonlight. He approached cautiously, hands raised, though she could see that he still wore a double-hafted battleblade upon his back. “Peace. It’s only me, Lucia.”

*Vilkas.*

Feeling her muscles quiver with the strain, Lucia allowed the fur to recede back into her skin. Oh, it *ached* to release the wolf, to become soft and hairless once more. Stretching in a grotesque mockery of a smile as her muzzle flattened, Lucia stood straight and proud. Blood soaked and stark naked, as the Companion looked at her with no judgement in his eyes. Amusement perhaps, as he nodded towards the elk she had killed. “Done then? Still quite a bit of meat on there. Let’s lug it to camp. Then we’ll talk.”

Sighing, she walked over to the stone where she had stashed her clothes and weapons. She was not ready to talk yet. As the wolf spirit had been subdued to slumber beneath her skin, Lucia had felt all
the roiling emotions that she had been running from surface once more.


She didn’t feel very pure in heart, running away like that from Lars. There had been no inner struggle when she had made the split-second decision to give him pleasure. To snap that tight, painful tension she smelled on him. Giving him release in a way she knew from past experience could bring a bliss found nowhere else.

But after...

She had not acted honorably. Had run, terrified, from the man who extended his heart in his hands. And she had stomped on it; a coup de grace to the evening that had been such a farce. Honestly. Trying to choose him a mate, like he was a young unblooded boy who couldn’t find the right end of a sword to grasp.

*What was his family thinking?*

They had been right about her, she thought grimly. Lucia was all wrong for him. She hung her head as she and Vilkas dragged the remains of the elk to a small encampment where horses whickered at their approach.

A wagon that clearly had been packed with meat and pelts by the smell had been parked next to the picketed beasts of burden. Throwing the elk carcass atop, Vilkas gestured for her to come closer.

Bedrolls had been laid out beside a merrily snapping fire, and her chest lightened the slightest bit as she recognized with awe the ones she had seen as mere babes, so long ago.

"Thadrig? Fjora and Gydda...is that them?"

"Shhh, just got them to sleep. Yes. You’ve been gone for years, whelp.” Lucia blinked. At first glance, Farkas appeared to have three legs instead of two. The visual trick resolved itself as the giant of a man moved his prosthetic false leg off to the side, unashamedly bearing the healed stump of his old war wound.

She gazed upon the twin girls. Their dark hair nearly wove together in a black pool as they slumbered, eyelids twitching as they dreamed. *So lovely.* Still thin and unformed...not quite women, but no longer children either.

Thadrig, who nearly took up an entire bedroll with his gangly height. The mop headed lad snoring lightly was far from the the squealing toddler she had chased and tickled. She was already familiar with his younger sister, Svari, but Thadrig...he was special to her.

"Everyone has changed."

"Including you, shield sister. Sigrid sent a courier, warning me you might be about on the tundra the next few days.” Sitting down with a relieved groan, Vilkas sat next to her.

She watched the embers of the fire glow red-hot, nearly white in the ash that swirled and stung her nose. Clamping her jaw, she stubbornly refused to ask. To bring up the matter of beastblood with the Companions, as the Harbinger had asked. She didn't need any more shit to feel guilty about.
“So. I take it the dinner with the Battle-Born lad went poorly?”

It was Farkas who had spoken, scratching his back as he yawned. She shrugged, pretending to make light of it. *Fake it ‘till you make it.* “It was interesting. Met quite a few of the possible future Madam Battle-Borns.”

“Couldn't have gone that poorly.” Vilkas had his good side turned to her; else she might have missed the calculating way he glanced at her mouth.

“No!” Clapping hands to her face, Lucia narrowed her eyes at the old veteran. “How did you know?”

“Besides you confirming it just now?” Vilkas chuckled, turning away until she only saw the wicked gash running along the length of his face. “Your lips are still swollen, lass.”

*Shit.* Flopping back to lie upon a bedroll, Lucia glared moodily up at the stars. “Am I to have no secrets? No privacy or freedoms at all? Will this happen each and every time I return to Jorrvaskr? The insistent teasing and eternal questions?”

“Caring, you mean.” Farkas began carving a piece of firewood with his knife.

“Aye. Family tends to do that, whether you want them to or no.”

“Well, it’s *shit* being second guessed all the time.” Lucia seethed. “No one does that in Solstheim. I'm trusted to handle myself, there. No one asking where I've been, or where I'm going. Mollycoddling asswipe.”

The brothers exchanged glances, as Lucia pretended not to notice. Breaking up dried twigs and bits of grass, she tossed them one by one into the fire.

Vilkas cleared his throat. “So, ah...how much of this has to do with Lars?”

Fed up with it all, Lucia threw her handful of tinder into the fire. It made a brief burst of flame, fading as quickly as it had flared up. “What doesn't? I show up. I play nice. Lars is pissed. He does this *thing* , and I do this...well. Never mind that. It was a jest, and now...argh!”

“Verrry coherent.” Vilkas drawled. “So, more or less, you had a good time. On more than a casual level. And it terrified you.”

Lucia bristled as Farkas chuckled. His bass growl made her stare at both twins in astonishment. “Like staring into a goddamn mirror, eh Vilkas?”

“Unfortunately.” Turning his good side to her once more, Vilkas cast a considering, one eyed gaze upon her. His fogged left eye had gone completely white with time, giving him an eerie, almost ghostly appearance. “Tell me something, and I'll tell you what a man I deeply respected once told me.”

Facing Vilkas head on, she forced herself to look at his good eye. “What? What can I say that would make any difference in all of this?” Blowing out a breath, Lucia scowled. “It's all gone to shit, no
matter what I do.”

“Hmph. Maybe he’s better off without you then.” Stretching out on the bedrolls next to Thadrig, Vilkas crossed his arms behind his head. Smiled at her irritated frown. “Am I wrong? Or are you unwilling to fight for what you want?”

Her scoff was more like a sob. “I don't know what I want.”

His lone eye was uncompromisingly cold. “Then you’d better figure it out, Lucia. Fast. Before he weds someone else.”

Thumbing her lip in contemplation, Lucia stared at the fire once more. Trying to unravel her own complicated tangle of desires. Somehow. Insects chirped as a cold night wind moaned across the tundra, skittering gravel and dirt into the fire. Causing it to gust and gutter, brightening every time the wind reached a lull.

*What did she want?*

“I want him.”

Raising his head to blink tiredly at her, Vilkas allowed his head to thump back against the bedroll with a sigh. “That's a good start.”

“Tell us something else.” Suggested Farkas, as he sheathed his dagger. Giving Lucia his full attention, as she squirmed under the force of the Companion’s critical stare.

The fire crackled and popped, as she thought about Lars.

“He’s...well. Lars is my best friend.”

Seeing Farkas nod thoughtfully, Lucia pressed on. “He's patient and polite - to the point of being obnoxious, at times.”

“Good with children. He always let me eat the last sweetroll - even if he really wanted it. When I joined the Companions, I was so mad that I had to start by running laps, instead of wasting enemies with my sword. He sat for an entire afternoon, listening to me bitch...trying to cheer me up with puppies that his dog just gave birth to. Lars is one of the smartest, genuinely good people I know.”

As she spoke slowly, ignoring her knee-jerk reaction to shun any overt sentiment, she realized that not only did she want Lars; want his body in a familiar, yet completely new way...she loved him as well.

All of him...from the fearful, stammering youth he had been, to the quiet, considerate man he had become.

*And she had blown her chances all to Oblivion.*

“That thought that just crossed your mind…what was it?” Coming out of her dazed thought process,
Lucia looked over at Vilkas who had sat up and was smiling shrewdly at her.

Watching her swallow, the older man tilted his head, his good eye alight with mirth. “Hmm. Afraid, are we?”

Fuck that. “I'm not afraid of anything!”

“Oh, good.” That grey eye stared at her, unblinking in the firelight. “Then you should know...brave hearts always beat lesser ones. If you are honest with yourself, perhaps you'll find it is worth daring whatever perceived loss you fear, to give your heart away.”

“...and to receive his, to guard and cherish in return.” Farkas added, shaking his head as Lucia emitted a high squeal of enraged fear.

“But...I don’t know the first thing about wooing a man! I'm not dainty, or...or delicate! Dammit, I can't even dance!”

Tossing a stick of firewood at Vilkas as he laughed out loud, Lucia hissed out her greatest worry.

“What makes you two so sure that I won't end up the broken one, eh? You haven't seen the women I have to compete with. All so accomplished …” she made the term sound like a slur “...and perfectly prepared for him. A Jarl’s son.”

Falling forward, she miserably buried her face in her hands, fighting back tears. You dense motherfucker. You had to run away after giving him the first blow job of his life. Realizing after the fact that he might have wanted more than just your lips wrapped around his very fine cock. Smooth.

A rough hand rested upon her shoulder. Looking up, she saw Farkas and Vilkas both crouched in front of her. Both wore identical looks of fondness, mingled with a fair bit of annoyance.

“Uh...Aela did warn you that taking on the blood makes you more angry, right?”

“And violent. A combination no woman needs.” Vilkas quipped, as Lucia gasped out a rough laugh.

“Don't cry, little shield sister.” Dabbing her face with a faded square of linen, Lucia blinked as tears spilled out onto the handkerchief Farkas held under her eyes.

“Please don’t. Would it help if I told you I know several high court dances?”

Staring at Vilkas, mouth open, Lucia shook her head, sniffing. “How…”

Farkas pursed his lips and fluttered his eyelashes. “He’s a Thaaane…”

“A Thane who was forced to learn years ago by his wife in order to attend court functions. I can teach you for tomorrow night. Didn’t you know…” she gaped at him.

He shrugged. “Aye. There’s another night of dancing and feasting, for they announce the engagement then. You'll dance with Lars Battle-Born, and dance well enough to prove to yourself you are worthy. But first, you must learn. Now do you want to marry this lad or not?”

Smearing the blood on her face as she furiously tried scrubbing away her tears, Lucia managed a smile. “Yes. Yes please.”

Vilkas managed to roll his one eye heavenward, which was frankly an amazing feat. “Oh good. Well. No time like the present. Up you go.”
Stepping carefully around the sleeping children, Lucia stood hesitantly. Farkas chortled as Vilkas led Lucia to a flat, open clearing in the grass and began her instruction.

-“There you go. Men bow first, then ladies bend at the knee. One, two. One, two. Pick up your feet. Happy. This is a happy dance. For fucks sake, stop crying.”

“I'm trying , you old asshat. Why are you grabbing my wrist?”

“I'm trying to grab your hand to guide you through the next set of steps, you ungrateful little shit. Now glide. Glide, damn you.”

“One, two...one, two...oh no…”

“Keep going...hey! I saw that.”

“No you didn't. It was on your bad side. You couldn't possibly have seen it.”

A sigh. “Again. Farkas, tell me if she makes any more rude gestures.”

“Yup. Right there. Can't miss it.”

A quick slap. “Ouch, dammit! That hurt!”

“It will hurt even worse if you embarrass yourself in Dragonsreach. And if you embarrass me...well. I think I'll tell Lars about the time I saw you write ‘Missus Lucia Battle-Born’ in a messy scrawl, all over Jorrvaskr’s floors with chalk. Sigrid and Alsbet had to scrub for hours to get it all out.”

“...you wouldn't.”

“I most certainly will, if you don't pick up your goddamn feet. Move , young lady!”

Scolding and laughter lingered long into the night, as around a lonely campfire Lucia learned how to dance...and hope.

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Idgrod Ravencrone the Younger had died sometime that night.

Lars felt empty. Nearly blank, as he made arrangements for the body (and a sobbing Sissel) to be transported back to Morthal that morning. Sincere regrets. No obvious signs of foul play. Signed yours truly.

And wasn't this just the tip of the iceberg of his collective troubles today. He stared into space as Aventus finished his lengthy dissertation on the events of the previous evening.

“...though I must say, I actually rather enjoyed Lucia’s soaring tribute to Reavers and Pirates everywhere. Lars? Lars where is your mind?”
“Huh?” Shaking himself, he sat up in his chair. “Sorry Aventus. It was a long night.”

“Hmm.” Looking at his friend skeptically, Aventus Aretino folded up the paper he had been referencing. “That’s it. Enough for now. Come on...up.”

Groaning, the Battle-Born heir dragged his heels as the Imperial practically dragged him from his office room. “Mm tired, Aventus. No more. Just pour some of that jarrin root extract you always keep on you. Right here in my bottle of ale.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t going to happen, Lars. No matter how much I dearly desire it at times. Stand right there.” Examining him, Aventus clicked his fingers. “Right.”

Moments later, as a freshly washed, brushed and redressed Lars freed himself from the clutches of his well meaning friend, he nearly blundered straight into a table set up for the midday meal.

“Oh. Are you quite all right?”

Catching himself on the door frame, Lars was surprised to see Sofia, sitting down at a table for two in a room that abetted the guest quarters. Warm sunlight - unseasonably hot for fall - shone brightly upon the scene. Nearly bleaching the woman who sat there into a ghostly pallor.

Gesturing to the table, the Nord smiled warmly. “I’ve taken the liberty of arranging some refreshment. You’ve been working hard all morning, tending to poor Idgrod and her unmentionables. If it’s not too bold, I say come sit. Relax for a while.”

Cautiously, Lars sat down. Looking around, he soon discovered that Aventus (that sneaky bastard) was nowhere in sight. “How have you been faring in lieu of the recent news?”

“I’m sorry for Idgrod’s family. She must have been in poor health.” Slicing the bread, the two Nords quietly attended to the business of sustenance. And, he thought as he chewed and swallowed the leftover venison turned to shepherds pie, it was as painfully awkward as he had feared.

Would all future mealtimes be as silent as this? Struggling to banish the thunderclouds that had blocked his mood, Lars took a sip of ale and decided to try some small talk. She was a potential future wife. He should probably discover sooner rather than later if Sofia happened to be a simpleton.

He tried not to think about how her hair was the wrong color; sand blonde, where it should have held all the ripeness of mature wheat. “So, you’re from Windhelm. How goes the rule of Jarl Free-Winter?”

Sofia drank from her glass, her dusky blue eyes firmly fastened upon him. “Fair. He’s allowed Argonians and Khajiit into the cities. Which has elevated the crime rate, of course. But business is growing and morale is high.”

“That’s...something, I suppose.” Jarl Olfrid Battle-Born did not believe in allowing the animalistic species through the gates, though Lars had a suspicion that many came and went as they pleased nonetheless. The city guards were woefully undertrained. “I hope the damage from the riots has been fully repaired by now?”

“Yes. The walls have been rebuilt, though many homes still remain in wreckage.”

Sitting and staring politely was more nerve-wracking than the time Lars had tried to get a beehive off the doorway of the barn. It had stung him in the ass then. He wouldn’t allow it to now.

“Sofia, I tend towards honesty in all my dealings, hopefully not at the expense of tact. But I will
sacrifice that tact now for a clear answer. Why do you want to marry me?"

She laughed quietly, looking down. “Ah. Honesty. Now we come to it.” Looking up, those eyes - like a haze of mist upon a lake - seemed to darken a bit. “If we’re not referring to the obvious answers, such as the benefits of your Jarldom or the wealth of your Hold…”

“-Please no.” He managed, praying that there would be something. Anything else for her to fasten onto. He needed a reason to believe that Sofie Windrime was the name - the right name - he would call out tonight as his future bride.

Or (he winced) it would be Dagny and her redecorator. Lars would not entertain any further self pitying thoughts about a certain Companion. No matter how much his loins tightened at the memory of blood streaked blonde hair and challenging brown eyes rimmed in woad.

Sofia pushed around a spear of roasted leek upon her plate with a fork. “Lars, I believe I gave my surname as Windrime, when we first met. But I may have failed to mention that while I was raised by the Shatter-Shields…”

Taking a sip, Lars mentally gave her props for being truthful. Aventus had fully briefed him on all the guests at the keep.

“And the Imperial must have left him alone with her for a reason.

“Yes. I’m aware.”

Placing the fork down beside her plate, Sofia dithered with her hands. Folding them upon the table, she lifted her head and thinned her lips, licking them nervously. “Then, you may also know that I spent much of my childhood selling flowers for a living. On the streets.”

Holding his previous opinions of her for the moment, Lars leaned back in his chair. “War orphan?”

A slightly cynical smile graced her features. “Something like that.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Picking at a thread upon his napkin, Lars decided he needed to be honest as well. “I lost my father and aunt in the Battle for Whiterun. Though I’m sure our parents were most likely serving on opposing factions, I’d like to think that we both share a similar grief at the loss of a loved one. I’m grateful the civil war is over and done with.”

As Sofia remained silent, eyes cast down upon the table, Lars leaned over. Touched her hand with his. “There. I’ve told you something that hurts, when I think on it overlong. Now, your turn to explain why your childhood has something to do with your choice to court me.”

He waggled his eyebrows, affecting a coy look. “Aside from the obvious benefits, of course.”

She laughed, almost as though she were surprised. “Of course. Ah...well. This might sound odd.”

“T’m good with odd.”

Giving him a slightly frustrated smile, Sofie nodded. “Yes, I gathered as much last night.”

Liking her even more, as this emotion felt far more real than any of the obsequiousness she had shown during the prior evening, Lars gestured for her to go on. “I did say I’d tell all, didn’t I. Well. When the Shatter-Shields adopted me, I thought my problems were all over. A family of my own, to raise me and love me. A place to finally call home.”

A shadow of something crossed through those blue eyes; so fast Lars could barely tell what deep feeling it heralded. “Unfortunately, I soon came to realize that I had been selected as a stand in. A
replacement for a dead daughter, and a poor replacement at that. Having known poverty, being in want of food and shelter first...then later desiring, yet not receiving familial love and trust - I can say with all honesty that I hope to gain these things by your hand in marriage. And that’s the truth.”

He smiled at her kindly. “Well. I can’t fault you for that. It’s what we all want, in the end.”

Silence filled the space once more. Strangely, it didn’t feel quite as empty as it had before the discussion. Fiddling with the brocade of her draping sleeves - a spiral, embroidered in silver threads - Sofia seemed restless...gazing anxiously out at the window.

Lars followed her line of sight, an idea coming to mind. “Do you ride horseback, lady?”

She graced him with a stunning smile, seemingly relieved. “Yes, I enjoy it very much. It feels like what I’d imagine flying to be like.”

Shor’s bones. This might work out after all. “Wonderful.” Taking her hand, he lifted her from her chair and escorted her from the table. “Autumns here in the tundra can get quite cold. But the wind does enhance the experience. Let us fly.”

Passing a number of maids upon leaving Dragonsreach, a gently laughing Sofia on his arm...he felt a ripple of unease amidst their careful banter as he noticed a wooden board that the workers were traveling to and from.

Nailed by their ropy tails, six dead skeevers hung from the plank. Upside down.

***************

It was the final night of the matchmaking, and Dragonsreach was filled with stars.

Not real stars, of course. Farengar, the court mage, had released countless balls of light to float at varied heights and brightness among the tall rafters of the vaulted ceiling. Watching the lights carefully, the mage sat in attendance upon a stool, occasionally recasting the magelight as necessary to prevent his work from coming undone. Maids had covered the long trestle tables with white linen tablecloths. The tables had been set with carafes of wine and pale blooms, adorned with preserved luna moths and sprays of tundra cotton.

All white and gleaming and cool. The ethereal scene was topped off by a fortune in beeswax candles, placed upon every available surface. They smelt far better than tallow, though they burned just as quickly.

Lucia paused at the dreamlike threshold, gathering her courage.

Fortune favors the bold, Heart-Fang. You earned that name. You can earn the right to speak to Lars, to explain and beg forgiveness now by dancing your Imperial heart out. Just don’t trip on your damn shoes.
Picking up the lengths of her skirt, she took one step forward. Then another. She would rather have faced an ancient dragon, high up in the frozen wastes of Solstheim’s barrows, but here she was. And here she would remain until she confronted Lars.

And told him, in all honesty, how she felt.

The sun was sinking steadily in the west...hardly a handspan of golden red light remaining. Nobility and commoners alike had already filled the room with the sounds and smells; a hubbub of slowly fermenting excitement. Nothing wagged on the tongue quite like gossip, and tonight the subject on everyone’s lips was that of the ruling family.

Would Jarl Battle-Born live long enough to see his grandson wed? And if so, who was the lucky bride? And what had she done to gain that rare privilege?

Most of the younger, eligible women wore blue; Lars Battle-Born’s favorite color. All shades, from pale sky to deepest cerulean. Sapphire, lapis and aqua, all swirling in a sea of sour musk, perfume and spilled alcohol.

Lucia wore gold.

In truth, it was Sigrid’s old wedding gown. “It will look marvelous on you dear. We don’t have the time to order you a custom gown. But we can make our own alterations.” Her Harbinger had finished, not bothering with the corset as she stood back and viewed Lucia with suspiciously shiny hazel eyes. “Oh. Oh you look so radiant, darling. It’s like a fairy tale.”

“A what?” Trying to keep her carefully coiffed and brushed hair from catching on anything, she missed Sigrid’s grumbling, only hearing her as she raised her voice. “-like an elf tale. A folk legend. Like the stories we used to tell Thadrig and the girls about the swan-maiden and the friendly giant. Remember?”

“Didn’t the girl get eaten at the end?” Peering worriedly at her tanned face in the mirror, so bereft of any woad or bloodpaint aside from a thin tracing of ashy kohl around her eyes (a stranger’s face) Lucia turned to Sigrid in sudden, gripping fear. “Oh Sigrid...what if he refuses to even talk to me?”

“What if all of this has been for nothing?”

Vilkas appeared, resting his hand upon Sigrid’s shoulder, as she reached up to pat his hand. “Then you did your very best. No one can say they did more. Go on. Make us proud.”

As she grabbed handfuls of the heavy cloth of gold gown, Lucia was grateful for the slashed sleeves and the freedom they provided. She wore no other adornment, save her tattoos put on display. Her silver earrings she had taken out, allowing the holes to heal.

Naked. If she was being honest with herself, Lucia thought frantically, she felt utterly naked. No sword. No armor, or shield. Not even the familiar dusty itch of woad, or the flaking crumble of blood. Lucia had utterly bared herself for this night. This dance.

Fortune favors the bold.

With a rushing pass of a trailing navy skirt, Lucia spotted Lars, arm in arm with an ash-pale beauty garbed in gossamer silver.
Her heart nearly burst. They were *laughing*, stepping in the style she now recognized as a type of quadrille; the perfectly matched couple drifting in and out of sight as other couples passed by. Like the moon behind a cloud.

She moved towards them anyway. *Be bold. Be brave.*

*No matter how much it might hurt later.*

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“Lars? I need to speak with you.”

Turning away from a smiling Sofia, Lars Battle-Born felt as though he had been struck by lightning.

Against all expectation, there she stood. Practically bathed in sunlight; the rich metallic hue setting her apart from a sea of blue behind her. Bronzed skin had been bared at her shoulders and breast, the sleeves slashed and opened to showcase her tattoos...as though anyone could miss them, he thought dumbly.

The hair that had been soaked in blood and wrapped around his fist was clean and soft- shining a dark wheaten gold as it fell thick and loose down her back. Face bare of any makeup, save a smudging around her worry-creased brown eyes, she stared beseechingly up at Lars as he said nothing.

“Please? I know I don’t deserve it, after the way we...I left things. But maybe over a dance, I can explain.”

