A Heart Never Forsworn

by PeanutBrittles

Summary

Cast out from her people for her crimes, the Forsworn Nemain somehow ends up in Helgen and meets the sworn enemy of her people, the man Madanach has sent her on a mission to kill: Ulfric Stormcloak.

Forsworn sympathizer, hater of Nords and remorseless killer, Nemain must decide what prejudices she will cling to, as she begrudgingly begins to respect the Bear of Markarth.

Can a heart once broken begin beating anew? Surely never for the man who slaughtered
every man, woman and child of the Reach who stood against him.

Bitter and betrayed, this is the tale of Nemain. Forsworn and Forsaken.
The Ritual

Chapter Notes

The Irish Gaelic I used as part of the Forsworn ritual is listed below. I make no claims of ultimate authenticity - my research is web based, so don't throw a fit if I get it wrong. Let me know though...I'm all for learning new things.

Codladh sámh - sleep well
Solas Mhic Dé ar a n-anam - God have mercy on your soul

Mood music for this chapter: 'Alfadhirhaiti' by the iron age tribal group Heilung. Self described as using everything from running water, human bones, reconstructed swords and shields up to ancient frame drums and bronze rings in their songs. COOL.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuZMmV-ZjcM&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&index=30

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They were there first.

The Reachmen, the Witchmen. Forsworn.

They who worshipped the Old Gods, still. Who sacrificed goat and spriggan to the Et’Ada, who sprinkled the blood on the ground in the name of the Horned One.

They who reverenced the Hagravens, the Briarhearts...witch and warrior that gave up all humanity. Sacrificing to the gods, to the cause. And fought still, even now for the kingdom that ever remained their own, no matter what symbols foreign man printed upon paper, or treaty proclaimed. The Reach belonged to the Reachmen.

They were the scourge of the Nords. The axe that fell in the dark. For no matter who held the Reach, the ancient traditions still held sway. And the blood, the honor to the Gods and the Goddesses repaid.

One way or another.

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In Deepwood Redoubt, a clearing in the vale flooded under full moonlight revealed an ancient rite underway.
Bone rattles shook and drums beat a solemn dirge, as women and men alike chanted and cried out; calling to the gods, the Et’Ada, to bless them on this sacred night. A great fire had been built, its fuel the massive cage crafted of juniper wood and femur bones. In it was contained the bodies of the sacrificed, forever silent though the charred faces remained howling...mouths stretched in an eternal scream. Gathered from near and far, Nord and Breton...all burned. Frozen forever in fear, an ode to the spirits to heed the Forsworn; heed the sobriety of the coven’s request.

Beasts of the mountain, sabrecat and goat, had been freshly killed. Witches chopped off the heads, adorning spikes with the macabre decorations that guided the gods to the People; the blood collected carefully into gourds and bowls were strewn around the clearing.

In sacred circles and widdershins walked the Forsworn shaman. Naked, garbed only in the cloak of her long dark hair and holding a bowl of blood, she dipped a knife in the still-warm liquid and flecked it upon the supplicants who bowed and moaned. Over and over, dipping, strewing the redness in streaks ‘till the bowl lay bare.

Her task complete, she set the bowl reverently before the fire. Turning, the drums increased in tone and speed as she walked in state to the great altar.

There it stood, chest high to a man. The great smoothed surface was stained dark with the sacrifices of many past. Embraced in stone bowls surrounding the altar were corpses of spiggans; head of goat and heart of cat. A noxious smoke burned in the embers of the bowls, filling the shaman with sacred sight, as she finished her journey.

The shaman bowed, and remained crouched, as the noise and calling reached a febrous pitch. She did not tremble. She did not shrink.

Not even when the dark crones of Hircine appeared, bearing a man young and stripped bare to a loincloth before the assembly of the Reachfolk.

An expectant silence greeted the hagravens, as their dragging footclaws rasped against stone. Black pinioned arms nearly shrouded his face, as their rough caws filled the clearing of Deepwood Vale. They spoke, in deep crooning squawks. And the Forsworn, the Reachmen did answer, echoing in the following verse.

Where is the one who calls, who calls?

The briarheart born in the night!

Who is the one who calls, who calls?

The wicker sacrifice alight!

When will the one be called, be called?

At the feast when the beast does bite!
What do we call, and who do we call?

The Briarheart and Witch to fight!

Feathers shivered in the moonlight as the man was led to the altar. A howling was heard, as the People called out great praise for his bravery, his sacrifice, as he looked out upon them. Searching the dark heaving masses, until his eyes affixed to her.