Releasing a vacant-faced Sofia with a nod and a bow, Lars offered his arm. Despite the mixed feelings he bore for this impossible woman, he had to see this in person.

“Tell me again how you know how to dance. I’m assuming you mean court dancing...and not that heaving jig you graced us with yesterday.”

“The sword has its uses, Battle-Born.” She released a shaky laugh. “Honestly, I wish I had one now. I’d feel better, knowing I had some sort of protection against you.”

Movement, as he ushered her to the dance floor and stood in empty space. His head was nearly ringing with the surreal timing of it all. “A sword can’t repair damaged buildings, feed hungry people or undo years of prejudice, Lucia. What good would a sword be, if you stayed?”

“Shit Lars, it’s not about the sword -” Halting what she had been about to say with his hand clasped against her mouth, Lars closed his eyes against the lights. Against everything but the sound of his own breathing. “No. No more talking, please. I think you’ve said enough.”

Her face paling under the tan, Lucia nodded curtly and stepped away from him. Marvelling as she took to the first position of the quadrille with no prompting, Lars began the dance with a bow. Carefully shielding his face with the mask he had perfected at court, as Lucia’s own browned features revealed a myriad of flashing emotions.
In the skyscape decor his mother had chosen, Lucia stood out like an unhammered nail. “Um. I only know the quadrille. Oh, and most of the floor patterns for the Sellinger dance.”

“Impressive.” They moved in synchronized steps, Lucia turning at the correct times. Clasping his hand with a near impact of heat, as her fingers trembled against his firm grip. Turning and stepping, his right hand grasped her waist and spun her out. In. Out. Step. Right.

She wore no corset beneath the cloth of gold.

No. He would not think of it. He refused to allow that memory any more thought.

Out of the thick bulwark of numbness he had built for himself, Lars found himself chuckling as silently Lucia counted the steps; her brow furrowed in concentration. All the couples formed a line, which soon wrapped around the dance floor in a revolving circle of duos. “You nearly missed one step, there.”

“Oh, damn. And here I thought I was doing so well.”

“You are. I’m just a bit curious as to why you’re here, now.”

Lifting her by the waist, they spun in a wide arc. She rested her hands upon his shoulders, the dress filling his vision until he saw nothing but gold.

Amidst the swirling fabric, he heard her voice sigh with a whisper. “Lars, I’m so sorry.”

“Me too.”

As they resumed the positions to repeat the dance once more, he noticed as Lucia bit her lip anxiously. “Um. About that.”

One step, two.

He bowed. She tilted her head. Neither allowed anything to break the connection between their joined gaze.

Two step, four.

The dance that was no longer a dance continued.

“Lucia, you were very clear last night. I hope you don’t feel the need to berate your point.”

Three step, six.

“No, Lars! It - I was wrong! I wanted...had to tell you that I lo-”

A hand stopped them, as a raven-haired man stopped their dance. “Sorry to cut this short, but Jarl
Olfrid wishes for you to make the announcement now.”

Almost not recognizing Aventus, what with him wearing royal blue instead of his habitual black, Lars felt an icy calm settle upon him. “Goodbye, Lucia.”

He turned to her, one last time. Soaked in the warmth of gold and bronzed skin, feeling a faint flicker of dismay. For through the roar of his own blood in his ears, he realized she was nearly shaking. Teeth chattering as she struggled to reach out to him, to speak. “Don’t let her follow, Aventus.”

“No, Lars, no please listen to mee-e-!” He heard her scream out, as dutifully his friend kept her at bay.

Wrestling the Imperial down, Lars caught Aventus muttering, “Have some dignity, for fucks sake…” as he spared her a last lingering glance. A flash of light in the cold blue, as she was swiftly taken further back into the morass of people, disappearing from his sight.

Lars pushed the sound of Lucia’s slowly quieting torrent of words to the far back of his mind. He’d made his choice. Stepping close to his family, many of which looked pained at the profligate use of magic floating above them (his uncle in particular shooting daggers from his eyes at Farengar) Lars nodded at Olfrid as the Jarl stepped forward, steps unsteady as he addressed the crowd.

“Thank you for your patience, everyone. Ahem.”

The crowd quieted, eager faces openly staring at the Jarl. Staring at him in open ogling.

Sighing inwardly as he noted the pinched faces of a number of women, he drummed his fingers against his sleeves. *Soon, this would all be over.*

“Well, as patriarch of the great Clan Battle-Born, I’m proud to announce the engagement of my grandson, Lars, to one of the fine women who have enjoyed guesting rights these last few days. Son…”

Walking forward to stand at Olfrid’s right side, Lars felt the slightest shudder, as Lucia reappeared in the crowd. Her face was a rictus of agony.

*This is what you wanted.*

“I’d like to announce my future bride. Sofia Windrime of Windhelm.”

And as Sofia smiled, nearly floating to his side like some Divinely blessed spirit... all Oblivion broke loose, as the crowd parted in a sharp divide around a sudden stir of activity.

Lars frowned, lifting his hand to see better as people began running away, screaming in fear. Scattered bits of what looked like cloth floated in the air, as a man Lars realized was Aventus stood stock still, staring in dumbfound wonderment.

-Clutching his chest, which had been scored by several gashing claw marks from the raging black beast which somehow had appeared out of thin air, shrieking a wailing dirge that made the hair stand up on his neck.
“Guards! Bring it down!” Lars heard his grandfather cry out, as he pushed his fiance behind him out of harm’s way. The stampede of escaping guests reached a fever pitch, as stars began to fall from the false sky of Dragonsreach’s ceiling. Dissipating with a flash of magicka, as Farengar also took flight.

It was a shower of falling stars, nearly blinding him in white bursts as Lars stumbled towards Aretino and the thing. Searching left and right, he managed to pry a sword out of the hands of a guard frozen with fright. “Protect our guests!” He shouted, receiving a dazed nod in response, as he turned with a grunt of agitation.

*By the Divines, how did a werewolf get in here?* “Aventus! Aretino, are you well?”

Falling to his knees, the Imperial seemed transfixed by the blood pumping wetly from his midriff. “T-t-talk. Sh-Larss.”

“Don’t speak, you need a healer.” Shoving his sword at the beast - who seemed to be hunching in on itself, still shrieking that horrible scream - Lars grabbed Aventus by his underarms and began hauling him away.

“Larssshh…”

“Shut up, Aventus.” Looking wildly around for someone, anyone to stand their ground in case the beast made any attempt to escape, Lars reached for a cabinet nearby that he knew contained at least a couple of health potions. “Here. Just drink. Don’t try to be a hero or anything, Aretino.”

Thick laughter greeted his words, as Aventus sipped slowly the potion that Lars tilted into his mouth. Turning away, as Lars tried to offer him more, those black eyes stared bleakly up at him.

“Lars. It’s her. It’s Lucia.”

No.

“This...this was all an accident, I think.”

Shaking his head, Lars gulped in a deep breath. Held it. Then began shaking his head once more in denial. “You’re injured. You were seeing things.”

“Afraid not, old friend. Go keep them from killing her, would you?”

Turning, Lars felt himself move in plodding bewilderment. Stars were falling from the sky that wasn’t a sky. His canny, paranoid Companion turned spy had been caught and injured unaware.

And Lucia - *Lucia?!?* - had turned into a great, howling black werebeast that was now climbing the pillars of Dragonsreach, seeking escape from the circle of soldiers jabbing spears, taunting her.
One threw a net that snagged a clawed foot. A pained high pitched growl was the last sound he heard, as Lars watched; aghast as the thing that must have been her disappeared beneath the spears and swords of yelling, shouting guards.

Apathy clouded his mind, as he furiously shook it off, raising his hand to stop them. Wading it, throwing soldiers bodily away as he pulled at their spears. Tried lifting the net that held the eerily keening creature down, as the guards wildly stomped and stabbed.

...Had to stop, stop STOP them from slaughtering what may or may not have been the woman he loved.

“...stop it. Stop it! Don’t harm her! No!”

In the corner of the room, Olfrid Battle-Born collapsed. Grasping his left arm with a grimace, the old ruler panted as he sank further to the floor. Alfhild struggled to support him as he fell, whispering hurriedly as she dared not take her eyes off of the brewing battle.

Behind them all, a pair of hazy blue eyes waited.

-And watched.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa. *3000 hits*

I am amazed that my brainchild has gotten so much attention. I'm loving the fact that people are actually reading - and responding - to the expanded universe that keeps me up at night and bothers me until I capture it in the written word.

You guys rock. Seriously. Skyrim is the best game ever.

- Back to the chapter. Yeah...come on, people! Lucia is WEREWOLF. Prone to violence and tantrums. Remember Sinding, from the Hircine quest? He killed a kid, purely by accident.

And Lucia is just a baby in terms of experience in restraining her temper. Definitely some fur'splosion going on as her hopes and dreams are dashed.
After exploding out of her own skin...the sudden change brought on by the crash of grief and rage... Lucia didn’t remember much.

Just the pain. Searing her with the knowledge of her failure...the horrifying raw realization that she had been too late. For it was Sofia... not Lucia who would marry Lars. Who would soothe his hurts, talk with him late into the night. Laugh at his jests. Wake up in a heated tangle of limbs, safe and secure and loved. Where’s your fairy tale now, Sigrid? I told you, though you wouldn’t listen...the swan-maid gets eaten in the end.

And as she sat up, clearing what felt like a full week’s worth of sleep grit from her eyes, Lucia realized she was now in some kind of holding cell.

A prison. Heavy stone blocks dripped wetly, draining into the pool of water that covered the down sloping corner. The bars were nearly as thick as her wrist around. As she shakily placed her hands around them, a spear jangled against the metal. Startling her so badly, she fell back on her ass amidst rough laughter.

They hadn’t even bothered to give her any clothes. She wouldn’t have cared, if it were not for the leering guard currently stationed outside. Looking in.

“Well, look a’ there. The beast has a lovely gold pelt atwixt ‘er legs, even in disguise!”

Lucia made as if to turn away. Then, with one smooth lunge, she grabbed the guard. Expelling her frustrations in a satisfying manner, Lucia managed to pound his helmeted head against the bars a few times before other spears jabbed into the soft flesh of her shoulders, forcing her back. “Away, monster! Back! BACK!”

“I’m not a monster. You lot are sick bastards, though. What happened to at least a threadbare tunic? A blanket or something?”

Even through the smooth blankness of the guard’s helmet, she could feel hostility radiating from the man. “Beasts don’t get basic civilities. You’ll stay there, ‘till the new Jarl decides what to do with ye.”

Shifting on the balls of her feet, back and forth, Lucia looked around. Examining the cell for any
weakness, anything she could use as a weapon. “...New Jarl?”

One of the guards remained to stare at her for a silent moment, as the others dragged away the guard she had smashed. “Old Olfrid’s heart gave out two nights past. The new Jarl was crowned just this morning. And wedded. Shame the old Battle-Born didn’t live to see it.”

Stumbling back, Lucia barely registered the stagnant pool of water soaking her legs, as she grasped the slimy rocks for comfort. Stability. Something, as the guard blithely continued on.

As though he could churlishly tell how much his words pained her.

“Aye. All Hail the new Jarl, Lars Battle-Born and his new bride Sofia Windrime! He’ll be a good one, I reckon. Like Balgruuf. Fair. Gave my brother a just sentence, when he killed Dagvir’s cow by mistake. They departed upon their tour of the Hold just this morn.”

Sinking onto the floor, she lay back against the rocks. Careless of how they dug into her spine, she let her mind go completely blank.

Lars, married. Wed and gone off to consummate with his shiny new milksop of a bride.

I was too late.

*************

There were an unusual amount of visitors in Whiterun.

Even for a wedding, Aventus thought worriedly as he surreptitiously scratched the bandages beneath his tunic. Even with the myriad resources at his disposal, he couldn’t possibly keep track of all of them.

Which worried the Imperial to no end. He had just waved off the new couple riding away on horseback, sent the mother of the new Jarl up to rest in her rooms, and now was heavily involved in coordinating the departures of the many noble guests and dignitaries that had arrived just in time for the conjoined funeral, the crowning and the ceremony. You’d think there would be enough stewards and housecarls for these tasks. But inevitably as he finished one errand, another would spring up in its place.

It kept him away from Jorrvaskr. For that he was grateful. The mood there had been overwhelmingly bleak of late.

One day. One day to plan and execute a wedding that doubled as a coronation. To send for the priest of Mara, commission a set of armbands and amulets that would fit both groom and bride. One day to fully redecorate the wrecked interior of Dragonsreach, mending the deep gouges in the wood. Burns that had to be buffed out of timbered furnishings and stone flagged floor from all the spilled candles. Time spent reasoning with the Nord staff who were completely spooked - convinced that the Ravencrone woman’s vision had come true, at last.
That this wedding was cursed.

*Skeevrs. Falling stars. Full moons...shit.*

Hours spent talking down Lars - repeatedly - from his near-suicidal desire to see the werewolf that now languished, knocked out by his best sleep powders, somewhere in the dungeons below.

Sofia had helped. Her calm influence had been a boon as she helped arrange everything, going so far as to send Aventus off to bed for a precious hour of rest, as she set the table settings along with the servants. Sewing with her own hand the wedding gown she would wear, refusing anything but the simplest crown of woven silver wire.

They both deserved a damn medal for the effort it had taken, pulling it all together last minute.

Aventus hoped, prayed even that it would be the push Lars needed to rise from the funk of the last couple of days. This Sofia seemed level-headed and kind enough to turn his friend’s head. Even though she was frightfully plain. Then again, Aventus knew...his tastes ran more towards the small and plump, rather than the wisp-thin stature...the nearly faded, washed out coloration Sofia bore. Others might find her attractive. *Maybe busting his nut for the first time would get that stiff sonofabitch to relax. Didn’t need a pretty face for that.*

Aventus hoped. But did not trust to hope. Perhaps theirs would be a marriage that would grow with affection, in time. *How absolutely shitty - to marry a near complete stranger?* Not for the first time the Imperial thanked his lucky stars for Mila Valentia, and the stability and sweetness she had brought to his life.

He had an amulet of Mara stashed away, rolled among his socks and smallclothes. Just waiting for the opportune moment. He rather doubted Mila would be tempted to snoop there...though he almost wished she would, just so he could tease her about it.

*Enjoy your trip, Lars. You’ll be back to work soon enough, with all this chaos. For your sake, I hope the lass has some experience.*

Stopping for breath as his wounds pained him, Aventus stopped near the outer bridge. Mentally snarling at the pandemonium - the absolute *clusterfuck* Lucia had created with the sweeping aftereffects of her presence.

*I wish Lucia had never returned to Whiterun. All the blame I lay to rest at her feet.*

“*You! Imperial! Fetch me my housecarl! I wish to leave with the next caravan!*”

*Damn. Dagny.*

Too late to pretend he hadn’t heard her now. Striding briskly up to the High King’s daughter, Aventus snatched the paper she extended imperiously, scrolling over the particulars. “There’s a group leaving in about half an hour. You can be on it as soon as your servants load the wagons.”

An exasperated sigh. “If that’s the best you can do. Nelkir! Come! We must see to our things!”
Gesturing for a passing servant to come and show the royalty where to wait, he began scribbling with a quill upon their papers, giving detailed instructions to bump them to the front of the line. Anything Aventus could do to speed their passage, he would.

Dipping the quill into his carefully balanced inkpot, he nearly didn’t register the whispered conversation passing between the siblings.

“...-no, Nelkiri, you can’t. We don’t live here anymore!”

“-Castle is old. Lots of places no one has ever been. I’ve already been back, twice. She would whisper things - secrets to me. Just like the Lady.”

“You worm. You told Sofia, didn’t you? Couldn’t keep your yawning trap shut. I knew you liked her too well. Well, too bad. She’s lost to you now.”

“...didn’t know. And now the Lady is silent. Someone unlocked the door, Dagny.”

Heavy breathing. “You said it wouldn’t open.”

“It wouldn’t, believe me sister. She did something, I know it. That bitch…”

“Not so loud. We’re going. I don’t care how much you whinge, we’re leaving this moldy pile of rock today.”

He had heard enough. Leaving in measured strides (as though he had been completely ignorant of their conversation, gods were nobles stupid) Aventus realized he had bitten his lip hard enough to draw blood.

What in the Nine Divines was Lars’ new bride playing at?

Practically shoving the paperwork at the nearest groomsman, Aventus rubbed his chest as he staggered off to his desk. He needed to sent out a missive, by the fastest runner he currently employed. Perhaps Sigrid would know the best path to cut through the White River. To cut off Lars and Sofia, under the guise of inquiring after their comfort and health. The Harbinger had been in mourning; remaining closeted and heart-sore after the imprisonment of her favorite foster-child, but it couldn’t be helped.

Or could it?

Great dagger-tipped paws. That sense of smell. I wonder how fast a werewolf runs at full tilt? She certainly tore a fine swathe through the throne room. Must investigate further. I can use all the help I can get, even from her.

He had heard rumors of a dark whispering door, deep beneath Dragonsreach. Casting the tale aside as a ghost story, Aventus had disregarded it; a cautionary tale at best for unruly children who refused to go to bed.

He recalled it now. Whispers of deceit. Twisting, tainting the mind with their foul poison. A voice promising untold power...if only one would unlock the hidden door.

What door? Aventus had been all over and under the vastness of Dragonsreach and had never
encountered anything similar to this haunted door.

That Nelkir, whom public opinion generally agreed to be dour and prone to rages, had actually discovered something supernatural - mayhap even of Daedric influence - in his childhood wanderings was bad news. It did not bode well for the safety of the honeymooning couple. One of whom had taken something forbidden. Locked away, behind a whispering door.

And oh, he could feel an omen of trouble twisting his gut. Paranoid, Lars had laughingly called him. Overbearingly circumspect, watchful of his own shadow. But this time, Aventus felt sure that the overweening sense of caution he had cultivated would serve them both well.

Beckoning irritably to the steward who oversaw travel missives, Aventus finished rolling and stamping the letter had had made three copies of. Sealing its contents carefully, as he dripped hot black wax and pressed heavily with his personal seal...that of a grinning skull flanked by a raven and a wolf.

“...Take these to your three fastest runners. One to Harbinger Sigrid at Jorrvaskr. Another by horse to overtake Jarl Battle-Born - yes, on the north road. Past the old Loreius farm. You know which farm I mean. Bah...nevermind. I’ll take it myself.”

“And the last letter I want delivered to High King Balgruuf at the Blue Palace. Away! Make all haste!”

Damn it all to Oblivion. He had missed something, somewhere along the way. And if this Sofia - if that was truly her name - was linked in any way to the Thieves Guild, he would tender his own resignation by hand. If Aventus lived that long.

He only hoped he was not too late, to prevent whatever damage his lack of foresight had not stopped.

Travel slowly, friend. For once, may the road hinder your horse. May your steps be mired in mud and hampered by rock. There’s only so fast a runner can fly, on such short notice.

Wait.

*******

“How much further to Heljarchen?”

His horse bobbed its head, nearly tearing the reins from his hands. “Not long. We should reach the town in the space of an hour. Two, at most.” Smiling tiredly at his new wife, he noted that she looked fairly exhausted herself. “I’m sure we’ll see the outlying farms in just a few moments.”

“Oh good.” Sofia sighed, rubbing her neck with a pale hand. “I confess, I’m rather looking forward to tonight.”

Feeling himself redden beneath his beard, the newest Jarl of Whiterun clicked his tongue, urging his mare to begin cantering once more. Sofia followed, her grey gelding keeping the pace as they ignored their sore seats. Making their way to the sleepy agricultural center of Heljarchen.
Hadn’t he signed the patents for the construction of the watchtower here, just last fall? Lars wondered, desperately trying to distract himself from what Sofia - his new wife - had openly hinted at. No doubt about it...this was going to be incredibly, embarrassingly awkward.

Almost, Lars thought, he hoped she had some previous experience. Some idea of what transpired between man and woman on their wedding night. Then again, a more primitive part of him desperately wished she was as pure as she seemed. Completely inexperienced, so that they could learn together in this new path they had started out on.

Lars wasn’t an idiot. He knew the basic mechanics. Had seen enough rutting by his dogs and stallions to roll his eyes at the ribald jests the guardsmen often joked about, unaware of his presence as he strolled along during his errands. Had understood the graphic nature of the drawings often found scribbled in privy stalls. Lars had pored over the writings of Crassius Curio like any other hot-blooded teen, snickering over the metaphors found in the Lusty Argonian Maid series. *Lifts-Her-Tail...it had taken him years to finally get that one.*

But he wanted, more than anything, to begin their marriage on a good note. And his complete inexperience in the matter of pleasure was giving him heart palpitations, as they drew ever nearer to the inn where they’d share a bed for the first time.

Aventus had jokingly offered to draw him diagrams, which he had shunned without a second thought. *No.* His first time, he would ask. He would learn himself the tender touches that brought pleasure, ensuring she did not suffer (if it was indeed her first time) as his mother had cautioned him. *Slow, careful and gentle, Lars. Don’t rut atop her like a bloody great brute. Help her along first, like the gentleman I raised you to be, lad.*

...It didn’t sound fun. Not exactly the way he had pictured it, after that spectacular wreck of a night, when Lucia had gone down on him under his desk.

Shifting in his saddle as Lars grew hard at even the hint of memory, he struggled to banish all thoughts of Lucia from his mind.

She had not been gentle. Or slow. Or careful with him. It had been rough and trembling and so very real. *Was sex different, then, for women than for men?*

*Must be.*

Dimly, he realized that they had been passing scattered farms and huts for a while, now. “Looks like we’re here.”

Handing off their horses to a waiting groom, the swinging sign for Snowbranch Inn came sooner than he expected. Ducking under the low lintel, he held the door open for his wife (his wife!) and checked them into their basement suite.

He felt his breathing come faster, more raggedly as the inkeep and his sons unloaded their trunks and travel bags onto the dresser. Hearing the doors close with a rasping creak, Lars turned to look at the room. Taking in the paintings, sconces lit with candles. The turned down bed, strewn artfully with wildflower petals. A bottle of Argonian Bloodwine and two goblets, resting on the end table near the bed. *Shit. Did one drink wine before, or after?*

Desperately staring at anything but Sofia, he cleared his throat. Aware of her shrewd appraisal from afar, as her travelling gown rustled around her legs. “Husband. Are you well?”

“Yes. Honestly? I’m a bit intimidated.” His gasp of laughter was almost wild in his anxiety, as Sofia
Feeling her fingers rake through his hair, Lars sighed. Letting her hands rest upon his neck, trail down his shoulders as he shivered at her touch. Almost tender, as her hands reached through the mass of his hair. “Don’t worry Lars. Everything will be just fine.” Closing his eyes at the sensation, he began to relax...

-Only to snap them open in disbelief, as something tight and choking fastened itself around his throat.

Gagging, Lars buckled and rolled. Desperately trying to rid himself of whatever had latched so furiously on to him. Cutting off his air. Blackening his vision, as he fought like a Reachman to see where Sofia was, to pummel the attacker into submission.

Feeling his limbs tingle with numbness as he lost control, Lars shook. Slumping over on the bed, for all was suddenly dark as night.

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Aventus stared forlornly at his very dead, very butchered sable mare. Damn. He had loved that horse.

Chewing on a dripping, nearly raw chunk of horsemeat, Lucia waved him over. Managing to swallow, she shook her head at the Imperial’s face of disgust. “You’re too picky. Eat up. We’ve got lots of ground to cover, so stuff your face and we’ll move on.”

Picking at the skewer he had lifted from the coals, Aventus stared moodily at the White River. “I still say we should have taken the path. It’s faster. The horse might not have died upon the rocks, had we done what I suggested in the first place. Now we have to walk.”

Wiping her hands upon her leathers, Lucia stood. He stared in disbelief as she tweezed out a ball of gristle from her sharp teeth and flicked it into the bushes.

“Yeah...that nag might have died sooner, had we passed directly by Valtheim Keep and all those bandits. Seriously, Aventus. Trust my nose. It’s what you brought me along for, after all.”

He wouldn’t dignify that jab with a response. Bad enough he had missed something. Worse, to admit it to her. The bitch who had sent Lars into a tailspin of depression.

“It’s nightfall, Lucia. We can’t keep this breakneck pace - I know it’s not what you want to hear, but we have to slow down. Else we may run into more trouble.” Abandoning the skewer of horsemeat, Aventus folded his arms and gave her a look. “We should go back to the path.”

“Nope. Too obvious. Got to cut through, straight north by northwest.” Her brown eyes were distant, as the werewolf sniffed at the wind. Making a face, she turned on him suddenly. “Ugh. Really? You had to break gas, right this instant?!”

Curling his lip, he laughed in amused contempt as she stomped about, drawing in deep gulps of breath further upwind. “Yes, Lucia. Just for you, I chose that moment to pass gas.”

“Ugh.” Shaking her head and stomping out the fire, Lucia poured what remained of their waterskins upon the coals. “Think I’m full. Let’s refill our water in the river and get moving.”
Of all the travel companions he had to choose...

It had taken an extraordinary amount of coaxing to release Lucia from the dungeons of Dragonsreach. Bribes, cajoling pleas and written letter from the Harbinger herself, to vouch for Lucia’s good behavior in the future.

And now here they were, stranded somewhere in the barrens where the White River ran into the Pale. Hopelessly lagging behind schedule, for they had not a prayer of catching up to Lars and his potentially dangerous wife in their itinerary. Not before they stopped at an inn to rest.

“You’re sure, Aventus? Sure of what you heard?” She had asked him for the thousandth time, as they climbed a ridge in the fading light. Shadows were shifting as clouds darkened what remained of the sun. Even Aventus with his all-too human nose could smell the humidity that heralded a rainstorm.

“Yes, yes and yes. You think I’m taking a stroll with you for my own health? Fuck you, Lucia. At least have the charity to snap his neck before gouging the heart from his chest, this time. Insufferable bitch.”

“Arf, arf. I am what I am, boyo.” Standing still, she sniffed the wind once more as Aventus leaned over and panted, straining to catch his breath. “You sure you’re up to this run? I could always carry you. A whiny little skeever-shit like you wouldn’t slow me down.”

Staring up at her incredulously, Aventus shook his head. “There’s...ugh...no way you could carry me that far.”

“Not on two legs. But on four, sure. You up for it?”

Blinking, Aventus looked at the Companion. For once, she seemed completely serious. “How fast can you be?”

A smile hovered around her mouth. “Almost faster than this storm I smell approaching us. I can get there by midnight. If you keep us limping along like this, we may make it by dawn.”

“Alright.”

Dropping her pack, she stretched. Popping her knuckles as he debated about whether or not to ask about a saddle. *Fuck it.* He’d ask. “Do you have a bridle, or...something. Anything for me to hold onto?”

Lucia laugh-snorted. “Uh, no. I don’t make a habit of carrying sarcastic sons of bitches on my back. You? You get to hold tight to my fur. Try not to pull it out - I’m a bit testy this time of month.”

*Great.* Watching in mingled curiosity and trepidation, Aventus gathered the armor she threw at him, packing it as he dodged what she tossed. Weapons, travel bags, ridding herself even of smallclothes as Lucia stood bare naked before him.
She didn’t seem self conscious, so he wouldn’t look away. Damn. She cut a fine figure. Not even all her ink could hide the cut of muscle and feminine curves. Perhaps all werewolves looked this way? Tempting. “Now what?”

She smiled. He noted that her teeth looked sharper. Thinner. “Now I change. Stand back. I won’t be able to speak very well afterward, so just climb aboard. And try very hard not to fall off, yeah?”

Nodding, he clutched their bulging travel bags closer and stepped backwards to give her more space.

Lucia sighed, tilting her head from side to side. Aventus watched as a ripple moved through her flesh. Starting from her fingers and toes, shaking her limbs until the woman writhed in what looked like utter agony.

Bones cracked and snapped. A low howl of pain erupted from her lips as they disappeared; stretching almost fluidly into a muzzle that sprouted whiskers and fur. Long taloned claws bled from her hands, as Aventus stared in shock at the woman who had grown nearly twice as tall and wide again. The ear piercing shriek that morphed into a howl nearly deafened him, as he clapped hands over his head. Unable to look away, yet desperately wishing to, as flesh rolled beneath fur and he glimpsed the pink-red of organs that should never see the light of day.

Her ebony pelt melded seamlessly with the night as she stood tall. Bending over with one last great huff, she hovered - almost on all fours before him. The yellowed eyes were watchful. And strangely sentient.

“Lucia.” Swallowing what he had been about to say, Aventus gestured to her back. “I need to rope these around you-”

-Almost before he could finish his thought, Lucia had slung the travel bags around her hulking shoulders. Waiting patiently, as he managed to gather his thoughts in time to fasten the bags so they would not fall off, Aventus shook his head. “You’re too tall. I can’t even imagine how I’m going to be able to ride you.”

The great mouth slivered with needle-like teeth grinned. “Ventus...cannot ride. I...carry only.”

“Whatever. Semantics aside, I need you to lower down a bit further.”

Before he knew it, Aventus was grasping handfuls of black, silky fur as he pulled himself higher up on the werewolf. Reaching his arms around her neck to hold tight, he gulped at the boldness of what he was about to do.

Shit. I feel like a fucking child. She’s huge. A werewolf...I’m riding a goddamn werewolf. Pinch me, I’m dreaming. And not the nice kind of dream.

Scattering his thoughts, Lucia took off with great loping strides. Rattling the teeth in his head as he hung on for dear life, Aventus looked back as the White River disappeared into a faint grey ribbon.

Mountains loomed ever closer on the horizon, as massive paws dug deeply into the earth. Propelling them ever closer to their destination.

As thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance, rain began to fall. Soaking into his leathers, matting the hair against his head as he clung even closer to the were. For she emanated warmth, a heat that kept him from freezing as the wind of their passage blew past the wetness on his skin.
We’re coming. Not even this goddamn storm will stop us Lars. Hold on, friend.

******

“-had enough. If you play by the rules, you walk away rich. You break the rules and you lose your share. No debates, no discussions...you do what we say, when we say. Do I make myself clear?”

Lars woke slowly. Painfully.

Feeling as though his head was stuffed with tundra cotton, he cracked his eyes open.

He was lying upon the surface that he had previously believed to be his marriage bed. Delicately testing his hands, then flexing his feet, he prayed that whoever was speaking off in the dark could not see. Did not notice him awaken, for the bonds that held him securely tied to the bed were well-knotted. The bed had become his prison.

“-n’t underestimate them, Mercer. They're well-funded and they've been able to avoid identification for years. I'm impressed it reached this point.”

Holding himself still, tensing as he recognized the cool voice as belong to Sofia - his wife - he practiced drawing shallow breaths. Counting every inhale and exhale, as he struggled not to cry. To rage, fighting the constraints that bound him even here. Should have known it was too fucking good to be true. Even my wife is out to get me.

And I fell for it. Went ahead and married her, knowing nothing about her except that her past was a sad song.

Motherfucker.

The other voice spoke again. A man’s voice, coarse and annoyed in tone. "I'm sorry, Windrime but I was under the impression I was in charge! I lead and you follow. Does that seem clear to you?"

Listening carefully, because really... what else could he do at this point? Lars kept breathing. And biding his time. He’d fucking bite the shit out of whoever these people were, if it came to that.

“...Crystal. Just know that I warned you first. The Companions have been nearly impossible to infiltrate, despite my best efforts.”

A creak of leather. Floorboards squeaked, as someone shifted upon the floor. “You’re no threat to them yet. Merely an annoyance. But once you become Jarl Windrime, Sofia, I’m sure you’ll be able
to provide us with something more. You always were a quick study.”

More shifting sounds of fabric and leather. A soft sigh, as wet sounds of mouths meeting filled the silence.

*I don’t believe this.*

A gasping choke, accompanied by the liquid drip-dripping of what must surely be blood.

He knew that sound; the sound of death. Something metallic slid fluidly through fleshy bulk. Ending with rasping sigh, as a body fell heavily to the ground.

Holding his breath, as he strained to hear anything else, Lars nearly bit his tongue off as a weight pressed into the lower edge of the bed. He felt dampness upon his legs, as something long and hard was stropped against the cloth of his pants.

Her voice was gentle as she spoke. “I know you’re awake, Lars.”

Opening his eyes, he sucked in a deep breath. His heart was fairly beating out of his chest from the sheer pressure of not knowing what in Oblivion was going on. “Care to fill me in, wife?”

A whisper of laughter. “Sure. I owe you that, at least. After all…”

Lars turned away, gritting his teeth as soft lips pecked his cheek. “...You are giving me everything I ever dreamed of wishing for. Since we’re being honest.”

Feeling a strange sense of calm come over him, the Battle-Born allowing himself a sigh. One single exhale that carried all the sadness. All the disappointment he felt. For her, and for him. “Why don’t you cut me free, and we can talk about what to do about all this.”

Her fist hit his chin, nearly causing him to black out as he saw stars. “-Talk. You want to talk? To me? I’d sooner run you through, Battle-Born. Traitor. Lover of that Imperial dog. You fucking sympathizer to the Empire! TRAITOR!”

Whoa.

“Sofia-” Lars managed to slur, before she hit him again. This time with the flat of her hand, causing his nose to bleed with the force of her strike. As he struggled to breath open mouthed; throat clogging with blood, he made a noise of pain as a weight straddled his lap.

Looking up, he could barely see her form. Nearly wraithlike in the candlelight, those grey-blue eyes were hard as stone.

“Fine. As long as I have you here, I might as well make use of you. I’ve never been with a virgin before.”

Struggling in earnest now, Lars sickened to hear her soft laughter. All the more sinister for the gentle, almost condescending tone she chose to speak with. His face ached, smaller cuts beginning to seep across his skin as his wife began rocking slowly, unceasingly against him.
“Oh, Lars. I fear I have not been completely honest with you.”

Biting his lips against the pleasant burn of her hips, Lars glared at Sofia. “I’m not surprised. Now get off!”

“No.” Continuing her rhythmic thrusting, Sofia grinned. Bringing up from the bed a strangely curved, blackened blade that she displayed like a prize; lowering it to his eye level. As if it were something he would want to see. “You don’t know what this is, do you.”

“A hideous excuse for a sword?”

He nearly yipped as she smacked his chest with the flat of the blade. “Don’t test me, traitor. This is the Ebony blade of Mephala. And it was right beneath your nose, all this time.”

Damn. Lars was getting hard, despite all efforts to ignore the crazy woman currently riding him. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Well you wouldn’t, would you? Warrior, noble, and philanthropist. So good and pure of heart, I imagine you wouldn’t dream of using the power I now wield.”

The longer she spoke, he noticed with steadily increasing suffering, the less she moved. “What does it do?”

Waving the blade in front of her eyes, Sofia leaned back and raised up off of him; giving him a slight reprieve as he shifted as far away as he could.

Removing her dress in one swift pull, the pale Nord’s skin fairly glowed. Nearly flawless, but for a number of fleshy, mutilating scars that criss-crossed the breadth of her chest and stomach. Freely laughing at the look of panic he gave her, the woman hummed as she traced the blade tip along his shirt, slowly ripping his tunic open. Laying him bare.

“Sweet, innocent Lars. Don’t you know? Mephala feeds upon the blood of the beloved. The trusting.”

“Every time I kill someone who cares for me, even a little with this beauty- its powers regenerate ever stronger. Idgrod was honored to die upon it, to give her body to the Lady of Whispers. Olfrid, too. Though he was harder to isolate than she.”

His mind whirled in a panic, as dumbly Lars thought about the notes he had sent home to the old mother in Morthal. She had probably received her daughter’s body at some point this past day. He had seen no marks. Nothing that hinted at murder.

“How…”

-And he moaned, as Sofia grasped him through his pants. Pumping him with her hand, slowly, then gliding to a steady, near maddening pulse of pleasure. “You really are a virgin. I hardly have to do anything to rile you up. Through their orifices, of course. I had to drain the blood afterward - so messy, but otherwise there was no way anyone could tell. Don’t fault yourself, love.”

“I’m not your love!” He nearly roared, rising against her, against the ropes that held him taut to the bed.

Smiling that nearly rabid baring of teeth once more, Sofia leaned over him. He shook his head, struggling still as her hair fell over him. Blinding him with darkness, as she braced his head between her arms. Kissed him deeply, biting his lower lip and worrying it with her teeth until she drew blood.

As he gasped in fear and guilt-ridden lust, Sofia leaned back once more. A knowing look in her
hazy, sky colored eyes. “You will be. And after I take you to my satisfaction, your lifeblood will replenish my Lady’s mighty blade.”

“And then you’ll die, dear husband.” Her chuckle was a bell-like tinkle, as he writhed against her, red faced in his suffering. “And it will be a pleasure, to take Whiterun in hand. To do what my people, the Stormcloaks could never accomplish, to bring the great city of the tundra to ruin.”

Staring up at her, as she shivered in ecstasy in her imaginings, Lars licked drying blood from his lips.

*His wife was stark raving mad.*

*No way out.* He was slowly tiring; the soreness of his neck swelling from where the cord had pulled tightly. Stinging pain throbbed on his jaw, his eye from her previous blows. Lars felt a sense of despair fill him, as he fisted his hands against the ropes. Trying through sheer willpower to break the bonds. “...Deplorable they may be at successful networking; the Thieves’ Guild does rather excel at destroying what infrastructure they settle into. And the Companions have such an efficient method of obtaining news. Strange, for a warrior’s guild.”

“No…” Her hands divested him of his pants, yanking them off roughly as he tried to throw her off with his hips alone. The woman merely laughed, leaving his pants around his knees as she cradled his hips with her legs bent, slowly sinking down as he growled defiantly, practically shaking in unrelieved tension.

Helpless to fight back, as she impaled herself upon him. “Yes. I think Dragonsreach will do quite well, don’t you? Don’t worry.”

He felt tears leak from his eyes as he turned away, ashamed of himself as she raised and lowered herself atop him. Riding him for all he was worth, as he desperately strained away. Trying to resist, to fight back in the only way he could. By not participating. *Get off, get off get OFF-*

“...oh Lars. There will always be a Battle-Born on the throne of Whiterun. That I can promise you. I timed my monthlies, just for this moment. What do you think?” Her hips began to pick up the pace, making him whine in frustration; tossing his head back and forth in denial.

Through the heady fog of desire, a thought coalesced in his mind that he held tight to. *Perhaps if he didn’t... wouldn’t - she would kill him. Rob her of her sick fuckery, this sham of a mating by not playing along.*

“I think two or three times should do the trick. Relax, Lars. Your first time should be enjoyable. I’ll do all the work.”

He screamed in anguish, as with a blinding wave of heat that nearly scalded him with hatred, he came inside of her.

*******

“Stop! Oh gods and divines, stop please stop! *Mother !”*

It didn’t matter how much he cried out.
It occurred to Lars that the woman rather liked it when he sobbed and screamed, nearly apoplectic with fury as she reduced him...again and again down to a puling mass of want and quivering need.

Disgust; deep dark and filthy, as Sofia worked him with hands and tongue and cunt. Whispering mad things, crazy plans giggled in that reedy soft voice.

How Lars hated her.

Floor boards creaked above, as strangers milled about in the inn. Utterly oblivious of what transpired directly below in the dark. Couldn’t they hear? Didn’t they care that Lars was fucking DYING with every caress; every stroke of her hated hand upon him?

In hopeless shock, Lars realized hours later that it was likely the guests upstairs believed nothing was wrong. An obnoxiously loud couple celebrating their first night alone. Nothing strange about that.

Sofia had worn herself out after the third bout of sex. She drooped at his side, her fingers still touching the thrice-cursed blade she had laughingly taunted him with, even as she slid on top of him. Once, as he had bucked beneath her; nearly gone in the tight pressure of her squeezing atop of him she had hit him. Hit his temple with the pommel end of the blade. That, strangely enough, had caused him a nearly orgasmic rush before he blacked out.

He was awake now. Though, Lars thought as he took inventory of all his aches and pains, he wished he wasn’t.

Everything hurt. His head. His ribs. His cock felt nearly skinned raw, thighs chafed from her relentless pursuit of his seed. Again and again she had struggled to arouse him, slapping him in a fit of anger when he had spit a glob of blood upon that crazy bitch’s face.

How long she would sleep, he didn’t know. Lars figured she would make good on her promise, then. To gut him, through some orifice. Draining his blood to appear as a natural death; though how she would manage that, he almost wished to know. Aventus was no fool, and neither were the rest of his people. Her bony ass would never sit on the throne of Whiterun. Not if he could help it.

Blinking back tears yet again, he felt his heart shrivel up inside his chest. And for what? He scolded himself, shifting ever so slightly away from the woman as she breathed open mouthed. Dead to the world.

It wasn’t as though he had a chance in Oblivion of freeing himself. The sword angle was all wrong for cutting the ropes that bound his ankles. Perhaps he could push it further away from her with his hips…

No. Any movement he made in that direction would wake the woman. He had no desire to be at Sofia’s mercy. The woman was inexhaustible.

Resting his head back upon the bedding, Lars grimly realized that in some twisted way, he was happy he wouldn’t be surviving this shit. How, by Merciful Mara, would he ever be able to have sex (he couldn’t even link the words ‘make’ and ‘love’ together in his mind, they kept bouncing apart) again without the ever-present panic.
Fear that quickened his breathing even now at the thought of swelling, mindless pleasure mingled with pain; so much stronger than he had imagined it would be.

And less, he reminded himself with a muffled groan. *Much, much less than he had hoped.*

He never wanted to have sex again.

Feeling his eyes drift shut, Lars abandoned his planning and schemes to the forgetful amnesia of sleep.

***********

An incensed cry of pain awakened Lars from a dark, dreamless hole.

Feeling the bed bounce, he could see nothing. The candles had burned out long ago. “-bitch. Imperial bitch dog I will *end you!* I’ll cut you, end you! *Hold still!*”

A familiar voice spoke. Lars thought he was probably dreaming, because Aventus was way back in Whiterun. Dealing with the remnants of his wedding. “I’m blocking the stairs. She’s all yours.”

A deafening roar sounded, making him wince as the cacophony of noise multiplied. Growls, shrieks and sounds of fighting continued, as footsteps practically thundered across the floorboards. Sudden silence, as a wet snap heralded the end of whatever had just happened.

Sounds of chewing. Wet, pulpy and repulsive. “*Enough, Lucia.* She’s dead. Let her be...we have to help him, now.”

Shutting his eyes tightly at the abrupt presence of light shining into his eyes, Lars hissed. “Aventus? Why does it smell like wet dog in here?”

A pathetic whine was his only response, as a dagger began to saw through his bonds and he cried out, feeling blood rush into deadened skin.

“Sorry, Lars. This is going to hurt. I’m going to put you out, now.”

Opening his mouth to protest, Lars felt something trickle down the back of his throat. Swallowing, for he had been so thirsty laying here this whole night, he managed to crane his neck, to see…

Dead eyes. Hazy blue grey that were fogging over, as something black dripped from Sofia’s mouth. Unable to tear his gaze away, Lars fell back into a darkness he gladly welcomed.

Chapter End Notes
This is an actual excerpt from the game that planted an idea.

Admonition Against Ebony

To anyone reading this: BEWARE THIS BLADE
It is hoped that the only people having access to this room should be the Jarl of Whiterun and his trusted wizard. If anyone else is reading this, please understand the magnitude of your folly, turn around, and never even speak of this room or this blade to anyone.

It has corrupted and perverted the desires of great men and women. Yet its power is without equal -- to kill while your victim smiles at you. Only a daedra most foul could have concocted such a malevolent and twisted weapon. But it appears that all who wield it end up with the crazed eyes of those wild men who roam the hills chattering with rabbits.

It is not to be trifled with. Not even the hottest fires of the Skyforge could melt it; indeed the coals themselves seemed to cool when it was placed within. We cannot destroy it, and we would not have it fall into the hands of our enemies. So we keep it, hidden, dark and deep within Dragonsreach, never to be used.

Woe be to any who choose to take it.
Honestly, I'm not sure what happened. These two stole my time and attention, and what was supposed to be one chapter became a four part short story.

Soundtrack: "Streets of Whiterun" cover by Andy McKee, original composition by Jeremy Soule for Skyrim

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5SkLq1fP1s&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&index=87

“The healing process is almost like a spiral, Lars.”

“Survivors go through the stages once...sometimes many times. Up or down, you’ll always be moving. Whether it’s a good change or a bad one is up to you.”

“You can move up the spiral by accepting the truth of what happened to you. Accept it. Feel it. Acknowledge that something awful happened that you had no control over. None. It fucking sucks, right? Believe me, I know.”

“Oh well. It’s over and done with now, you think. Time to move on.”

“But it’s never as simple as that, is it? Our bodies - our minds remember. They remember pain and fear. We flinch at anything that even remotely resembles our pain. And so we lash out.”

“We scream and we fight and we rage. Why the hell should I care, you think? Because nothing feels permanent anymore. You’re so afraid, and it just feeds that rage until it spills into everything you do. You can’t escape it.”

“And that’s okay. It’s good that you’re so angry, because it was a terrible thing that happened. I’d be upset if you weren’t angry. Of course, it’s better to find some constructive way to expend all that power- the determination to rise beyond your pain. Some people never manage to rise beyond the vengeful persecution of what hurt them in the first place. To me, that’s a real tragedy. I can think of a few examples.”

“But Lars...if you can manage that, you can do anything. Eventually as time goes on, and you keep taking care of yourself, it will get better. You’ll start to feel more, as the numbness you didn’t know had taken over wears away. Ouch. Painful, but it has to happen. It must, because you were shattered, and those pieces have slowly started to merge once more. It’s not an easy process.”
“You’ll feel, and you’ll ascend up the stages of the spiral. Hopefully to the point where the memory of what hurt so much is just a distant dream. A memory that holds no more pain. Only an acknowledgment that it happened. And that you got through it.”

Placing her hands together, Sigrid smiled and gave Lars a quirky nod. “Namaste. Don’t ask me why I say that- it just makes me feel better, after all that touchy-feely crap. Now, tell me...how do you feel?”

Sitting cross legged with the Dragonborn at the edge of High Hrothgar’s courtyard... on top of the world, gods there is so much of it... Lars Battle-Born put some serious thought into the answer to her question.

*************

The beginning had been almost unbearable.

After his friends had brought him home to Whiterun, he hid alone in his rooms for about a week. It wasn’t because his body needed time to heal, for he had been spoon fed healing potions and dragged to the shrine of Talos almost immediately upon entering the gates of his hated, beloved home.

No. Lars simply didn’t feel like talking. Or eating. Or doing anything that resembled social interaction. He lay upon his bed, staring at the vaulted ceiling of his rooms, refusing to touch himself even to bathe. Hating himself.

“...Intervention! Up up up, boyo!”

“I hate to say this Lars, but I will. I need your help. Unless you want to crown me Jarl, get up!”

Lucia and Aventus had prodded, begged and finally pushed him out of his chambers. Drawn him a bath, which he had stepped into fully clothed. The woman that was somehow really a mythical werewolf practically sat on him (which made him hyperventilate, until Aventus pushed her off and scolded her) to make him eat. One bite at a time, the mashed gruel and berries, followed by milk. Infant food, he thought remotely. Like he had regressed to a second childhood.

“Do you know what it’s like to wake up in the morning and...and despise every inch of yourself?” Lars casually asked later, as Aventus tried and failed to comb through the gnarled mass of his hair. Grimacing as his scalp felt trapped, hidden by the matted mass, he reached for the knife lying nearby on the dresser, to cut the damn stuff off. *One less thing to remind him of being held down.*

Lucia pushed it away with a single finger. “Uhhh...no Lars. No. Blades are dangerous for you right now.”

Slumping as Aventus tried to untangle the comb, Lars sighed. “So are my thoughts.”
“And yours are significantly dulled if you believe self harm is the best option right now, my friend.”

Lucia lifted the shears from the vanity table and snipped them experimentally. “You know Aventus, after checking out just how much of that mop is knotted, I’m going to go with Lars on this one. I’ll chop it off, if you’re sure.”

“Do it.” A flutter of fear tightened his shoulders as he felt fingers ruffle through his hair. “Just...stand in front of me please.”

She looked at him, nostrils flaring. Mouth working against itself as she seemed to struggle for words.

“What?”

Closing her eyes, she pasted on a bright smile. “Not a problem. I have...trouble controlling my temper sometimes. But I’m not upset with you. Lean over so I can cut your hair.”

In the ensuing days, Lars would be surprised by the shaved face that greeted him in the mirror. Grave eyes, head somehow lighter without the length of hair he had worn for years down to his back. It was now tightly cropped to his skull, throwing the severity of his features into relief.

Tracing his own lips, he tried not to shudder in revulsion. He still couldn’t touch himself - not even his face, without remembering that night in barbed, puncturing stabs. More often than not, he still woke up sweating. He slept without blankets most nights, since he could not bear to feel weight of any kind smother him as he lay down.

Time passed.

Slowly picking up the motions, he dragged through sessions in court. Lars sat numbly through the harvest festival, unsmiling and uncaring as he felt the almost tidal pull of happy people drinking, singing and dancing flow around him. As though he were a rock in the current.

Months after his return, he had been surprised out of blankly staring at his desk by Lucia, who hoisted up a pair of travel packs. Raising her mouth in a smile, those brown eyes lined in woad remained serious. “Up for a little jaunt, Battle-Born? Where do you feel like wandering? Because if I stay here another minute, I think my ass is going to be permanently glued to the chair.”

That started a weekly tradition that he soon grew to look forward to. Probably the first real positive emotion that had emerged, reluctant and fragile, from the shattered wreck of his devastating marriage.

At first, Lars easily tired of walking. He couldn’t do more than a few hours of hiking up and down the tundra plains, unused as he was to walking long stretches. Lucia scrambled up rock faces that were nearly vertical, causing Lars to call out to her, as she would pop out from the sheer overhangs with a smile and a wave.

As the weeks became months and the snow fell heavily upon the plains, they went further afield. His legs became stronger, more hardy. The few hours of wandering around the vastness that surrounded Whiterun became half days. The first night they spent, out in the open near a mammoth camp, Lars had suffered something Sigrid - the Dragonborn, his erstwhile counselor- had termed a panic attack.
Gripping in the claws of a nightmare formed of memory, Lars had thrown off his sleeping furs and run straight into the mammoth herd.

How he had avoided being trampled, he could never recall. Wearing nothing but his pants, he had run in a panic - weaving through the giant hairy legs of the great beasts, until Lucia slammed into him. Knocking Lars out of the way of a giant’s club that swung in a great arc, nearly smashing his head to a pulp.

“Lars. Lars snap out of it! Come on, we’ve got to move! The giants look pissed!”

Still shaking with sick adrenaline, he had marched in double time back to Whiterun the next day, followed by a silently concerned Lucia. “It’s totally normal, sweetie.” Sigrid had told him. “Keep going out. But I’d recommend avoiding caves or forts, if feeling trapped makes it worse.”

Open spaces were better. The wide freedom of the skies was reassuring, and as the winter drew on he found himself actually smiling at times. When the night sky shone like a mass of diamonds thrown upon black velvet, perfect and pure; his footsteps along with Lucia’s crunching into the snow the only sound...he felt almost content. At peace with his world.

Once, they had come across a bandit camp. Unsure of what to do...whether they should retreat, or advance, Lars had puttered indecisively until Lucia strode up next to him and pulled his sword from its sheath. Taking his wrist firmly in hers (he nearly pulled away, the feeling of touch, any touch nearly burned) she placed his weapon in his hands. The werewolf looked grim. “Time to do some good, Battle-Born. These scum kill and loot your Hold, stealing from farms that can’t afford to lose their winter supplies. All because they’re too fucking lazy to shift their stumps.”

He watched as she readied her shield, banging the haft of her sword against it repeatedly. A bandit popped up from the barricade, yelling to its companions. “Let’s end them.”

Hesitant at first, as the first of the half-starved marauders came shrieking towards them, he began cutting them down by her side. Slashing, left and right to the heavy thuds of her shield as Lars kept the woman to his side as he killed, always aware of where she was. Lucia fought like a berserker, laughing wildly as she gutted and sliced. A kind of fierce joy he marveled at finding in such a depressing place as a bandit camp, strewn with trash and the rotting bodies of victims. As though she was the original bearer of his surname. No, don’t think like that. Even if you are the most fuckwitted coward what calls himself a Nord.

Once he found himself laughing out loud as she used her shield to block; charging three bandits lined up on the parapet and bowling them over with a yell, laying about with her sword as the ones who hadn’t fallen off scrambled away, tripping in the snow. “Victory or Sovngarde, you miserable twat-licking cock sniffers! Come back here! My blade is thirsty!!”

When they cleared the mine where the thieving scum had made their lair, he saw red as one of the bandits - a woman, with blonde dreadlocks and fury in her greyed blue eyes - came at him, axe raised. “Time to die, hero!”

No. Not again. “You first!”

He came back to himself later, as Lars realized he had been methodically stabbing the squishing remains of the bandit’s face and chest, blood splattering so thickly he could taste it. It wasn’t her. Couldn’t be. His wife had been dead for months.
Swinging her sword, allowing a clump of gore to slide off, Lucia knelt down next to him. Smiling in that infuriating way, she dipped her fingers into the cavern of the bandit’s ribcage and reached out slowly, as he tried very hard not to shift away, to streak blood upon his face. His breathing picked up, going ragged almost against his will.

Lucia’s fingers lingered for a moment, brushing his eyebrow as they sat there in the dim lair, just looking at one another. “There. Now you’ve got your warpaint back on. Good job. Think you fairly made her into paste by now.”

Standing, she didn’t meet his eyes as she briskly stood and picked up several grotty bags of septims strewn over the shelves and chest. “Yay us. Let’s go get drunk.”

**********

“Where are we going today?”

Standing with their travel packs all packed and ready, Lars waited for Lucia to respond.

The Imperial Companion was sprawled out upon a fur rug in front of Jorrvaskr’s main firepit, seemingly deep in thought. She wore no armor today. Just a woolen tunic that reached her knees, leather boots over linen leggings. In her hands rested a book, her legs scissoring in the air as she licked her thumb and turned a page.

Laughter, accompanied by squealing, became louder as children raced along the length of the hall. Dodging Thadrig as he barreled past in pursuit of Gydda, Lars looked around.

Midwinter Festival had come and gone, and the leftovers of the feast were still being served...all the way into the month of Morning Star. Jorrvaskr was filled with the bulk of bodies; the smell of sweat, smoke and ale still strong amidst the cleaner aroma of pine bough wreaths and snowberries. In the far end of the hall, he could see the Harbinger locked in a discussion with others of the Circle. Other warriors walked along, laughing as Thadrig caught Gydda and began struggling to pry away the wooden sword she held tightly away from him.

It was a loud, crowded domestic mess. *What is she doing in here? Lucia hates noise and smells.*

Praying Sigrid wouldn’t see him before he could take off, he made his voice a loud whisper that carried. “Lucia?”

“Hey, Lars.” Marking her book with a ribbon, Lucia rolled to her side. Patted the furs next to her. “C’mere. Not sure I feel like going out today.”

Still watching warily for for the Harbinger (who guilted him into meetings twice monthly, always wanting to talk about *feelings* and shit) Lars rested the packs against the benches near the wall and walked over. “Right. Who are you, and what have you done with my friend. You *never* want to stay indoors. We mere mortals reek, remember?”

“Ha, ha. Shut up and sit down.”

Kneeling down, Lars tried to read the title of her book. “What’s that?”
“Nothing!” Seeing his eyebrows raise incredulously as she scoffed, Lucia rolled onto her back. Throwing her arm over her eyes, she extended the arm holding the volume out to him, waving it in the air. “Fine. Go ahead. Behold my shame.”

Taking it from her hand, Lars read the embossed script with growing amusement. “The Tale of Fjori and Holgeir. Wow. Didn’t know your tastes ran to sappy sob stories, Lucia.”

“They don’t! I mean...it’s just—”

Sinking down to lay flat on his stomach, he chuckled as he flipped to the spot she had marked for later. “Hmm…’None remember what they fought over, for their love to come was so great, it overshadowed all rivalries or disputes.’ Oh my.”

“Give me that!”

Batting her arms away, as she tried to take the book from him, Lars continued reading in a honeyed voice. Trying not to laugh, as she strained to reach beneath his arms, flailing. “...’They fought to a standstill, as their followers looked on - till her sword broke his axe and his shield dulled her blade’...ack, Lucia, don’t roll me into the coals... ‘and all could see that they were equals!’”

Snickering, he let her take the book from him, dodging a thumping blow as he scooted back from the heated edges of the hearth. Both of them were now sprawled upon the fur, and he couldn’t help the smile curling up the edges of his lips as he noted just how red she was, beneath her olive tan skin.

“So. You’d rather stay here. In a place I’ve heard you more than once complain of smelling like mansweat and shit. Just to read some overblown tragic romance.”

She grimaced, placing the book to the side. “I’m a girl, Lars. I know you forget that sometimes, since I beat you so regularly in sparring practice. And everything else.”

He watched her face, sharp and colored with indignation, as it took on a warm glow from the flames. The shaved sides of her head had grown out in the past few months, giving her a nearly fuzzed blonde halo where the thick gold of her hair did not fall over her scalp. “I don’t forget. You’d better bite down on that pride, by the way...I’ve been taking lessons.”

Peering at his smug face, Lucia narrowed her eyes. “From who? Aventus?”

He smirked, feeling a tingle of...something as her legs brushed against his. “Athis.”

“... Damn that fetcher.”

As Lucia huffed, so easily angered, he pushed himself closer. Aligning his shoulders and hips with hers, feeling her warmth through the thick wool of her clothing. “There is something I do well that you can’t hope to best me at.”

She looked startled, licking her lips as her wide brown eyes lowered to take in the proximity of him. “Whatever, Battle-Born. You wish. I’ll pound you soundly at that, too.”

Leaning over, their faces nearly touching as Lucia stopped breathing altogether...Lars allowed himself a smile before he rolled backwards. Steamrolling her with his taller, heavier form, as she pushed at his back with her fists, punching to no effect.

“Mammoth roll!”

“Ugh! Get off, you big bastard! Gods you weigh a ton!”
Laughing, he turned on top of her, catching her wrist in his hands as she began slapping his face. “Don’t be a sore loser. Now yield to your Jarl, Companion.”

“No way!” Dodging her knee as she tried to topple him over, he took her other wrist in his hand. Pushing her arms back behind her head, Lars placed all his weight in his arms, effectively pinning her down beneath him.

Her breasts heaved beneath his bulk. “Dirty tactics, my lord. You’re going to regret this. I’m going to take you to Eastmarch and fucking drown you in the geyser pools.”

A warm heat suffused his chest as he felt her tremble. Lacing his fingers in hers, he reminded himself that this was just another fight. Another battle, to be fought and won. Nothing to be afraid of. He didn’t fear her. “You’re assuming I even want to travel that far. I’ve heard the pools stink too. Like sulphur.”

“I’d rather smell that than your socks, Battle-Born.” Her hips made the smallest of movements, her face pinching as he observed her. Intensely focused on every reaction, every flickering change as he allowed his legs to tangle in hers. Dropping his forehead upon hers, he took a shuddering breath. Nothing to fear. He made a sound, as her tongue swiped his lips, licking her own as he groaned in response.

Her mouth moved against his, her breath warm and smelling of snowberry jam. “Lars …”

“…Lars and Luc-ia, lying on a fur! She kissed him and made-him-purr!”

Someone kicked Lars gently on his side, foot digging in until he gritted his teeth and rolled backwards upon the floor.

Sigrid, Vilkas and their children stood right next to the two of them, shit-eating grins appearing upon their faces, as the Master at Arms kicked Lucia next. “This is not the time or place for this, you two. Think of the children.”

“First comes loo-ove, then comes marriage!” All his breath whooshed from him, as Svari sat upon his stomach, bouncing merrily as she sang. “Then comes the baby in the baby cabbage!”

“It’s ‘carriage’, Svari. Like a cradle. Jarl Battle-Born, don’t you have somewhere you need to be?” Lifting her daughter up from bludgeoning his intestines, the Dragonborn fixed him with a bemused look. Nearby, he noted that Lucia had stood, and was now whispering heatedly with Vilkas.

“Shit.” He had completely forgotten. There was a council meeting at noon to discuss the new trade laws Cyrodiil was currently trying to redraw. “I thought today was Fredas.”

“Hmm. Sorry, but no.” Her amber-green eyes crinkled as she smiled at him once more. “Don’t worry about our session today, Lars. Though I want to ask you to accompany me somewhere, when First Seed comes along and thaws us all out.”

“Sure.” Glancing back at Lucia as he prepared to leave, he felt heat in the pit of his stomach as he realized she was staring at him with a look of deeply conflicted hunger.

Fighting off the tremors of fear, always waiting in the shadows to strike as he lowered his guard, Lars forced himself to relax. “Later? I think my schedule frees up in a couple of weeks, Companion. You can show me those smelly mudpots in the Rift you love jawing off about.”
Looking like she had been poleaxed, Lucia nodded slowly. “I’ll...get our things ready. Let me know when.” Behind her, Vilkas gave him a leering grin and a rude gesture.

*Shit. They saw everything. Shit shit shit.* “Sounds good.”

Turning on his heel, Lars fled the hall before his face could become any more scarlet with embarrassment.

**********

The journey up the seven thousand steps to High Hrothgar had been brutal.

And indescribably beautiful, the Jarl of Whiterun thought, as he debated on what exactly to say. Everything seemed so distant, spread out like an illustrated map far below the mountain. The Throat of the World rose behind them, its white peak a pinpoint brightness against the clear blue skies.

Once, he had even seen a dragon wheeling around the summit. He had asked Sigrid, over the near silent supper they shared with the Greybeards, if he had seen what his mind had somehow tricked him into viewing. Not believing at first that he was really there. In High Hrothgar, the roof of the world. She had replied in the affirmative, only solidifying his belief that he had strayed somehow into a bard’s tale. *Sky above, voice within.* It was a surreal experience.

“To be honest, I’m not sure how I feel.” He mused, hearing the Dragonborn sigh as they both stood, stretching from the long meditation they had just undergone. “I’m ready to move on. And I’m not, all at the same time. Does that make any sense?”

“Yes. You should take your time. Don’t push into anything before you are ready.” Walking to the edge of the cliff, he took in a deep breath of the thin, cold air. Below in the bowl of the valley lay Whiterun and the tiny tower that was somehow Dragonsreach. Spring had thawed the roads and mountain passes just enough that their passage to the mountainous retreat had been possible. Lars wasn’t troubled by the thought of traversing the same, treacherous path once more. Every switchback and clearing, as they shouldered their knapsacks along he had been treated the most spectacular views. Making it all worth it, in the end.

Even if it meant returning to the lengthy debates of court life. The neverending paperwork, complaining supplicants and rigid ceremony. “Are you talking about fully resuming my duties as Jarl, or something else?”

Sigrid grinned, grey streaked hair flying in the wind. “What did you think I was talking about?”

Feeling cheated by the turn in questioning, Lars shook his head. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be fully ready for that.”

“Then let her go. Tell her to shove off, so she doesn’t waste the rest of her life pining for you.”

He looked away from the small ring of life that was Whiterun. “She’s my best friend.”

“-who is stupidly in love with you, Lars. I know it has been awful for you, sweetheart. But trust me - it’s been tough for her as well.” Standing beside him, he closed his eyes as her warm hand patted his
“Spring brings new life everywhere. Open your heart, Lars, and don’t be afraid.”

Pulling out the amulet of Mara he always kept with him in his pocket, Lars looked at Sigrid, worry etching his features. “My last marriage didn’t fare too well, Harbinger. I confess...I’m fucking terrified of changing what we...who we are, to one another.”

“It’s comfortable, now. We can tease each other without it meaning anything. Go on trips without any awkwardness. No expectations. And I don’t know if I want to ruin it with...with the possibility of shattering it all to Oblivion.”

Chucking him underneath the chin, Sigrid smiled fondly. “Buck up, kid. Faint heart never won fair maiden. You’re braver than you think. I say, go for it.”

Used as he was to the Dragonborn’s pointed comments by now, Lars still felt himself flush up to his scalp as Sigrid added, “And if you want any pointers or helps, I’ve got my sex talk dusted off and all lined up for you. I had boys on the cusp of teenagehood, once. Trust me - you’ve got questions? I’ve got answers.”

**********

It wasn’t until Second Seed that Lucia arrived back in Whiterun from wherever she had taken off to.

He had spied her trudging home to Jorrvaskr as he returned from his evening ride. Lucia, Vilkas and Farkas had left sometime during his journey up the seven thousand steps, leaving an emptiness. Thank the gods, he thought in relief as he watched her and the other Companions enter the ancient hall. Without her loud merriment, his days had stretched into a monotonous blur.

Where Lucia had sat, bobbing her foot impatiently as she waited for him to finish writing... there was only a chair. Silence where she had filled the air with laughter and jests, making Dragonsreach seem more like a tomb than a throne room. As he finished signing deeds of property that had been sold in the Hold, Lars reflected that he even missed the way she insulted him as he would write; all scrunched over and focused. “Have you laid that egg yet, Battle-Born? Because something else might come out, if you catch my meaning. Lighten up, boyo!”

Lars found himself sitting with Mila and Aventus more often than not during the weekend, working his way through various vintages of wines and meads as they spent nights at Jorrvaskr. Occasionally they would visit the Bannered Mare or the Drunken Huntsman. Unused to spending his time outside of Dragonsreach, Lars discovered a wealth of information about the people of his Hold. Who was discontented with the yield of their farmland. Which families were currently feuding and why; the latest news from down south.

People were people, wherever they lived or came from. Dunmer, Nord or Argonian. Everyone wanted somewhere to belong. Someone to love, and be loved in return.
He learned to sing along with the crowd as the bards played the popular songs of the day. Aventus often sat in the corner of the room where he could ‘keep an eye on the exits’, his arms wrapped around Mila as she dozed, or read one of those thick alchemy volumes the lass insisted on lugging everywhere. Lars would stare unashamedly at the couple, observing how even the most casual touches were given and received without fuss or fanfare.

There was something wrong, he thought, deep in his cups one night. Something wrong with envying one’s friend for such simple comforts. Jealousy was a bitter solace, as spring pressed on. Grass grew thick and high upon the plains, and the city hummed in the seasonal rush of tilling the earth, planting crops and rearing the young animals born with the turning year. Yet with all this change, he felt stifled.

Restless at the silence, where there should have been sound.

*********

It was one such night that Lucia stole into the Drunken Huntsman.

“Hey there! It’s been awhile.” Mila greeted the Companion as she slid down the bench next to Lars. Aventus curtly nodded his head in welcome, receiving a sniff in return. Whatever had transpired on their trip to Heljarchen, neither friend had deemed worthy to enlighten him. But since it was such fun to watch their stilted interactions, the Jarl thought amusedly, he would wait to ask for that particular story.

Hiding a smile behind his mead, Lars watched patiently as Lucia chatted with Mila about the warming weather. The latest gossip. Who had birthed new children, and where bandits had settled, needing to be cleared out yet again like last year’s leafpile. Conspicuously keeping her eyes off of him, as her cheeks colored beneath his steady gaze.

Finally, the Companion ran out of small talk. He rolled his eyes as Aventus gave him a knowing leer. “Lars, can I talk to you? In private?”

Kicking Aventus under the table, as he made a crude gesture that dropped Mila’s mouth open in chagrin, Lars nodded and stood; following Lucia out of the inn into the night.

They walked along the path towards Dragonsreach, meandering in tranquil companionship as he pointed out subtle changes in Whiterun. Where Amren had dug a new well. The fence that had to be repaired after the Grey-Mane’s cattle got loose. Even brushing the flowering heads of the plants blooming in Danica’s gardens.

Reaching the stairs to the keep, Lucia turned to him suddenly. “Um. This probably is good enough. Unless you think the guards can overhear us?”

Lars smiled. “I could just send them away.”

Scuffing her boots against the stone, Lucia huffed. “Then they’d know there was something worth eavesdropping about, Lars. Ysmir’s beard, you’re horrid at this privacy thing. Didn’t you ever have
someplace you could escape to as a child? Somewhere no one could find you when you didn’t want to be found?”

The wind picked up as he stood, thinking about it. The night smelled like upturned earth and moved hay. “Actually, yes.”

Grabbing her hand, she stiffened as he deliberately entwined his fingers with hers, giving her arm a small pull. “Come on.”

Entering Dragonsreach, Lars led Lucia up one of the upper staircases ending in a balcony, leading her to a small window. “Climb through here. Mind your head.” She ducked through, her leathers brushing against him as he followed closely behind. “Wait. Are we going outside again?”

“Shh. We’re not there yet.”

They followed along the small pathway bordered by stone crenellations, Lars taking the lead as he gestured for them to climb. Hand over hand, his feet finding familiar footholds he remembered being much larger as a boy...they pulled themselves over the edge of a round tower.

Flattened and dusty with disuse, they had roughly a man’s length of space to move around. “You must have been a child when you used this as a getaway. It is really small.”

Lars touched an ancient birds nest, which crumbled beneath his fingertips. “I used to come up here to escape from Braith. To hunt for bird’s eggs, though I never could bring myself to take them out of their nests.”

Lucia sat with a heavy sigh, dusting off her hands as Lars reclined next to her on his back. “It’s got a great view of the sky, though. Whatever happened to Braith? I never heard.”

Biting the inside of his cheek, Lars forced himself to think back to his childhood nemesis. “Left to be a sellsword around the same time you did. Ended up marrying the leader of her band. They live in the Reach somewhere, tending a farm. We still see them sometimes, when she comes with her children to visit Amren. Snotfaced brats, just like their mother.”

Lucia giggled quietly. He savored the sound, looking up at her profile rimmed as it was by the stars. Insects chirped in the distance, the wind the only sound as he wriggled against the rock to get more comfortable. It truly was a small space. He had just enough room to lie down, with his feet nearly hanging off the short border of stone, with Lucia wedged in closely where she sat. Her hips were firm against his chest.

Struggling with himself over the desire to rest his hand upon her back, Lars was about to speak when she beat him to the punch. “So, I took a trip. To Orphan Rock, where I killed some hagravens with the other Companions, Farkas and Vilkas.”

“Kind of.” Turning carefully, Lucia faced him. What he could see of her face looked thoughtful. “I cured myself of the beastblood, Lars. Went up north to the Tomb of Ysgramor, to throw the witch’s head upon the Flame of the Harbinger.”

Lifting his head up to better examine that strange expression, Lars lifted himself up on his elbows. “Really? Lucia, I thought you loved being a werewolf. What..” he cleared his throat, as she scooted closer, her furs tickling his arm. “What made you change your mind?”
In the moonlight, he could see the whiteness of her teeth as she smiled, almost sadly. “You, of course.”

Leaning over, her form blotted out his view of the stars as he remained frozen. Holding himself absolutely still, to better hear what she would say. “The blood...it was what I wanted, once. To be fierce and free, beholden to no man. Strong and wild, like the others in my pack who took me in. The family I never had, kind of like the Companions.”

“But, being moon called - that’s not what I want anymore.”

Sitting up, his elbows nearly knocked her over as they both readjusted their positions. “Shit, sorry. Um...” What he wouldn’t do for a candle. A torch. Something, just to see her face.

“What he wouldn’t do for a candle. A torch. Something, just to see her face. “Lucia. What do you want...from me, I mean? And no joking.”

“No jokes? That takes away more than half of what I was going to say,” she laughed shakily. “Damn it, this is harder than I thought. Lars...” her hands came up to touch his face.

He felt himself go rigid, as her rough chapped fingers traced the shadow of beard on his cheeks. “Lars, I really...I love you. I respect you, and - and your patience. Your goodness. If I can be like that, even just a bit, then I would be a better person. Um.”

“Yeah. So, that’s what’s kept me busy these last few months. Please say something, before I go mad. Lars?”

Taking a deep inhalation, he forced himself to continue breathing, as her hands cupped his face between them. “Lucia. I’ve always loved and wanted you. I still do. I just...” his voice cracked slightly, as he brought one of his hands up to touch hers. “...don’t know how. How to move beyond to - to what I think we both want. Right?

Her words came simply. “I want.”

Unable to leave it there, Lars pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed it. “Show me.”

Not like last time. You dolt. Stop being afraid, this is nothing like last time... he chanted in his head as she gently pushed him down against the stone floor of the tower. Pressed her hands against his chest, searching for the fastening to his tunic.

Panic welled up from deep inside him, nearly causing his heart to beat out of his chest. “I can’t. I can’t do it, I’m sorry...I can’t...”

Leaning back, Lucia was quiet as he struggled to regain control. To convince himself that he was safe; this was fine, idiot you are ruining this for yourself, god damn it pull yourself together....

“I should have realized - Lars, wait just a minute.”

Lying there in an agony of shame, he did as she asked. Heard the sounds of furs and leathers rustling, as she unstrapped pieces of her armor. Taking off even her undershirt to be tossed in what space remained, until she rose bare and beautiful above him.

-and surprising him once more, as she fluidly pulled him on top of her. Shifting, until her nakedness was beneath him.

He had no idea where to put his hands. Still fully dressed, Lars tried very hard to not stare overmuch at her breasts, tanned and gloriously full. At the tight curve of her waist that flared into hips he could feel pressing into him.
“I’m not sure this is helping.”

“Well, not with your clothes still on.” Her laughter warmed him, even as he struggled to conquer the fear. Fear that he was doing it all wrong, even now. That she would change her mind, leave him alone on top of this tower, and -

Oh, fuck. Her hands dug into the muscles of his lower back. She wasn’t doing anything, really, that they hadn’t already at some other time, he thought wildly as he struggled not to crush her. He had massaged her aches and pains in turn, from travelling with heavy packs over long distances. How this was different, he couldn’t explain. Fingers dragging, her nails scratched his back as she brought her hands further up...pulling over the breadth of his shoulders until they grasped his face once more.

“Lars. You’re in control. I’m the one on the bottom. Tell me what you want. Or just do it.”

Gasping at her words, Lars fought himself and won. Sitting up, he brought his knees closer together, restraining the intractable, wonderful woman he loved. Not giving an inch, as her breathing became uneven. Pulling his shirt over his head, he nearly fell off the tower in his rush to rid himself of pants, as she laughed, grabbing his hips.

“Oh gods, hahah...please don’t fall off this tower. Fuck, this is awkward.”

Digging into his pockets, Lars threw the pants to wherever his shirt had vanished. The night was warm enough that being naked barely raised the hairs on his skin. It felt...strange. But if she could bear it, then he could as well.

Stretching out over her once more, he wrapped something around her wrists. She picked at the chain, lifting what he had given her up to her eye level. Squinting at it in the dark.

“Lars. This is an amulet of Mara.”

Lowering himself onto her, Lars rested his head in the crook of her neck, breathing deeply. “No, it’s your amulet of Mara. If you’ll have me.”

He could feel her heart, beating like the flutter of a bird, fast against his bare chest. She breathed out a sob. “Yes, of course you...impossible...come here!”

Feeling fairly stunned, Lars felt her hands scrabble for his face as she lowered his lips to hers. Their teeth clacked together as he fiercely responded; grabbing whatever he could reach of her to him as their mouths moved in sync. She said yes.

It felt as though they were melting; her mouth rising up to meet him again and again, as the aching anticipation grew stronger. More insistent, as he trailed kisses down her chin...laving her throat with his tongue as she held him tight. Like he would fly away if she let go.

Choking as her legs wrapped around his hips, Lars barely breathed. Struggling not to push against her, to take what was offered without being absolutely sure. “Lucia.”

“All yours. See?” Leaning back slightly, he saw that she had looped the amulet of Mara around her neck. Her face in the dark was tense with want. “Please, please just do it, Lars, I’ve been waiting an age, just take me already , dammit!”
He coughed a laugh. “I thought women needed more...preparation. Touching. What-”

“Not this woman. Put your hand down there. Feel that? Yes.”

-And as he bit his lip, sliding inside of her plush heat that felt like nothing else, because it was Lucia, he could hear her laugh. Ever so slightly, happily, as he rubbed his thumb over the tip of her breast. “Go slow, or don’t. I’m completely at your mercy, Lars, so-”

Grabbing her neck, Lars held her down and kissed her furiously as he lifted himself completely out, then thrust fully in, squeezing her hip as she panted in pleasure. “Just like that, fuck Lars, that feels so fucking good, please don’t stop!”

He wasn’t sure he would be able to, even if he tried. It was as though his mind had been taken elsewhere, sublimated beneath the command she had given him; to take her. Pumping his hips against the delicious pressure of her, the closeness of their bodies joined...he moaned helplessly as her heels dug into his back. Urging him on, as he wound that golden hair around his fist and pulled. Pulled her even closer, her face pressed against his as it all went white-edged and trembling.

His arms wouldn’t support him anymore. Going limp, he sighed as she made a noise.


“Did you…?” Holding himself up was difficult, with the rubbery, unresponsive bliss his muscles had reverted to. But he managed. “Lucia, did that feel good to you, too?”

Her white smile shone brightly in the dark. She touched his face. “It felt...well. Really good, not going to lie. But no. I didn’t orgasm, if that’s what you’re asking. But I can, if you want to learn.”

Resting his forehead against hers, he breathed out a near-silent ‘yes,’ as she taught him all she knew.

*********

“We’re getting married at the Midsummer Festival. Along with Aventus and Mila. I want you to be the first one to know.”

His mother Alfhild looked as though he had just lobbed a heap of mammoth dung at her boots, instead of announcing his imminent marriage to the woman he loved. “Lars. Please be serious, lad. You cannot marry her!”

“Why not?” Feeling her squeeze his hand in encouragement, Lars Battle-Born stood his ground. “I love her. I’ve asked, and she has said yes. Be happy for me, mother.”

Sitting down hard, Alfhild looked at both couples in despair. “But, Lars...she’s not our kind.”

Interrupting what Lars was about to reply with, Lucia stepped forward. “Not your kind? Am I not a Companion? Blooded in battle, the same as him? Lived my entire life in the same Hold as your son?”

Sighing at the stony look the old woman gave her in response, Lucia shook her head. “I don’t need your permission, Alfhild. But as my mother in law, I would truly desire it.”

“But she’s a...a werewolf!” Alfhild exploded, waving her hands wildly as Aventus snickered and Mila shared a look of exasperation with Lars. “Not anymore.” Lucia replied softly. “You don’t have
to worry about having pups, or any such tripe.”

“IT’s official. The banns have been posted by now. And everyone knows.” Lars spoke grimly. Clasping her closer, Lucia grinned. She had replaced her piercings with carved rings of bone and ebony, reshaved the sides of her head the show off the sculpted twisting braid that fell down to the small of her back. Wearing a white Imperial style dress that draped artfully in honor of their engagement, she complemented Lars; who wore a bleached linen tunic to match, showcasing their amulets of Mara.

“We’re getting married, mother. And there’s not a damn thing anyone can do about it.”

“...Except for Lucia, if she decides to take off again.” Aventus added silkily, as Mila hissed at him to shut up.

Smiling sweetly, Lucia tilted her head to look at Lars. “I might. But rest assured - I’m bringing my husband with me. Fuck off, Aventus.”

“Bitch.”

“Asswipe!”

“Can you two stop it for three seconds!?” Mila cried out. “By the Nine how are we supposed to plan a double wedding with you two always at each other’s throats!”

Alfhild stared, mouth gaping as Lars laughed; a deep rolling belly laugh that colored his face with joy. “Well. We’ll be spending pretty much every day together until the wedding. Get comfortable, you two. I expect a full retelling of everything that happened on your journey to Heljarchen. I’ve waited long enough.”

Moans and sighs greeted that statement, as the Jarl of Whiterun smiled smugly. Standing on tip toe, Lucia whispered in his ear. “Short answer - it involved me carrying Aventus. Like a wee helpless bairn. There was ‘no’ riding involved. Don’t listen to him, whatever he says is wrong.”

“-That’s not what happened! You killed my horse! And then ate it!”

“You should have had some. It was delicious.”

Shouts and laughter echoed into the hall, as birds flew up in a cloud. Disturbed by all the noise, they soared around the towering height of Dragonsreach.

Upon an abandoned tower roof, a songbird chirped. Scratched at twigs and feather down fluff in its new nest. Eventually flitting away to reveal a small, speckled egg - laid safe and secure.
Alltid och för evigt (Always and Forever)

Chapter Notes

party music! 'Those Marching O'Neills' by the Wicked Tinkers, a tribal Celtic band that I absolutely love. I've seen them in concert many times at our local Scottish Highland Games, and I can tell you...they rock. What you hear is not actually a didgeridoo, but a war horn about four feet long. So cool!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxeP7cwPgBs&index=19&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaL.pxQ6w

Or for a more stately, slow coronation song, here is Shenavallie Farm.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3b6lwuzQcQ&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaL.pxQ6w&index=22

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Come here
And take off your clothes
And with them
Every single worry
You have ever carried.
My fingertips on your back
Will be the very last thing
You will feel
Before sleeping
And the sound of my smile
Will be the alarm clock
To your morning ears
Come here
And take off your clothes
And with them
The weight of every yesterday
That snuck atop your shoulders
And declared them home.

My whispers will be the soundtrack

To your secret dreams

And my hand

The anchor to the life

You will open your eyes to.

Come here

And take off your clothes.

-Tyler Knott Gregson-

“Hurry! We’re going to be late for the feasting!”

Sigrid smiled at her daughter. “We’ll go right back there in just a moment. Just freshening up from running around all morning. I know for a fact that Mila is still fussing with her hair and Lucia and Lars are still in the line greeting visiting dignitaries. That will take them awhile, making every idiot feel important, so we’ll have to butt in, to let them dance. Go ahead and fix your crown, dearest.”

Auburn hair waving like a red flag as she jumped about, Svari let out a wail as the crown of dragonstongue Sigrid had so carefully woven in that morning fell out. “Ma! It won’t stay!”

“Hold on.” Grabbing yet another hairpin, Sigrid grabbed the wriggling child and gripped her between her bent legs on the bench to fix the flower crown. “Let’s see...there. All done. This color is just lovely against your hair, sweetie. Great choice.”

“Yay! I can’t wait to show Da! He said he’d dance with me, he promised! And Uncle Farkas, and Thadrig! Let’s go back now, Ma!”

Propping herself to a standing position, Sigrid knuckled the small of her back and groaned. “Not yet. You’ll be bored stiff, waiting for the dancing to start. Remember that when the Jarl and Lucia walk down the steps from the throne, you have to call out-”

“-Hail Jarl Battle-Born and Lady Heart-Fang! Hail them with great praise! I know, mom. Do you think Lucia really will rip off their heads and spit down their necks if people call her a lady?”

“I highly doubt it. Svari, don’t push that weapon rack, the axes will topple out onto you. Now let’s be off and walk quietly - no yelling or singing! - to the keep.”

“Awww…” Grabbing the skirt of her yellow gown and skipping down Jorrvaskr’s hallway, Svari turned circles in unbridled excitement as her mother slowly caught up to her, huffing as she adjusted her own leaf-green garb.
“Come on, Ma! Dancing! And treats! Let’s go!” Svari whined, her pale grey eyes (just about the only thing she had inherited from her father, he always jested) looking up pleadingly as Sigrid took a quick drink from the rain barrel outside.

“Patience, kiddo. They’re not going to start right away. See, your cousins are outside, waiting for us.”

Fjora and Gydda had darkened with maturity, the pale flaxen blondness of childhood deepening into the ash dark hair of their father. Very becoming, against the rich olive of their skin that their Imperial mother had passed down. They had kept the icy grey eyes that were a near signature of their family, now. Both had dressed in white bleached linen, with silver cords braided into their hair. Sigrid smiled and waved at them...laughing under her breath as Fjora returned the wave and Gydda pretended she had not seen her. Teenagers. The next ten years were going to be an absolute riot, she could tell.

Only Thadrig had inherited her hazel eyes, Sigrid mulled...and the boy was growing into a near carbon copy of his father in every other way. Nearly twelve years old, now, he was desperately interested in anything involving blades, fistfights, dismemberment...Sigrid blamed the gory war stories her son had grown up listening to, slack jawed in awe as his father and uncle shared old memories around the fire at nights.

Tales that seemed to grow more ridiculous with each telling. The only dragon that actually fought in the Battle of Whiterun was Odahviing - not a ‘cloud of dovah blotting out the sun’. Farkas should have become a bard.

Setting Thadrig to train with the other whelps had straightened out some of the more bizarre requests (such as his name-day plea for a dragon egg). Sigrid only hoped this fervor to fight would die down a bit as he matured. He had plenty of time to seek fortune and fame later in life. Much later.

Chasing after Svari as she breathed in the smell of pine needles warmed by the sun, Sigrid met up with Carlotta at the Gildergreen. The Imperial was lugging an armful of travel bags and chests, giving her a relieved smile as Sigrid shouldered some of her burden. “Is Mila ready then?”

“Finally. The twins just finished fixing her hair from the wedding, so she has to be. Still not happy with how the ribbons lay...I think it’s perfect, but what do I know? I’m just her mother.”

“Yes, that was a very enthusiastic, er, kiss Aventus laid on her.”

More like a mauling, Sigrid thought mirthfully. It was clear that both couples were completely enthralled with one another, despite their bickering and misgivings over the course of the summer, as the four dissimilar youth prepared for one of the biggest events Whiterun had ever seen.

Not even Sigrid’s own double wedding had excited quite so much attention - or finely worded requests to be invited. The second marriage of the Jarl of Whiterun - to an Imperial commoner, no less - joined in the ceremony by his Imperial housecarl and an alchemist? Well. Sigrid wasn’t sure if the masses who had shown from every corner of the country were there to truly celebrate, or merely to claim eyewitness credibility, what with all the gossip flying about.

She was betting the latter. There had been a bit of an uproar when the Battle-Born Clan had been informed of the engagement. Lars had held his ground, calmly repelling all the arguments they had thrown at him...and had born a self-satisfied smile ever since Lucia had announced that she was, in fact, filthy rich from her wanderings in Solstheim. Chests of gold, armor and jewels were still arriving by carriage, animating the Battle-Borns into fits of greedy delight. They sure changed their
tune after that little nugget was revealed. Now, the Imperial Companion could do no wrong. Though her foster daughter still looked at the majority of her new family with barely concealed disdain.

As a wedding gift, Arcadia had surprised Mila and Aventus by bequeathing her grand-niece the alchemy shop, along with the house and accompanying gardens. Despite Mila’s misgivings, Arcadia reassured her repeatedly - she had achieved the level of master alchemist, at last. The Dragonborn smiled to see the paint drying upon the shop’s swinging new sign - “Dulcius Ex Asperis.”

Sweeter after difficulties. Very appropriate, Sigrid thought with a proud grin. For them all.

Joined by the twins bearing crates of summer ale, the women dragged the remaining luggage up the flights of stairs to Dragonsreach. Carlotta had joined Sigrid in wearing formal gowns just for the occasion. Where Sigrid was garbed in green, Carlotta had chosen a deep rose. It set off her tan complexion perfectly, picking up the snapping black of her eyes. “I can hear the guests being hushed - not long now. Come on, let’s move.”

Servants hurriedly rush forward to relieve the Dragonborn and mother of the bride of their burdens. Taking their daughters in hand, Sigrid and Carlotta walked quickly to the main hall.

Seeing Farkas, Vilkas and Thadrig standing to the side of the room with the rest of the Companions, Sigrid grasped Svari’s hand more tightly as the girl tried to break free. Noticing their none-too stealthy approach, Vilkas gave her a small wave. His eyepatch shifted with the creasing of his eyes as he laughed at the sight of Svari practically dragging Sigrid along to stand by his side. “Ma, I see them!”

“Quiet. Here comes the court crier. Remember what to say?”

“Yes! Oh, they look so pretty!”

Mila had chosen a traditional Imperial wedding gown of silken white. Draping at the curve of waist and breast and paired with the garland of greenery festooned with silver ribbons, Mila looked like the personification of the Greek goddess Diana; all innocence and smiles as Aventus hovered near her side; a black shadow in ebony armor.

If Mila personified the moon, then Lucia was the sun. She was golden Aphrodite, if the goddess of love had gone to battle; in a gown that blended lush creamy furs and cloth of gold...her tattoos a colorful counterpoint to the glow of happiness she exuded. Good for her.

The new Lady of Whiterun had eyes only for her new husband as he led her by the hand down the stairs. Wearing formal Nordic armor and crowned in the circlet of Whiterun, Lars seemed oblivious to the whispers and stares...a smile splitting his face from ear to ear as a war horn sounded its plaintive cry. Countless hands were raised, pumping their fists into the air as the crier waved a pennant that bore the horsehead sigil of Whiterun, calling out as the new couples approached the main floor.

“Hail the horse and the rider!
Bear the undying flame!
For our shields will never break asunder,
now that Whiterun is whole again!”

Joining her voice to the welcoming cry, Sigrid smiled to see Svari dance a little jig as the drums and skalds began a celebratory tattoo. Thadrig joined in, with the twins nearly collapsing against her and Vilkas as the crowd whirred into a frenzy of dancing. Holding her husband’s hand tightly, she rested her head against his shoulder in pure contentment, hearing the resounding echo be dwarfed by the following cheering and shouts.

“Hail Jarl Battle-Born and Lady Heart-Fang! Hail them with great praise!”
“Hawaaayy the braw! Whiteruuun!”
“A toast! To the joining of north and south! Skyrim and Cyrodiil! Arraaahh!”
“Where’s the ale! Come on, bring it up we’ve got thirsty guests here!”

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Twirling, stepping and clapping, the dancing continued on late into the night. Lubricated liberally by mead, ale...and the festive gaiety of a double wedding spiced by a hint of scandal.

“...I heard his first wife was killed under very suspicious circumstances. Do you think-”
“Imperials ! And the new lady hardly a lady at all. By the Nine, did you see her tattoos?”
“I swear I’ve heard the name ‘Aventus Aretino’ somewhere before…”

With a single squeeze of her hand, Vilkas released his wife to do whatever it was that had placed such a sly expression on her face. Draining a cup of mead, he sighed as the hot-headed lass that had wormed her way into his heart approached with a smile, hand extended.

Keeping time with his twin was exhausting. Leaving the other men, some far younger coughing from exertion, Farkas led the guests in a rollicking circle dance. Red faced and laughing, they spun and stomped, couples intertwining and breaking apart as older pairs kept pace with the young. Even with a false leg, his twin put them all to shame with Carlotta on his arm. No one would ever guess they were parents of children grown, the way they commandingly swept the floor.

Not like you, old man. Go smoke a pipe or something to ease the headache from all those drums. It took effort, but Vilkas kept his breathing steady as the new Lady of Whiterun managed to trod upon his boots for the third time in as many songs. “Argh. You did that on purpose, you little shit.”
"I swear I didn’t! Vilkas, you look wrecked. Why don’t you go sit over there with all the greybeards and jaw about the good old days, when Imperials stayed south and Snow Elves roamed Skyrim?"

"You want to keep your place in the Companions? I have some tasks for you. Though I doubt you’ve the wit right now to pour water from a boot without written instructions on the heel."

"Oh, you shut that mouth when addressing a lady, boyo!"

Relieving Vilkas of his duty, Aventus Aretino smiled in delighted vindication as Lucia swayed on her feet. "I think our Lady suffers from a bit too much spirit. She fairly drained an entire barrel dry from nerves this morning."

Slurring as she fixed her gimlet stare upon them both, Lucia scoffed. "And you were right there wiv’ me! All worried about deflowering your...hmph, bleugh...flower! I can’t believe you haven’t done her already! What are you waiting for, Aretino?"

"The wedding. My thanks for announcing that to all and sundry, by the way. Come on, time to cast off."

Following close behind, Vilkas held back a snicker as Lucia practically tripped upon Mila’s dress. That lass would rue the moment she decided to overindulge, tonight. He certainly had, when Sigrid had surprised him with transportation to their wedding bed. Vilkas certainly wouldn’t complain at how things had turned out though...no matter how much she wheedled and cajoled, Vilkas would not be moved.

She wants to see Cyrodiil? Not on dragonback. Never again. Perhaps if she stops losing so many damn bets, we might make it to the White-Gold Tower - on horse - before we become too decrepit and aged to leave Whiterun. Not sure, but I think the woman actually likes it when I win...

The couples joined up with members of the family upon the great open porch of Dragonsreach. Servants scurried along the sides of the hall and stairs with luggage, narrowly avoiding him as he pushed past all the gawking nobles and wide eyed country folk.

Ah. There she was.

Standing there on the porch alone, as the other guests ebbed backwards into a fitful huddle, Sigrid called out a roaring greeting in Dovahzul to the dragons that had arrived, hovering in a mass of multicolored wings and flash of scales. Gusts of hot summer wind, scented by flowers and brimstone blew back into the porch. Reminding him of a similar day long ago, when it had been himself and Sigrid...a young couple departing upon their first journey together.

Well. Vilkas scratched his eyepatch, righting it as Thadrig bumped into him. Eager to get a closer look at the dragons that milled about in the night air. We were young-er.

"Drem yol lok, Naaslaarum! Voslaarum! Odahviing, you came as well!"

The great silver mother dovah gripped the rocky edge of the keep with her claws, her weight crunching into the stone. “Paaz shul grind, Dovahkiin. I see your egg-child has...hmm...flourished.”

Sigrid smiled brightly, reaching out to stroke Voslaarum’s muzzle fondly. Scratching at the minute scales that ridged the flaring nostrils, making the female’s massive eyes flicker in pleasure.
“Thank you. Vahzah, I have been blessed with two children now, thanks to your kindness so long ago. A boy and a girl. That lump over there is Thadrig, and my girl Svari is dancing somewhere.”

Shuffling his oversized feet, Thadrig muttered sullenly. “Ma, don’t embarrass me in front of the dragons.”

“Alright, alright, don’t ‘fly off the handle!’ Haha ha.”

“Ma, you can’t make jokes. Stop trying!”

“Well, I made you, Thadrig. Suppose I can’t top that.”

Vilkas felt his hair blow back as the great beast sniffed at him, blowing her smoke-incense breath over him. “Is this your laas lin? Tinvaak hi Dovahzul, Dovahkiin’s mate?”

“Don’t know much of your tongue, I’m afraid. Vonmindoraan.” Out of the corner of his eye, Vilkas caught sight of other guests timidly approached the wheeling, flapping dovah with meat roasts and skewers. A tiny, almost bejeweled blue dragon dipped down and snatched up a mammoth steak, causing the noblewoman offering it to squeak and snatch back her arm. “Are these your young, Voslaarum?”

“Geh, warrior. Much trouble they have caused us since their hatching. Dez motmahus...too late to eat them, now that they have named themselves.”

It was difficult to count the smaller, shrill-voiced dovah as they flitted around the ceiling of the porch. If one did not count the span of their wings (which stretched nearly double the length of their bodies) each infant would be roughly the size of a goat. Vilkas estimated there to be roughly six or seven dragon children. A small red male nearly clipped him with a wing, as he spun out of the way... the dovah squawking as it smashed its wing against the stone wall. Naaslarum - whom Vilkas assumed to be the father - stretched out his sinewy neck, dragging the infant away from further injury as the red male trilled in pain. “Congratulations.”

“To you, as well. I am ready at your command, Dovahkiin, to bear your kin on their way. We will fly upon the northeast wind current, until the path parts us from Odahviing at Ysgramor’s seat.”

“Yes, Windhelm. Though there’s no accounting for taste, I guess even Solstheim is a shorter trip than Cyrodiil or Hammerfell. Come on. Up you go.”

Lifting Mila up upon Voslaarum where she shakily waited for Aventus to climb on behind, Sigrid handed up their travel backpacks. Carlotta and Farkas waved farewell, as the great grey wings began testing the air, beating with increasing strength as they slowly ascended to the skies. “Goodbye, my Mila! Goodbye Aventus!”

“Have fun in Windhelm! Don’t fall off the boat, because those slaughterfish are damn huge!”

“If you make my girl cry, I will make you cry, Aretino!” Farkas shook his fist at the departing dragon, nearly made invisible by a shrieking rainbow cloud of dovah children. Naaslarum followed his mate, roaring a farewell as their wings grew smaller, disappearing over the mountains to the north.

Sigrid snorted, wiping away tears as she hugged Lars tightly. “Right then. You’ve already told your mother goodbye, I’m guessing? Enjoy your stay at Ravenrock and Thirsk. Oh, and kick Aela for me, when you meet the Frostmoon pack...she knows what she did.”
Lady Heart-Fang stood unsteadily on her feet, looking up wide eyed at the great red dovah who folded his wings and tilted his head. “Tiid bo amativ. You have matured, little one. Has it been so long?”

“Tell me we’re not riding dragonback, all the way to Solstheim. Ysmir’s beard, no. Please... Ulph!”

Managing to grab her gold plaited braid and pull it out of the way, Vilkas held her steady as Lucia vomited into a nearby urn of flowers. Patting her heaving back, he waved away a concerned Lars. “At least you managed to get it out before your flight, lass. I wasn’t so lucky.”

Still hunched over, Lucia accepted the towel he handed her with a grumbled oath. “...tell me it was worth it, old man. Really. I don’t mind going by horse, or ship.”

“Your husband can’t be spared from Whiterun that long. Being Jarl, and such. Keep your chin high - and whatever you do, don’t let that beast carry your waterskins.”

Helping both Lars and Lucia climb up Odahviing’s back, the dovah playfully knocked him over as he drew near. Buffeting him with a flap of wing as Sigrid rushed over to help him stand.

“Still alive, Faadvurdein?”

“Longer than you’ll be, if you touch me again. What do you insist on calling me, anyhow?”

His wife chuckled, reaching an arm around his waist to hug him from behind. “Faadvurdein is your Dovah name. Warmth Valor Guard.”

It was difficult, but Vilkas managed to roll his good eye at the dragon. Receiving a purling growl in response, as Odahviing bore sharp teeth in a mock grin. “Aww, and you thought Odahviing didn’t care a lick about you, sweetie.”

Smoke trailed from the beast’s nostrils as he grunted, shifting as they finished lashing the last of their supplies onto his back. “I do not care, Dovahkiin. Your choice of laas lin is lamentable. Krosis. But you have ever been hasty, Sonahsod, in your choices.

Pulling away from him, Sigrid approached Odahviing as the dragon prepared to leave. Watching her greying hair bob against her back as she strode forward, Vilkas ignored Odahviing’s insult and scanned the sky for any sign of inclement weather. Clear skies tonight. He noted that Thadrig had disappeared somewhere, along with the twins. Probably back to the feast to stuff his bottomless stomach. Waving at Lars as the Jarl patted his wife, who looked positively green as Odahviing tested the air with his tongue, Vilkas frowned as the following conversation drew on.

“What are you talking about, you big red dinosaur? You’re being pessimistic and it’s making me testy.”

A large chunk of rock from the ledge crumbled away as Odahviing flexed his claws. His voice was a deep, mournful rumble. “Grik los lein, Dovahkiin. Have you never pondered upon your youth, your strength as those around you crumble to the claws of age?”

Spread ing his wings, the red leather skin of them shone dully in the moonlight. “How many souls have you taken? How many joore have you slain?”

Growing increasingly concerned as Sigrid trembled in rage, Vilkas walked slowly behind her. “I fail to see what any of this has to do with my husband. You tell me, and explain right now why, in your high and almighty opinion, I screwed up.”
The dovah turned his head. Blinking a clear eyelid, more a membrane than anything, that massive slotted gold eye trailed over both their bodies.

"Consuming souls extends the life. You have fought many battles against my brethren, Sonahsod. Dovahkiin. Destroyer of Alduin, Akatosh-favored. How long your years will be on Nirn cannot be measured, now."

"What the FUUUCK- "

-Vilkas braced his arms around Sigrid as a roar ripped from her throat, starting to shake the stone floor. Causing the tables laid out for the wedding guests to quiver and shake, spilling the contents upon the floor as her wrath rippled around her.

Taking flight, Odahviing hovered over the porch. His great form seemed vast, all-knowing as the great wedge-shaped head drooped. "Mindooran hi, Sigrid. You will long outlive your laas lin. Kroisis, to bear such news. I thought you already knew."

"Go away!" Her voice was a cracking sob that shook the very ground. "I don’t want to see you again, Odahviing. Not for a long while. Take them safely to Solstheim, and don’t come back!"

Roaring in harsh misery, Odahviing pumped with great wingbeats, wheeling north. Vilkas could hear a thin wail as Lucia and Lars were born up and away. Good luck, lass. Drawing a deep breath, he hugged Sigrid close as she buried her face in her hands. Guests that had fallen over or tripped due to the Dragonborn’s vocalizations crawled or crept away, some lingering to stare accusingly at the two as they stood still, unmoving before the face of this news.

Clearing his throat, he looked down at her head of hair...still overwhelmingly auburn in hue. With so few streaks of grey marring the deep burnished color. His own hair had gone mostly silver years ago. "Sigrid. Do you...do you want to talk about i-"

"No. No, I really don’t. Not yet, love."

Taking in a shuddering breath, his wife turned to bury her head in his chest. Tightening his grip to hold her even closer, Vilkas stroked the woman’s back idly, pausing as he stroked her hair to marvel at how little she had changed. That face, still so unlined by exposure to weather or age. He knew it so well, by now. His own features had not held up half as well.

I knew it. Somehow...knew something was fucking with her. Had to be dragon souls, when all that shit was supposed to be over and done with.

Musing upon the strange twists and turns life often dealt, Vilkas stayed long after everyone else had left the porch, merely holding his wife as she cried like a child in his arms.
“Ma! Ma, Thadrig is breathing on me again!”

“Am not! Svari, you took my sword! I need it to practice! Where did you put it?!”

“Aunt Siggy, I’ve lost my favorite comb! My mammoth ivory comb with the carved flowers! I swear she took it, I know she did! Make her give it back!”

“Not until you apologize for dumping skeever shit in my smalls drawer! I’m still picking out pebbles from my underthings, you sow!”

“Bitch!” “Whore!”

“Waaaaughhh!”

-That was it. Sigrid had had enough.

Nearly ripping the wood from the table as she scooped up cut leeks and potatoes, she dumped them in the cookpot and tried to ignore their screeching. Thumps and banging echoed from the upstairs of Lakeview Manor as she stormed out of the kitchen, surprising Carlotta.

“...still can’t find that damn comb. Sigrid. Do you um...need a break, sister?”

“Please,” she managed to bite out, wincing as something crashed upstairs. That better not have been my elven potted plant or there will be hell to pay. “Think I need to go kill something. Or someone...point me in a good direction, ‘Lotta.”

Wiping her forehead, Carlotta pointed west. “Vilkas said he was going to look for a good place to dig a new well. Take it out on him, but know that you’ll owe me...the children have been acting up all day.”

“Thank you. I’ll cover for you and Farkas next time. Promise. WULD-NA-KEST!”

Holding tightly to the table as the Dragonborn blew through the open front door, Carlotta irritably sneezed at the ash her speedy exit had stirred up from the fireplace. “Gods, I hate it when she does that.”

Thud. A sniffle from upstairs.

“...Ma?”

**********************

She found him strolling half an hour out, walking the woods of Falkreath. He had balanced two buckets on a harness slung around his neck. Fresh springwater, no doubt. They would have to wash
sparingly until that well was dug. Their last one had dried up over the winter, and the thrice-daily trips to the lake had become a tedious chore.

“*Please* find me something to bludgeon.” She begged, striding forward as her husband looked taken aback by her appearance.

She knew - she probably looked positively wild, with her hair all askew and her clothing stained from cooking and cleaning. And the lack of sleep...Svari had gotten ill, keeping Sigrid up throughout the last few nights as she watched the girl sweat and moan through a fever. No doubt caused by some foreign guest at the celebration. *No vaccines here. Or steroid shots, or antibiotics, my god I’m going to go fully grey from this...this stress!*

An entire week had passed since the big wedding, and she still had not caught up on the household chores. None of them had, for the task of reopening Lakeview for the summer was a mighty undertaking.

And the children had been less than helpful, in that regard. Reluctant to do their chores, to help with the necessary weeding, cleaning and tending of the cows and chickens they kept. Farkas had half-heartedly threatened to strand all four of them on an island on the lake, if they didn’t behave. *Here’s hoping they shape up soon, or I’m going to build my own Chokey for time-outs. Or buy some paralysis powder and slip it into their milk. Just for five minute’s peace.*

“Rough day?” Vilkas looked sympathetic, as she groaned and walked up to a stump, sitting down forlornly. He set down the buckets brimming with water and stretched as he walked closer to her, an audible pop sounding as he arched his back.

*“You think?”* No matter how I threaten him...Thadrig won’t do his chores. Says he’s planning to run away back to Jorrvaskr, and hitchhike along on someone else’s job. Mucking out the barn isn’t fancy enough for him.”

Vilkas cracked a grin. “Wait ‘til he finds out just how glamorous it is, beating up debtors and clubbing horkers.”

“*There is nothing funny about this!”* Raking her fingers through her hair, Sigrid pulled out the hairstick that kept her braid tightly wound up on her head and finger combed the mass of it out. Her hands snarled in the knots. She could practically smell herself getting filthier. Ugh.

“And Svari - ignoring what I ask her to do, always trailing after Gydda and Fjora! Repeating everything they say, *especially* the snarky backtalk and insults! This is just ridiculous. Maybe we should head back to Whiterun sooner, rather than waiting until Hearthfire, like we planned. I can’t stomach another week, much less months of kids fighting and no baths.”

She heard him chuckle, as he walked up behind her. “Thought we were trying to teach them valuable skills, woman. Self reliance, a hard work ethic. Where is the benefit in that, if we give up now?”

Leaning over, she sighed in frustration as one of his hands pressed down on her shoulders, massaging the tension out. It felt so good, it nearly hurt. But it wasn’t enough to distract her from the upwelling tidal force of complaining she had stored up. *Too much. Too much has happened, and nothing is getting done, and I don’t know what to do about it. The freaking Dragonborn Seer doesn’t know what to do!"
Still pissed, Sigrid slapped his hand away. “Thanks but no thanks. It’s not helping.”

“Hmm. Then maybe this will.”

She gasped as a bucket of ice cold water was suddenly dumped over her head. “Augh, Vilkas what the hell?”

Leaping up from her seat on the stump, she realized he had swiftly moved away, a cocky smirk on his face. “What? You wanted a bath, right? I hauled that water from the river just for you. You should be grateful, woman.”

“I’m going to kick your ass!” Hearing him laugh as he took off, Sigrid picked up her sopping wet skirt and bolted after him, murder on her mind. Trees flew past as she dodged and jumped, mindful in the heat of her temper to not stumble and fall on the raised roots, rocks and holes that could easily twist her foot. “Come back here, you...you coward!”

“Got to catch me first.” She heard him call out, as Sigrid frantically looked left and right in the slowly darkening woods. Searching for a glimpse, any hint of which direction he had taken in the trackless depths.

A flash of silver hair. He was heading for the lake.

Feeling a grin of victory stretch over her face, Sigrid mopped up her forehead and began jogging due north. Confident that she could overtake him.

...And then drowned him. “Wuld Na Kest!”

Feeling her hair stream back as the whirlwind shout shot her forward a fair distance, Sigrid stumbled against a tree trunk that showed up out of nowhere. Ouch. That was always the risk, with that particular power...it required a good deal of open space to be safe to use. She’d gained enough bruises to be cautious.

“Boo!”

Steely bars wrapped around her waist, lifting her up and over his shoulders. She screamed a harsh cry, beyond words as she pounded his back with her fists.

The lake loomed beyond them, a great black pool of ink rimmed by the setting sun. Wading out into the water with great, stumbling strides, Vilkas gripped her by the waist and tossed her - shrieking-into the water.

Shplooosh.

Snorting and sputtering, her hair completely covering her face, Sigrid flailed about in the lake. “Where are you, husband, so I can give you a proper ducking?!”

“Right here.”
Just as she had managed to stand, wobbling, on her own two feet, Vilkas lifted her up in his arms and dunked them both.

Bubbles churned against her face as she screamed in the water, pulling his fingers away as he tickled her; his fingertips reaching beneath her arms, her thighs to delicately trace the backs of her knees. He must have taken pity on her, because soon she felt herself lifted up, up out of the water to suck in a fresh gulp of air.

“There. Now you got a bath, woman. Do you feel bet-” Splash!

Tearing herself away, she clawed the water. Splashing him in face again and again. “Take that! And that!”

Covering his face, he sputtered as he laughed beneath the deluge. “S-Sigrid!”

As she continued furiously hitting the water, soaking him with every sweep of her arms (like a little girl, it was fun seeing that familiar smug face get soaked) she noticed with a moment’s concern that he had sunk beneath the surface.

Looking left and right, frantically searching, Sigrid felt her heart seize up. “Where…”

-Only to scream again, as that bastard shot out of the water like a harpoon, grabbing her with his wet, cold arms. His breath was hot against her ear. “Had enough?”

“Never.” Twisting in his grip, she craned her neck back to look at him. His eyepatch was completely askew, barely held on as he grinned like a sabrecat; all teeth as he took in her soaked and clinging gown. The linen was transparent by now, revealing her tight nipples against the cloth like she wore nothing at all. And his good eye was completely, utterly fixed on her chest as it heaved in the water.

Like they were teenagers, and not doddering old veterans, bitching about kids these days. Reaching up, she pulled off the eyepatch and tossed it to the shore. “I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of you. But Vilkas…”

He didn’t let her finish her thought. Cupping the tangled mass of her hair with one hand, he pulled her bodily to him, to devour her mouth.

Years. Years they had been together, and it still felt so right. Pulling herself up to rub against him, she wrapped a leg around his hips as she kissed him back, hard, his teeth nearly cutting into her lips as she tried showing what she was feeling. What he meant to her. This desperate, anchoring love that had sustained her, kept her alive. With him, she was safe.

And she would outlive him for many years more.

As their kiss became more tender, gentle as his hand rubbed circles upon her back, Sigrid parted with one last press to the corner of his mouth. Pecking the long, healed scar that trailed, pulling up the left corner of his lips into a permanent smirk.

His heartbeat was a thundering drum against her chest. “Here. Let’s get you all dried off, now that you’ve had your bath, wife.”
Unable to speak past the sudden lump in her throat (years. How many years did he have left?) she allowed him to pull her out of the water. To set up a fire, from wood that had been seasoned and stored nearby in their usual fishing spot, as she breathed ‘yol’ to ignite the flames.

Conscious of every minute passing by, as he laughingly helped her strip off the wet dress that had adhered to her skin. Chuckling in turn as she divested him of the tunic and pants, small clothes kicked off as they stumbled towards the hastily unrolled sleeping furs.

Seconds. Minutes.

Days, months, years.

How long does a dragon soul make one live? I've taken ever so many...

As they shivered, struggling to build up the fire and warm themselves against one another as the sun set against the western woods of the lake, Sigrid memorized his face. Still so handsome, both eyes creased with laugh lines. The scar had softened with time; the deep runnel of the blade mark evening out into a more dulled red. He had taken the complete loss of eyesight in his left eye with more good humor and forbearance than she would have, Sigrid thought as she clasped his hand to her chest. It had gone completely white with time, unnerving many who looked upon him. Prompting him to wear that eyepatch, which Sigrid unerringly teased him about.

Smiling, she remembered the night she had taught their family to sing ‘A Pirate’s Life for Me,’ serenading her husband with the tune (and foaming mugs of rum, specially imported from Hammerfell). Bringing that beautiful, wicked smile back to his face as she stumbled through an explanation, still giggling, about pirates, peg legs and eyepatches from her world. Farkas had adored it, singing it ad nauseum by the fire until everyone at Jorrvaskr greeted the twins as ‘really bad eggs’. That had been a good night.

Even his chest hair had gone grey, but the form of him had remained largely unaltered by age. Where Farkas had become more bulky and slightly more thick with time (and unlimited jazbay pies) her husband had toughened into sinew. Becoming more weathered; rangy than rubenesque.

Still sexy, even as a (relatively) old man in his fifties. She didn’t mind the change, and she told him so, as the stars began to wink into life across the sky.

“Well. Good to know my wife won’t be leaving me for a strapping young lad anytime soon.” He yawned, cuddling her even closer as they lay together naked in the sleeping furs. Their clothing had been hung by the fire to dry, dripping with occasional hisses into the flames. “Not that I’ve been worried, mind. Don’t I keep you busy enough?”

Readjusting her head to lie in the crook of his shoulder, she lazily traced his chest. “Yes. About that. What do you think about what Odahviing said, at the wedding?”

She felt him yawn. His hand cupped one of her breasts, almost out of habit. “Don’t see anything wrong with it.”

“Wait. Seriously.” Pulling herself to sitting position, her hair fell down to graze his chest as she looked at him. The fire barely provided enough light to spill beyond the ring of their little camp into
the darkness, the woods a dense border of black all around. “You don’t see anything weird about the fact that I’m going to stay young while you continue aging?”

His lips quirked at her anxiety. “Like I said, woman...I see nothing wrong with this.” His hands reached up to tweak her nipples.

Batting him away as he laughed quietly, she let out an aggrieved sigh. “Of course. Yes. Let’s look at it from a slightly less chauvinistic angle, if you please. You’ll be a grandfather, hobbling around on a cane, and I’ll still look like I’m in my thirties with premature grey hair. You don’t think anything is wrong with that picture?”

“Who says I’ll need a cane? I’ll just lean on my lovely young wife. Who will still be madly in love with me, even if I am a wrinkled old bastard.”

“Bastard is right.”

Allowing him to pull her back down to him, she felt him softly sigh with the pressure of her body, as she lay upon his chest. He was so tall, her feet barely hit his calves. Her breasts and hips pressed into him, warming her as his hands began their slow crawl over her curves. Making her shiver, as she pushed against him in expectation.

“It’s all well and good for you, love. You get to watch me stay the same, if Odahviing is right, and I don’t age thanks to those datted, stupid souls. Remind me to lodge a complaint with the Greybeards, by the way, for not warning me about the side effects.”

His hands cupped her ass, squeezing gently. “Didn’t Paarthurnax tell you something of that ilk? Years ago? Hard to remember, being so old and frail-” A finger spread the cleft of her, making her yip as he pushed inside, rubbing. *Teasing.*

“...If he did I don’t remember it. I was too busy killing stuff and agonizing over you, back then.”

His other hand held her hip still, as she struggled to spread her knees. To take him inside of her, replacing that taunting hand making her melt with rising lust and frustration. “Not so fast. Slow. I want to actually enjoy this, woman. Why not call Odahviing back for a chat, after the young ones return from their honeymoon? You can always pesk him for more answers.”

*This* would not do, to have him so content to wrap her around his finger and remain able to *talk*, as she squirmed against him. “Still too angry. I’ll talk to him in a few years. Damn him. Vilkas, you...ugh-”

Sliding against his hard length, so close and ready against her softness, Sigrid bit her lip in tense want. He wasn’t giving her an inch, still holding tightly. Preventing her from moving hardly at all, as he added another finger inside. Pumping slowly, in and out...swirling his fingertips in an electric caress over her clit as she growled at him. “What about me, eh? I have to watch you grow old and die! Have to bury you, watch the children grow old and bury them too. Over and over, never getting older...”

“Fifteen years it’s been, Vilkas. I’ve been with you as long as I was with...with Bryce. And when he - and the, the kids died, I...no! I don’t want to lose you, not like that ever again!”

She gasped as he suddenly sat up. Cradling her in his lap, legs askew on either side as he pulled her
to balance on top of him. His good eye was bright with kindness, a soft grey in the firelight as he looked at her, a smile tugging at his lips as the great strength of his arms lifted her. Kept her from sinking down, down upon that tantalizing hardness as she released a needy whine.

“Sigrid. You’re overthinking this, love.”

Feeling his breath mingle with hers, she held her breath as he ever so gently slid into her. The stretching within was a torment all its own, filling her ever more with need - never enough friction, as he lifted her. Thrusting up and down, until she leaned over to bury her head in his neck. Helpless to resist his touch.

His voice was a rough rasp against her ear, as she tightened her arms around him. “I never thought...that I would live this long. That I could ever be so happy...have children, with you. Be at peace with myself. *Fuck*, Sigrid, it’s been a full life. Gods…” He moaned when she bit his ear, kissing her way down his jaw until she reached his lips to take them for herself.

*Words.* So many words, and usually it was she who couldn’t stop, but now words poured from her husband, as she cried out - nearly overcome by the rising pace of their lovemaking. His hands nearly bruised her hips as they rocked together, hot heat and tight pulsing pleasure flaring brighter, as she held on for dear life.

“Wife, I will love you always,” he clasped her face in his hands as she nearly fell over from the lack of support. Gripping his arms, to steady where they were joined together. Locked in love, as he struggled to give what words he could, even in this rush of lust, “...and if nothing were altered, and your hair went white, I would still want you.”

“If this face I treasure,” his thumbs pressed softly into her cheeks as she sobbed, “...became filled with the lines of every smile, every laugh and tear, I would still love you. Because I was there, sharing in your life all along. None of that will change, should you live beyond your time.”

His shoulders hunched against her, as she sagged against him; both caught in the heady spill of orgasmic pleasure that tore through them, nearly at the same time. Feeling herself tighten, throb around him, she watched in rapture as his face betrayed all the open emotion, the pain and raw love she always knew he felt, though he rarely spoke the words.

“I will be with you, Sigrid, in what remains of our lives together. And when the last breath of your body leaves you, know that I will be waiting in Sovngarde to welcome you with open arms.”

“You...you...oh.” Sinking into his arms, he laid back against the furs as she held onto the moment. Fixing in her mind exactly how this felt; his seed leaking from where they were still joined. The rapid panting they both struggled to control, easing into a drug-like bliss that would take them both to sleep, if they so chose, as she lay curled up against his chest.

Familiar, comforting, close and safe. “Tell me it will be all right. That we’ll...we’ll stay together, for as long as possible. And our children will be happy and-and live long, good lives that have purpose. Tell me.”

His chest rumbled with low laughter. “Shor’s beard, I can’t promise you that, dear. You’re the Seer, not me. But Sigrid. You must promise me, that you will not seek your own life, when I go.” Feeling him grip her hair, carefully lifting her face to see his solemn gaze, Sigrid swallowed.
“Do you think they’ll kick me out of Sovngarde if I do? Because I’m not going to lie - I have no idea how long I’ve got. And it’s really, really going to suck, being alone without you.”

Still serious, he watched her face as she rubbed her cheek of the tears that had trickled out, so suddenly at this turn of conversation. “I wouldn’t chance it. Shor’s Hall is for the brave and selfless. Not even the Dragonborn is exempt from proving worthy of it. Please, Sigrid. Don’t take your own life.”

She laughed as he pinched her lips together, as she struggled to speak through his childish ploy. “I swear, woman, I’ll send you straight to Ondolemar, in Alinor. Have him babysit you, if that’s what it takes.”

“No! Not that! He’d be unbearable, going off about how I’ll never catch up to his three hundred whatever score of years. ‘You humans, so weak and pathetic in your grief. A superior Mer like myself, forced to endure your endless whinging!’ Yeah. He’d love that.”

He was laughing at her, now. That beautiful smile so free and open as she struggled not to cry. To ruin it with her tears. “I promise you this.” Vilkas vowed, as he carefully tucked her back beneath the sleeping furs, in the fold of his arm.

Sigrid felt her panicked breathing slow, as the solid weight of him so near calmed her down. “I’ll be here, as long as I can, woman. Farkas, Thadrig, and Svari - you’re not alone, love. Never alone. You are so beloved, by so many.”

Feeling him press a kiss to her forehead, she clung to him as he stroked her back. Soft, soothing motions. “Sleep, now. We’re going to have to haul even more water tomorrow, ‘til that damn well is dug. So rest while you can.”

Allowing the worry - the ever circling net of doubts, fears and pain that threatened to catch her up, even now, to be flooded away in the surety of his love, Sigrid closed her eyes. Just feeling, touching his warm skin as his breathing slowed, as she joined him in slumber.

Together.

For as long as they both would live, and beyond.

Chapter End Notes

Well. Now we reach the end of it. Only one more chapter, before the story reaches its conclusion.

As always, please comment with constructive criticism, praise or censure. I loves them comments.
Chapter Notes

More mood music.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeWB3CaDp2w&index=5&list=RD3oeUTXub59c

FYI the poem I used is Tolkien's elvish language. Quenya, I think? Here's the link. It fits well enough.

http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Nam%C3%A1ri%C3%AB

“So what do you call a Snow Elf, a Dunmer and a High Elf when you put them together? ...I say, a delicious scoop of Neapolitan ice cream! With sprinkles of sarcasm!”

“...Errr...”

“I’m sure you were leading somewhere quite salient with this point, Dragonborn. Might I draw your attention to something else? The fine weather, perhaps?”

“Ack, no!” Sigrid heaved a gusty sigh, flinging her arms out in frustration. “Neapolitan - okay, I’ll explain. It’s a type of dessert back where I’m from, with vanilla, strawberry and chocolate flavoring. Um...white, pink and brown in color. Just like you guys! Except that Ondolemar, ergh, well. I guess your skin could possibly pass as rose gold. Nevermind.”

The tall Altmer peered at her from his perch, high in the tree. With pruning shears, he clipped off yet another branch. It fell nearly atop of Sigrid and Teldryn Sero, causing her Dunmer friend to push her off the bench. And just in time. “Ow!”

“She made a jest, Ondolemar. We’re getting her to react more positively, at least. She hasn’t cried for weeks.”

Sipping at his tea, the sellsword ignored Sigrid as she picked herself up from the grass, fuming. Gelebor averted his eyes and focused upon his book as she straightened her gown from where it had ridden up, nearly to her waist. Grass stains were now smeared over the fine white cambric, refusing to budge as she frantically smoothed the voluminous skirt.

“Assholes. All of you. I wish I’d never come here. Damn...now I want ice cream.”

Alinor shone green and gold; light filtering through the whispering trees like stained glass. Not that there wasn’t plenty of that as well; the Dragonborn had been fairly stunned into silence as she had
stepped off the ship into port. The great city, once the central hub of the previous Aldmeri rulers, was nothing like she had imagined. When Sigrid thought of the Altmer, the space that occupied her mind was dark and geometric. Sharp and hard and cold, like Thalmor and their brooding black robes.

Not this...this paradise. Balmy and pleasant, it reminded her strangely of the Wizard of Oz. Emerald green, everywhere, the bustling place a swirl of glimmering ramparts, plants and high glass towers. Crystalline palaces were linked by balustrades that seemed formed of insect wings; so pure and clear were the colors used. The entire hypnotic effect was like staring into a kaleidoscope, and she found her eyes nearly burned after walking to the not-so-humble manse of her old friend.

Later, after her white gown had been whisked away to be cleaned by the silently disapproving servants of Sunhaven Hall, Sigrid sat at her vanity table in the rooms provided for her. The opulence of her surroundings no longer intimidated her, over the months she had spent here in the Summerset Isles. Her room featured the same jewel-toned coloration that the elves favored, and the room Ondolemar had chosen to lodge her in was aptly named ‘The Amethyst Room.’

All shades of aubergine, plum and violet were found here. The nearly ombre curtains which felt artfully over the bed were nearly indigo, gradually lightening to periwinkle where they brushed the silken sheets of her bed. The walls, the carpets...even the deeply stained wooden floors had inlaid tiles of amethyst hued shell that gleamed. A casual sign of wealth, putting treasures where one could walk all over them. Wealth wasted underfoot.

_Ondolemar could afford it_, she thought, staring into the mirror at herself. This mirror was the truest she had ever seen in Tamriel; throwing back a reflection unclouded by the typical metal sheen of Dwemer bronze, or the cracked and bubbled surfaces she had grown accustomed to in Skyrim’s less wealthy regions.

Like the room, she wore purple. A rich, warm tone nearer to burgundy than a true royal shade. It highlighted the pure silver of her hair, curled into ringlets by her handmaiden just this morning. Her wide eyes - still the same amber-green hazel they had ever been, now bore a fine web of wrinkles that still surprised her. Her cheeks, lips...she lifted a quavering hand to touch the powder-fine skin of her throat, where it hung in a slight jowl.

Sigrid smiled wryly. After her seventieth birthday, she had given up looking into mirrors. Eschewing them as pointless, a painful exercise in frustration. For no matter how she fretted about it, what could she do? Vomit up the dovah spirits, like some reversed Ghostbuster’s proton pack?

She still couldn’t remember how many dragon souls she had consumed, their light filling her body with power, with alien knowledge that hummed at the back of her mind even now. _Zin krif horvut se suleyk._

_Honor is fighting the lure of power_, she mused as she looked upon herself. For all that she had changed on the outside, Sigrid still felt young compared to her elven companions. Mer, who casually counted the space of centuries as she would decades. She’d never quite become used to that, really. No matter how often Gelebor casually tossed around a date from his youth that she had looked up later...it never ceased to fill her with horror that the snow elf had referenced something that had happened _long_ before Alessia freed the Imperial people from the Ayleids. The sheer immensity of time that he had lived made her teeth ache.

She didn’t ever want to live so long; to the point where every day became a given. Expected, uninteresting. She wanted to enjoy what time she had left.

Ondolemar had surprised her, sending her an invitation that arrived precisely twenty years after the death of her husband. Fortuitous timing it was not; she had read and reread the letter until the
parchment had nearly split at the crease from handling. For it contained words not only from her persnickety Altmer comrade, but also a final letter from Vilkas.

*He knew. Knew how hard it would be for her, without him. He had planned for this!*

If she ever actually made it to Sovngarde, Sigrid thought darkly...she would have words with him on appropriate death notes and what was considered timely delivery. She could have used his words - the boost this letter gave her, every time she read it - so much after he had gone.

Smoothing out the oft-read letter, she opened it with shaking hands to scan it once more.

*Sigrid my love,*

*If you are reading this, then I am dead. Don’t go out of your way to mourn my passing, dear. I know you will be occupied enough, beating the wailing mass of women away from my grave with your sword and Shouts. Never fear; assuredly all parts of me will be missed.*

*Just jesting. Death had to happen sooner or later. We had a good run of years together, wife. As I write this, our grandson is currently gumming my shoulder in hopes that I can provide him with milk. Svari is sleeping so soundly, however, that I am loath to awaken her. Our blood seems doomed to bear twins, and this little one’s siblings are tearing about somewhere outside, along with Thadrig’s countless bairns. My joints ache at even the thought of chasing them down.*

*As I said once, I never imagined I would live so long. Or, after reaching the fine old age of seventy four, actually be willing to continue living and not dose myself with jarrin root and nightshade. Age feels rather like a blanket, softening recent memory until only the oldest, most bright recollections remain sharp in my mind.*

*Memories of you, Sigrid. Bear my absence well, love. Remember your promise. I will see you in Sovngarde soon, along with all our friends and family who gain entrance past Tsun and the whalebone bridge to the Hall of Shor.*

*And to keep you company before we are reunited, I am sending you to Ondolemar, whose writ of passage you now hold; a writ that will bear you across the sea to Alinor, in the Summerset Isles.*

*I hope you’re both fucking miserable, having adventures without me. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.*

*That was a joke. Do nothing of the sort.*

*All my love,*

*Yours, Vilkas*

Even after thirty seven years, she still felt a sparking pain tighten around her heart upon reading his fading, carefully lettered words. Thadrig had delivered the sad news to Jorrvaskr, where she sat supervising the workings of the warrior’s hall. Tasks that had become routine as clockwork over the
decades, for all that she was grooming Athis to become her successor.

He had told her, gently but firmly telling... explaining that Vilkas, along with Farkas, had not survived their last mission.

A kidnapping in a Dwemer ruin may have been far from a challenge in their youth. More suited perhaps to the younger members of the brotherhood. Yet because it was Jarl Battleborn and Lady Heart-Fang’s son Idolaf; the Companion twins had left in all haste for the dank decaying ruin of Alftand. Little had she known that as she watched them go (their broad grey-headed forms stepping nearly in sync after a lifetime of travelling and fighting together) that it would be the last she would ever see of Farkas. Or her husband.

The young man had returned alone, shaking and nearly delirious with fever. After recovering at the Temple of Kynareth, Idolaf Battle-Born the Younger had stammered out the basic jist of what had happened. He had been taken for ransom by mages; for septims to fuel the dark research that now would never come to light. The Companions had nearly freed him, until an unseen lever had been pushed. It was a trap - set up by the mages as a failsafe most likely, for such a situation.

Sigrid had sat silent, listening in unbelieving apathy as the boy described how Farkas had gone down. A bad accident...the metal leg caught in twisting gears as they had struggled to fight, to escape the flood trap... slowly filling the room with a torrential downpour of steaming water.

Vilkas had urged the boy onward, telling him which turns to take to the surface as he stayed. Remaining to try and pry Farkas out from where he had been caught, to defend his twin as the lights guttered out in the slowly flooding room, the Falmer hissing and screeching as they fell upon them.

Idolaf had begged for forgiveness; for not having the strength, the knowledge; something to help the older men escape. She had pardoned him; calmly and mechanically. Shit happened. Not his fault. No matter that she couldn’t bear to walk up to Dragonsreach for months past receiving the ill news.

Later that year, after winter had thawed to spring, then high summer...Thadrig took a journey to Alftand with Athis. Their remains were recovered and brought home. Sigrid had touched them reverently; the bones eerily clean, almost unreal. Undoubtedly it was them, for the relatively intact skeleton of Farkas bore a missing, mangled section of leg. The other skeleton had been more dispersed, by water or scavengers Thadrig hadn’t been able to tell. Only the skull and a few rib bones and scapula remained of him.

Bearing the bones upon a woven tapestry laid upon a wooden bier, Sigrid had led the Companions in mourning as they burned...returned to ash upon the Skyforge. Like Kodlak, and Skjor. Njada, Ria, Torvar and so many others they had lost.

It had not hit her, she thought rising from the vanity table, until later. Months later, in fact, as Teldryn Sero cautiously offered her something to read as she sat in silence upon her chair.

She had thrown it. Thrown the ‘Book of the Dragonborn’ at his head, and screamed. Shrieked until her voice went raw from the overwhelming grief of it. Since then, the floodgates had been opened, and everything around her reminded Sigrid of Vilkas.

Every stupid blade in Jorrvaskr, every room and table and bed...
It was not long after that Carlotta had died, peacefully while sleeping in her marriage bed at Breezehome. Sigrid had found her curled up around one of Farkas’s old shirts, and had pushed for her to be buried with the garment in the Hall of the Dead. Per her request, for the Imperial had not favored the idea of cremation.

*Let what closeness she obtained, what comfort she sought be given. For I am alone, as I never was before. No matter how many babies are born with ghost grey eyes, he is lost to me.*

And now her own children were old; old and infirm as they played with their own children and grandchildren. Lakeview Manor had flourished into a small village; with its own lumber mill and smattering of shops. Thadrig now lived in the manor that had expanded into a fully functioning inn and tavern; The Dragon’s Rest. Her restless son had done his time as a Companion, meeting his Dunmer wife in Windhelm. They (and their horde of mixed and *adorable* children) ran the show in what used to be such a quiet hamlet of Falkreath.

She had walked Lakeview once in farewell, before departing for Alinor. Hardly recognizing half the faces that bowed respectfully at her passing, though most were surely her kin through some part of her bloodline. Part of what she would leave behind in Nirn upon her passing from this life. Whenever that would be, she grumped to herself. Finally, her outer reflection matched the onry cuss she felt like inside.

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There had been several surprises that had shocked her from the numb weariness she trudged with, day in and day out after the news and the funeral. Serana had shown up after the burning of what remained of the bodies; a dark, winsome thing more eternally young and lovely than Sigrid ever remembered.

“Well, friend.” That pale hand had extended itself, palm up and waiting.

“Well, I offer the same thing I always have. Walk with me in the night, Sigrid. Be my companion, for I grow tired of the same old thing. And you will too, if you linger here. How much more time must pass, until everyone you know from your youth is dead and gone?”

“Well, and I will make you truly immortal.”

Watching Serana from across the seemingly vast distance of the Skyforge, Sigrid had cracked a bittersweet smile. “I’m gonna have to pass on that offer yet again, Serana.”
The Volkihar had left silently in the night, as there were no more words to be said. But Sigrid had discovered a single gleamblossom upon her pillow that night, which she kept pressed and dried in her personal chest. Things she had collected in there that still held meaning; her mammoth tusk bracelet - yellowed with the years - which she worried about damaging. An old wreath, one of her first that had hung in Jorrvaskr; barely clinging to solid form after countless decades. Ribbons that Svari had worn as a child; and again, upon her wedding to a strapping Nord lad before the Gildergreen.

She touched a book of sheet music fondly. Fjora had gone on to become a bard of some note. Her Tales of the Dragonborn had been generally considered the most truthful rendition; though some critics scoffed at the very idea of a woman changing form into that of a dragon.

Gydda had fought her way into the Companions, becoming the Master at Arms much to the pride of her parents. She taught still in her dotage, a stern woman with oh-so familiar pale eyes that made Sigrid ache to look upon them.

No matter where she turned, Sigrid could not escape the memory of him.

Jorrvaskr, which had expanded into a newly built set of halls where Heimskr’s hut once stood. Not a bad legacy to leave behind. It had developed into a sort of martial academy; where students of warcraft could train and read from the massive library her husband had left behind. Hopeful warriors followed the footsteps of Farkas; the maps the giant had painstakingly drawn were copied by hand by reverent students. Sending every whelp, every newblood off to battle with a clear vision of their path.

Far better to leave. To take this last gift from the love of her life, and journey south to a place she had never imagined to see. It had warmed her heart to see Teldryn Sero insist upon accompanying her on her journey...still hale and tough as ever. It had nearly stopped the same organ to see Gelebor, Knight Paladin of Snow Elves and intractable recluse, show up in Solitude to tag along as she boarded the ship to Alinor.

Sigrid wished she knew where her path lay, for though the years had meshed into an unending series of days, nights and seasons...she wandered through them with little joy. She thought she knew something of the grief that the High Elves sang of, now; listening to them chant in their leaf-glass cathedrals.

Ai! laurië lantar lassi súrinen,
yéni únótimë ve râmar aldaron!
Yéni ve lintë yuldar avánier
mi oromardi lisse-miruvóreva
Sí man i yulma nin enquantuva?
Standing there one day, just soaking in the melancholic air, she had turned to Ondolemar. Never far from her side, the Altmer had looked down at her in mingled surprise and reticence, as she had requested the translation from High Altmer.

She could clearly recall every word, as his low voice spoke the elvish words in Norse.

\[
\text{Ah! like gold fall the leaves in the wind,} \\
\text{long years numberless as the wings of trees!} \\
\text{The years have passed like swift draughts} \\
\text{of the sweet mead in lofty halls beyond the West,} \\
\text{Who now shall refill the cup for me?}
\]

Sigrid sighed as the song ended. The wind blowing in from the sea rang against the hanging chimes. Tinkling bells, long hanging strands of glass tangled in the breeze; leaving echoes of notes hanging in the air.

Wistfully, Sigrid thought she might finally understand. For like the elves, she wanted what once had been, so long ago.

\text{What would never be again.}

*****************

And here they had arrived, in the land of the Altmer. Summerset Isles. And here they remained, passing peaceful days in the gardens and open-air rooms of SunHaven Hall. Listening to music, gardening, eating...all the pleasant tasks of old age Sigrid chuckled at to encounter here. In this place, of all places. \text{And to think that I would be drooling in my pudding, in some nursing home back in South Dakota. No, wait...I’d be dead. How old am I this year? One hundred twenty? One hundred twenty five? Damn, I've lost track again. By looks, I'm still pushing fifty.}

\text{Okay. Sixty.}

Sweeping down the halls towards the dining hall in that ridiculous plum gown, Sigrid thanked her lucky stars that she had not lost her freedom of movement. Other things had lost their savor with time, such as her fondness for travel ( \text{rough and uncomfortable, her legs just weren’t what they used to be} ) being replaced by the yearning for a good book by a warm fire. But her heart, her humor
burned as brightly as it ever had. She glowed now, spying the faces of her three friends, sharp faced and smiling as they stood at her approach.

“Thanks for waiting for me. I got distracted and lost track of the time.” She sat, her chair scooted in for her by Gelebor (thank you, polite David Bowie) and she inhaled deeply, as the tureens of soup were lifted of their covers. “Oh, good. Something with seafood in it. I didn’t mind the...the bug dish. But I was picking legs out of my teeth for days. Days!”

“That’s because you were supposed to delicately sip the stewed insides out of the chitinous armor, Sigrid. Not crunch them whole like one would a nut. Savage.”

“Ponce.” Waving her spoon in the air, she nearly spattered Teldryn as Gelebor smiled to see the irritation plain on her face. “Ain’t nobody got time for that.”

“Oh but we do, my dear Dragonborn. All the time in the world.”

She blew a raspberry at the Altmer, who sat pursing his lips over the shellfish dish. Over the years, Ondolemar had wrestled the Aldmeri Dominion down into something more parliamentary than despotic. Ancarion, the youthful archaeologist, had become embroiled in the political aftermath of the Volkihar Scandal (as it was called) and was now one of the most influential and wealthy Mer on the island.

And now, so was Ondolemar. Popular, prized for his company as well as his not-insubstantial wealth of land and fortune. And oh, were the elven ladies a’calling. Along with everyone else. “Hey. So, how about Lemar as a nickname?”

“No.” Straightening his napkin over his lap, Ondolemar didn’t even glance her way. Sipping at the wine Gelebor was pouring out into everyone’s goblets, Sigrid swished it in her mouth and swallowed. Mmm. Like pistachio and caramel would taste, if they grew on vines. “How about Ondy?”

Gelebor laugh-coughed, his albino skin flushing as Ondolemar glared at him. Fidgeting with his napkin, the Snow Elf spoke hurriedly. “Sigrid, why don’t we continue discussing our trip to the Forests of Auridon? I’ve heard they have winged lizards that sing, flying from treetop to treetop-”

“No. Seriously. Ondolemar is a mouthful. What will your lovely bride-to-be call you, as she runs around these vast halls to bask in your presence?”

A tic began throbbing in the Altmer’s forehead as she traced her finger around the rim of her goblet, causing the crystal to ring. “Ondooolemaaar! Damn, it just doesn’t slip off the tongue like it should. I like Lemar.”

“Enough slips from your tongue, you little fetcher.” Teldryn Sero kicked her underneath the tabletop, as Ondolemar irritably snapped fingers, summoning the house servants. “Can’t you see the old n’wah has no patience for such things?”

Sigrid blinked, trying to focus upon the golden visage of her friend. Ondolemar had been cranky at all the ‘meet-cutes’ his stewardess had put together for him. Desperately trying to find the poor Mer a wife, before his run of popular luck ran dry. Damn, is my eyesight going now? He looks like he’s going to be sick.

They finished the delicious dinner in near silence, only breaking to converse about the food as
different courses were brought out.

As Sigrid dipped her finger in her some golden cream concoction that tasted nearly like a cappuccino, Ondolemar cleared his throat and stood. “Might I have a moment of your time, Dragonborn?”

Raising an eyebrow at how serious he looked, Sigrid nodded. Her knees popped as she walked down the velvety carpeting to what was Ondolemar’s personal office.

*Very cigar-and-leather vibed. This place would fit in at Oxford or Cambridge perfectly. No... She noticed the glowing geodes of soul gems, skulls of strange beasts and books with titles she couldn’t read on the shelves, and sighed. Hogwarts, then. I’ve died and gone to Hogwarts, where all the students are all from Slytherin...if Hogwarts was set in a semi-tropical forest with a shit-ton of xenophobic immortal yellow people.*

“Sigrid.” He gestured for her to sit upon the couch. Warily avoiding the buttons (which looked like tiny carved faces screaming) Sigrid sat at the far end. He joined her in the middle, seeming not to care about sitting on faces. Face sitter.

She mentally reigned herself in. And there it was again. The ever-present libido. Why couldn’t you die off with my menopause, you damn whore?

Not betraying her thoughts in the slightest, she smiled at her old friend. “What’s up?”

Shifting uncomfortably, he leaned over and templed his long fingers together. *Uh oh. He’s got the face.* The face that always heralded bad news, of some sort. Sigrid sat up straighter.

He sighed, his glass-green eyes looked almost through her. “As you know, I’ve been embroiled recently in trying to find a wife. Mostly, I’ll admit, to get my stewardess Ilthuriel off my back.”

Sigrid snorted. “Good luck. Those nails have dug in tight. I’ve never seen such a parade of pretty young things, all for you. Why haven’t you chosen one yet, just out of curiosity?” Examining her nails, Sigrid checked his expression from the corner of her eye.

He looked tired. “Because I feel not even a shred of attraction for any of the females I have been offered, of late.”

Feeling sorry for him, Sigrid leaned over and patted his hand. “Ondolemar...that sucks. Would it really be the end of the world, if you married a human? Or just...I dunno. Dated around? I know you had a good thing going with that Breton chick a while back.”

Smiling wanly, Ondolemar leaned back on the couch. “Scared her off. She didn’t mind spending my gold, but the thought of raising my heirs was...a bit much.”

“Shame. What will you do now?”

Almond eyes, so clear and ageless, fixed upon her. “I had hoped,” he spoke slowly, as though he were chewing the words before spitting them out, “...to entice you to accept my hand in marriage.”

Sigrid stopped picking at her lip and gave him an affronted look. “You have got to be joking.”

His thin lips curved into a warm smile. “Afraid not. We’d make a good pair, you and I. I know...” he reached out to take her hand.
She let him, letting the words wash over her, as she mentally prepared to shut him down. No way was she going to be married a third time. Trouble came in threes. Losing her last husband had nearly been the death of her. “...know that you’ve taken the loss of Vilkas hard. He was a good man, a good Nord. And you were together for, what? Half your human lifespan?”

“...But you’re far less temporal, now.” He continued, rubbing her hand with one slender forefinger as she studied him in return. Hopeful, Ondolemar squeezed her hand. “What...er. How do you feel about any of this, so far.”

“I think you’re full of shit.”

He made to remove his hand from hers, his lips withering into a scowl. She held fast, glaring at her friend as he turned away. “Don’t be like that. You know as well as I do, after my last health check-up, that I am aging faster and faster. The plumbing doesn’t work anymore, Ondolemar. I couldn’t give you kids, and I’m not sure I’d want to.”

“...Because they’d be complete and utter prats.” She added, feeling relief inside as he grinned ever-so-slightly at her words. “Any blend of you and me is sure to be a total jerk. Plus, even though I am ‘Dragonborn’ and ‘Harbinger’ and shit, I already know your people are really not super-impressed by me.”

“They could be.” He quirked a thin eyebrow at her. “You haven’t shown them all you can do.”

“And I don’t want to!” She hit his shoulder, wincing as it caromed off the glassine tabard he wore. *Like a beetle shell, only crack-proof.* “Some of your pals in the New Dominion still want to slice me open. Find out what makes me tick. *No thank you.* I like my organs inside, pretty please. Not outside in glass jars, nauseating the tourists.” She pointedly scanned his office decor.

He sighed. “Well. It was a long shot. But thank you for summarily ending all hope for a spouse I could at least tolerate, for a while.”

“Dork. Not a snowball’s chance in hell of it happening. I’m flattered, though, that you think my company is preferable to some air-headed twit. You’d be getting a raw deal, tying yourself to me ’til death do you part. Which will be sooner than you think.”

Leaning back against him, Sigrid kicked her feet up on the couch cushion and took off her shoes. *Fuck it.* They’d been friends for so long, and she had hung out with him and the other two Mer for so many years...it would be silly to let such a little thing destroy their friendship.

“How? His long arm tucked her in more securely against him, as she yawned.

“What? And if you’re going to read or something, can you take the damn plate glass off? I can’t rest against you with it on. And it smells funny.”

He laughed quietly, as she felt herself being folded forward. Chucking the heavy tabard carelessly across the room, it landed upon the carpet with a *bong-bam* of noisy complaint. “There. Perhaps reading would be advisable, to relax. Your company in privacy is...strangely arousing. Despite your dismissal of my suit.”

Twisting her neck to stare at him, almost upside down, Sigrid made a face. “You’re kidding. Please say you’re kidding, right? ‘Doleymar, I’m freaking ugly now. I’ve got wrinkles in my face that only a cliff-rider would love. You really haven’t banged anyone since Maribelle Jouette, have you?’”

A huff of breath, spiced with dessert wafted her way. “No, but that’s beside the point. Surely you know...” he shifted his knees, so that Sigrid now lay upon his lap, face up.
His grave face lowered slowly, hesitantly towards hers. “-that I have had feelings for you for some time now.”

Holding very still, the Dragonborn stared into those eyes that seemed to go on forever. His iris nearly swallowed up the pupil; a shade that reminded her suddenly of a geyser pool in Yellowstone she had seen once.

Deep, crystal clear all the way to its base...and fairly boiling with heat. “Sigrid.”

The kiss, when it came, was not entirely unexpected.

His lips were mere slices of flesh; thin and dry. He pressed against her tenderly, as she lay there in a kind of funk. Relishing the novelty of being kissed, after such a long dry spell. Even if it was by the wrong man.

It was her fault what happened after, she thought a few seconds later, as she grabbed his ears and pulled down. Hard.

Dryness gave way to a mouth that tasted of wine. Pure and dark, sinful in its ecstatic savoring, the way he plundered her mouth with his tongue. She ran her fingers along the fine length of his ears, marvelling at how warm they were. How real. I wonder if it feels good when I-

She stroked his ears. Rubbing the thin cartilage between thumb and forefinger.

-Making him stiffen. Bite back a helpless moan, as she allowed her tongue to trace the edges of his sharp teeth in slowly rising greed, as his hands hauled her up from where she lay, to better attack her lips with his own.

They remained liplocked for the better part of an hour, reaching a nearly pretzel-like contortion as he bent his overly tall frame around her smaller, blunted form. It was familiar, comforting, and at the same time so new, as she brushed her more human-small face against the long pointed slopes of his features, pecking his cheekbones with kisses that made him sob in mixed mirth and despair.

Her wits were slowly returning back to her. No matter how fun that had been (or how deftly she avoided the prominent bulge beneath her) Sigrid knew it was over before it had began.

She wouldn’t.

Couldn’t do it, couldn’t promise what she no longer had to give away. Her heart resided somewhere in Sovngarde.

If only her hormones had caught the message a bit sooner. She cleared her throat, as he lipped the rounded curve of her ear, feeling a tingle of lust curl up tight in her belly. “Ondolemar...no.”

“No?” He pulled back, his mouth swollen. Green eyes near alight with fire.
“No.” Standing shakily, she slid off of his lap as he jerked. Scrambled at the desk for a handhold.

“Shit. Sorry about that...er...problem. In your pants. It looks like a big problem.”

“It is.” Those eyes filled with green flame blinked at her. “Are you quite certain you don’t want to—”

“...To help a friend out?” She nearly laughed at herself. At him, as they both began chuckling at the entire goddamn mess they had found themselves in.

He had a lovely smile; sharp white teeth and rumpled dandelion yellow hair. You’re a fucking tease, Sigrid. “Ondolemar...you know you’re one of my best friends ever. And I’m really sorry that I took advantage of you just then. It’s been...well.”

She turned away, staring at nothing as she heard a rustle of cloth announcing movement behind her. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been held like that.”

He hugged her from behind. “I must apologize as well.” His cultured voice sent ripples of unrelieved tension through her core. “I knew you were still in mourning, yet I dared to hope.”

She patted his hand. “No hard feelings, then. Let’s just forget that you’re an amazing kisser, and that I’m the idiot who grabbed your ears. Totally overstepping my bounds.”

As he snickered at her expense, she turned around. Plum-burgundy silk swirling around her legs, as she lifted her head up to gaze at his face. “Your ears...that felt good, didn’t it?”

Shaking his head, Ondolemar pushed past her to open the door of his office, laughing still. “Yes they are an erogenous source of pleasure for my race. And yes, you overstepped your bounds. But so did I.”

"Come. The others will wonder what we have been up to.”

“...Smutty, carnal and naughty things. I wonder if they feel left out. What would you call an elven orgy? An elegy?”

Ondolemar stopped in his tracks. “I hope that was a joke made in poor taste, and not out of any serious desire.”

Sigrid hmmed playfully, placing her hands square on her hips. “I don’t know. You see any other fine outworlders with big tits and sassy smiles ready to deflower Gelebor? That Mer has been holding it in for a long time. A looong time. Speaking of helping out a friend.”

Ondolemar shook his head slowly. “Honestly, woman. I’m not sure if I should applaud you...or bury you somewhere deep in my garden. Never to see the light of day.”

She felt a pang of sorrow at the term of endearment. “Please...don’t call me woman.”

“Apologies. That was his charming term for you, wasn’t it.”

Sigrid blew out a breath at the sneer on his face. “Well, it was nice when he said it, not you. Now where is my third course of dessert? I'm old and entitled. I feel a need to stuff my face with something.”
“Since you will not allow me to fill you with other, more pleasurable alternatives…?”

“Shut up, Ondolemar.”

Walking back to the dining hall hand in hand, she winced as every stride made her knees click and pop. Old age sucks. Trying to glide smoothly, her bare feet padded along the carpet. Until she was stopped suddenly by him before the closed door where Gelebor and Teldryn waited.

He took her hand in his own. Long slender fingers rubbed her smaller, worn hands. “Dear friend,” he began, the bare suggestion of a smile still there, as she sighed at his interruption of her devouring frilly cakes and sweet things.

His thumb lifting her chin to ensure her eye contact banished all thoughts of dessert from her mind. “The part of you that is not flesh, but spirit - it is as young and lovely as any flower of the courts in Shimmerene. Your goodness, your forthright nature...and dare I say, your humor. Yes. These are the things I treasure about you, Dragonborn.”

“It is these qualities that make you beautiful. Not your fine features, or the promise held in the curve of your body. I thought you should know.”

_Dammit._ She was _not_ crying, even as she felt tears spill down her wrinkled cheeks. “Flatterer.”

“Quite. Now let us return. Perhaps Teldryn, with his intimate attention to detail in accosting my female staff, will know where I may find a prospective bride.”

*******

Feeling the rock of the deck beneath her feet, Sigrid smiled as Alinor passed beyond the horizon.

_Home._ She was going home.

Never mind that she returned alone to Skyrim.

Gelebor and Teldryn had found more than they had bargained for in their years spent in the Summerset Isles. The Knight-Paladin was utterly involved in recording the tales of his people, reading what had been stored for countless centuries in the vast libraries of Alinor, Lillandril and Eton Nir. He would stay, he told her with a winning smile. Stay and serve Auri-El in this preservation of what was left. Alinor bore a temple to Akatosh that he volunteered at regularly, so in this way he could assuage the guilt of leaving the Forbidden Vale and its empty shrines. It was a good compromise; the Dragonborn felt grateful he was not doomed to eternal solitude in the Vale. A lonely end, surrounded only by the Falmer and countless leagues of ice and snow. This was far better.
Teldryn Sero had stayed to pursue more...earthy goals. Sigrid expected a wedding invitation any day, for he had been disappearing with one of the serving women for regular intervals, now. It had been a toss up for the last six years between this particular gal and a ball busting bitch of an Altmer noblewoman. The drama of the love triangle had provided the remaining Mer and Sigrid endless entertainment (particularly for teasing fodder) but now that it was over…

It was damn near irritating, just how happy the Dunmer looked with his humble-born sweetheart of the rose-gold hair. Mooning around, walking hand in hand in the path beneath the trees. Disgustingly in love. Good for him.

And good for Ondolemar and his new wife. She had stayed, focusing all her considerable powers to find her friend a suitable bride.

It had taken a while. Nearly a year, in fact. But after endless musical venues and balls, glittering galas and soirees, Ondolemar had joined hands with an older, saturnine Altmer by the name of Oldornawen.

They had bonded over insults and gardening. Quite a pair. She would be sad to see no more of them, waving back as they slowly grew smaller. Calling out to the golden forms of the Mer, until Alinor disappeared into the gloaming mists of the sea.

Biting her lips, she licked salt spray from them and raised her hand to cover her eyes. A storm was blowing up from the west, in dark hued huddled clouds that looked ominous even to her untrained eyes. I could always do the Clear Storm Shout. If I have to keep it up for a while, it might wear my voice ragged. Whatever. I doubt it will hit right away.

Wonder what the kids are up to, by now. Did anyone die that I know? No one has sent me a letter in almost two years. Granny Siggy is officially out of the loop.

The ship glided north, its sails snapping in the brisk wind as it bore the Dragonborn to the northern climes. Taking her home.

***********

Standing at the whalebone bridge, Vilkas waited for his wife to come back to him.

Time passed strangely in the realm of Sovngarde. He couldn’t say exactly how long he and Farkas had stayed here after arriving, for there was no sunrise or sunset to herald any type of change. Only the nebula of the circling auroras overhead; and the vast spread of Sovngarde laid before them, far beyond the massive walls of Shor’s Hall that ironically took up only a small part of this afterlife.

Beyond stretched eternity. The flower-strewn plains and hills leading to the whalebone bridge were rimmed in mountains that he had taken to climbing often with Farkas, marvelling at how invigorated
he felt. It was as if layers of woolen cloth had been peeled back with death. And the boundless energy coursing through him; had he ever felt this way? Not even as a young man, running up and down steep hills and climbing the far cliffs; for Vilkas was tireless in exploring this new place.

“It never ends,” his mother Gydda had smiled after embracing him for the first time. After he had inquired as to what lay past the greatness of the hall, curious, she had enlightened him. “There is an ocean, pure and perfect behind us. With so many fish, and the water - oh, it is so clear! There are ships. We should sail, son. Sail away and find just how far the horizon is, to see what we can see.”

“Oh we can stay on solid ground and travel far afield in the forests,” boomed his father, clasping both twins tightly in his hands. The older Thadrig (Vilkas was having difficulty, for the Thadrig he thought of remained in Skyrim running an inn) had also been overjoyed to see them arrive.

It had been wonderful to reunite with Kodlak, who had clapped them both upon the back. To see Njada. Jergen. Even Carlotta, who arrived not long after; Farkas wrapping her in a great bear hug that soon grew to include their parents as well as Vilkas.

The only truly disorienting thing, he thought, was the strangely shifting appearance of the spirits that dwelled in the valorous halls. Fighting, drinking, singing...most remained as they seemed at a glance. But the souls he had met for the first time seemed to flicker, almost - like a lantern flagging in a drafty gust. Perspectives were impermanent, apparently, and it was damn confusing to see his mother blush and become strangely young (the youth of a blossoming girl upon her, where there had previously been age lines) when his father shot her a knowing smile.

It hadn't taken Ysgramor long to explain how appearances worked here, for spirits. “No doubt you'll be wondering about the strange reappearance of your eye, and your brother's leg.”

Vilkas had listened attentively in amazement as the First of Harbingers waxed on. “You appear as you see yourself, lad. Some remain as they were at their death. Others - though not usually those of this Hall- revert to their childhood. Pah. Milkdrinkers.”

The tall, blonde king of old winked. “Most settle into themselves after a goodly introduction to the wonders of Shor’s realm. Don't fash yourself- you'll always be you. Whether old and greyed, or just showing the first shadow of a beard. Welcome to Sovngarde, son.”

Sailing, hiking, feasting and fighting...it all revolved into one great round that Vilkas very much enjoyed. Much like Jorrvaskr, without the troublesome nature of flesh; for no matter how many times he fell upon Ysgramor’s axe or landed a killing blow in turn, the spirits picked themselves up in laughter, unharmed. Trading insults and good natured ribbing about his skill in battle.

It was a good afterlife, surrounded by family and friends. And the lands of the gods was unreal, in its infinite beauty and boundless space.

-Yet he found himself pausing at times. Putting away the sword and the mead, walking past the great double doors to stand at the bridge. Peering into the far distance, past Tsun standing sentinel, to see if she had come.

When she would arrive. Time may have had no meaning in Sovngarde, but his heart knew…

-Knew what it missed. So many matched couples had gained entrance to the hall. It was a torment, to see Farkas and Carlotta run hand in hand to one of the many golden doors that split off from the main
body of the hall. To feel lonely, though he was rarely alone.

So he waited. And he watched.

**************

He was picking Tsun’s mind on battle strategy in various scenarios when he first saw her.

At first, Vilkas wasn’t sure what he was looking at. A flash of light from the sky. A silver haired figure, trudging slowly down the mountain slopes, stopping at times to brush a wrinkled hand against the stems and petals of flowers.

*An old woman,* he thought in disappointment. *It couldn’t be her. She was ever young at heart. Why would she despair at arriving here?*

No longer eager to see the face of the newest spirit, Vilkas sighed and turned back to Tsun. Whose craggy face had wreathed in a warm smile.

He had been about to give the God of Trials a skillfully rendered plan of attack based on the Battle of the White-Gold Tower, when a voice called out to him. “-Vilkas!”

Turning back, he saw…

She was running, racing with unbound energy towards him, towards the whalebone bridge. As he watched, the age sloughed away from her features. Rich auburn spilled like ink upon the pale silver tresses, and a bright smile stretched on his wife’s face, as his feet began pounding the path to reach her.

Reach and embrace her, wildly spinning the woman (*finally, she was here!*) in his arms as she laughed breathlessly. “You’re here! And I’m here! Oh my god, you have no idea how much I’ve missed you. Wait. Where’s your scar?”

Nearly crushing her in his grip, Vilkas closed his eyes tightly. “What has taken you so long?”

Her smaller hands patted his face, his shoulders as she struggled to get him to look at her. “Well, I had this stupid promise I made fifty years back. So I stayed, even though I was fucking miserable and you suck.”

Vilkas found himself laughing as she smacked his chest. “Really? Sending me that letter *twenty years later?* You should have let me have it right after you...you died, you asshole! I swear you are *never* visiting a dwemer ruin without me again!”

Faintly, he remembered that desperate mission. The water, rising ever higher...Farkas’s face pinched in pain as he fought off the Falmer who were screeching, the bolt of electricity that had stunned him,
causing him to fall… “I don’t think there are any dwemer ruins here, luckily. But you should see the ocean that lies behind Shor’s Hall. It’s incredible, Sigrid.”

She bit her lip, the sight causing a slow burn of want curl through him. “Er...maybe not right away, love. My ship sank on the way back to Skyrim. I promise, I had nothing to do with it! All those poor sailors…”

Finally lowering her from where he had held the woman, suspended in his arms, Vilkas gazed upon her young, familiar face as she chattered eagerly. “I saved all I could, love! But my throat was so sore, after Shouting so much, and...and. Ugh. Drowning bites the big one. Not the way I would have chosen to go out, really.”

He cracked a grin. “Hmm. Poor thing. You only drowned. I suffocated by water, after being ripped apart by lightning bolts and Falmer axes.”

Sigrid’s hands fastened behind him, pressing into the small of his back. “...Ohh, so it’s a competition, now? We all see who had the goriest, most painful death?”

“You’d think so, the way most of the warriors here jaw on about it.”

They stood there, just holding one another for awhile. Both unable to stop smiling, as he watched all the feelings she felt shift, ever transparent on that pale freckled face. “I’ve missed you so.”

She trembled, as he slowly grasped her upper arms and lifted her up, giving him the chance to see her eyes well up with tears. “You too, you bastard. Don’t ever leave me again.”

“I won’t. You’ll never be rid of me now, wife.”

Slanting his lips over hers, he felt her legs wrap tightly around his waist as he groaned against her mouth. Spirits they may have been, yet her form felt solid to him. Real. He pulled her closer, more fully flush against his chest as she nipped at his lips. Sucking on his tongue as he nearly stumbled, both completely caught up in the ecstatic joy of it all, until-


Breaking away, Sigrid shot him a look. “Don’t ruin this for me, Tsun. I already fought you once. Don’t make me Shout you off the bridge!”

Vilkas laughed, feeling a curious lightness as she scowled in his arms at the God of Trials. “He’d just come right back, love. The laws that bind this place make it so. Believe me, I’ve pushed him off already in one of our spars.”

His thumbs pressing into the softness of her waist, Vilkas grinned to see her pale as Tsun harrumphed at the turn the conversation had taken. “So don’t try that. Try something else.”

Allowing her to slide down and place her feet back on the ground, he watched as Sigrid rolled her shoulders and bounced, fingers flaring experimentally. “Okay. Let’s do this. But I’m warning you Tsun...you’re a horrible cockblocking monster, throwing off my groove. For that, I’m not going to go easy on you.”
The ancient Nord’s voice echoed strangely in the fields of Sovngarde. “We will see, Dragonborn.”

Stepping back, Vilkas put his hand upon the great spine of the sea-beasts’s bones that formed the bridge. Watching with a smile that nearly hurt, as his wife launched a full scale attack upon the giant warrior.

Holding tightly as her Shout nearly blasted him from the bridge, Vilkas laughed out loud as his wife’s face fell. For Tsun reappeared, not a moment later from where she had thrown him into the yawning crevasse. The God of Trials sighed, looking down at the annoyed face of Sigrid, Dragonborn. “I find you worthy. Go and bother me no more.”

“Yesss!”

Grabbing his hand as she raced past him, he held on tightly as Sigrid whooped. Nearly jumping across the vertebrae of the bridge as he was pulled along, still chuckling.

“Let’s go! I want to see everybody! Oh my god, is that Kodlak? His hair is red! Why does everyone look so young? I’m kind of shocked that you’re taking how old I am so well, Vilkas. Wait. Why are you looking at me like that?”

A din of noise surrounded them, as the doors opened more fully. Revealing faces that were as dear to him as they were to her, waiting for them to step inside.

Interlocking his fingers with hers, Vilkas looked at Sigrid with a fond smile. “Ysgramor can explain it far better than I. Our spirits reflect who we are, Sigrid.”

“How we feel. Who we are with. Come.” It was his turn, to pull at her arm as she stood stiffly, eyes wide. Encouraging her with a tip of his head to enter the Hall of Eternal Valor.

“Come in. We’ve been waiting for you. All of us.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, here we are at the end of things. This is the last chapter of Vanished Without a Trace.

I have really enjoyed writing it. It’s not perfect, and there are parts that I almost wish I could rewrite completely - but for my first fanfic ever, I’m really happy that it turned out so well. It’s waaay longer than I’d first imagined it. Sappier, too. D’awww...

Thank you to everyone who commented, critiqued and praised this work. If you read this, then you enjoyed playing Skyrim. Which instantly makes us besties, in my book.

I am seriously so sad that this story is over. Do you know I wrote this Sovngarde chapter, like, months ago? Right near the beginning where I planned out all the rough drafts for the plot? Ugh. I hate endings.
If you liked this fic, check out my other one I'm currently working on. It focuses on a Forsworn Mage Dragonborn aaand *dun dun dun* Ulfric Stormcloak. Boo yah.

http://archiveofourown.org/works/11498760

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!