The shaman, rising with knife in hand. Fear warred with love in her grey gaze.

Codladh sámh, to the warrior
reborn in full moons light!
Solas Mhic Dé ar a n-anam!

Codladh sámh to the witch
Holding death in her hand tonight!
Solas Mhic Dé ar a n-anam!

As the man nodded to her, she approached him. The hagravens swayed as they hobbled to either end of the great altar of stone. Cooing softly, when as one the People arose to dance. To sing, beating hollowed out gourds and metallic fingerspans. Stamping the ground with their feet, greeting the night, as the man laid himself down, down on the altar’s dark surface without a fuss.

The riotous din was but a hum in the shaman’s head, as her mind clicked upon the same repetitive beat. That of a heart thumping, droning on and on in her mind. Watching as the man upon the altar turned, ever so slightly to look upon her, the shaman stiffened. Placed the knife - ebon dark, thrice blessed in water from the sacred springs - upon his belly.

Turning to the hagraven upon her left, the shaman retrieved a briarheart. Orange gold tipped in scarlet, it glowed upon her left hand. From the hagraven at her right she received a gleaming black soul gem. She was ready.

At a gesture from the bird crones, the People hushed. Watching, waiting; their eyes more like beasts than that of the Nords the mothers whispered that their blood had come from. Once when the land was young and the People unburdened by the defense of it, the shaman recalled, Nords and Forsworn had mingled and married. Made kin, to fill the rocky crags with mingled seed.

And they would do so again, when the worst of the invaders had been driven off - once and for all. Plight of the people, their task...their purpose, to serve the Gods by saving their land.

They were the Forsworn, she reminded herself. And what they were could never be undone.
Her resolution strengthened once more, the shaman placed the black soul gem upon the man’s head, between the eyes looking so gravely, so lovingly upon her. From his belly she drew the knife, balancing the briarheart in the opposing hand.

Nothing but the moon, the hagravens and the Gods, all watching. Judging the deed. She would be worthy, she swore in her mind as she raised the knife. Shining...the black-knife, night-blade that would steal her love’s heart away, forever beating in the belly of Mother on her left who licked her un-lips even now for a taste.

Her hand shook. His dark eyes closed. And the lips, those lips she had loved with kisses, that had touched near every part of her during the sacred joining earlier at sunset whispered.

Mouthed the words, “*Do it.*”

Turning to Mother, she kept her composure as the hagraven chittered her bony jaws and ruffled her winged forearms. The bird-crone grinned at the Forsworn’s face twisted with indecision she could scarce hide. And then she spoke the incantation, joined by the other, as the night bore witness to the change.

*Heart of thorn*

*Bones of the wild*

*In life, Forsworn*

*Rise from the dead*

*Blood of our Blood*

*Be reborn!*

The People leaned in, many hardly breathing as they watched the knife raised - so still in the shaman’s hand. *Do it.*

*Do it. He wants ye to do it. Ye must carve out the heart and stitch the briar. Feed the hagraven, else you be a liar, and cast off. Nevermore part of the People.*

*Do it now.*

The knife struck down.

The man made a choking gasp, his black eyes flying open as she trembled. Covered in the spurting,
sticky blood that pumped wildly, arterial spray from the heart, the heart…

Her own heart was cold. Numb, hidden away as she carefully sliced the knife through the skin. Creating a deeply jagged wound, cracking the man’s ribs as he panted loudly in pain.

She blinked back tears. She would not dishonor his sacrifice, as he would never cry out in the agony of what she did. Perfunctorily, the shaman incised the great vessels that dripped even now. Placing the knife upon the altar, she lifted the heart high above her head to show the assembled coven the pulsing organ.

Beating even now, with one sharp slice upon it. The enchantment holding firm, as she fondled his heart in her hands. Reluctantly, she stepped past him…struggled to ignore the face she loved wrench in unthinkable agony, as she released the slippery thing into Mother’s waiting claws.

A covetous coo sounded, and the shaman turned. Not trusting herself to wait, to see. To watch, as Mother devoured her grisly meal.

Still holding the briarheart - for it was ill luck to drop any of the sacred objects during the rite - the shaman slowly lowered it into the waiting cavity. Pressed both hands to his chest, as the man suffered…shaking and biting his lips in the death throes of his humanity as her spell wove the new heart, briarheart, into the place that had once been hers.

And now only belonged to the Gods. As the stitching, magic born, closed the wound in his chest, the shaman could still see the briarheart glow. Bright red, a mockery of the real thing. Glassed over, blurred by tears she dare not shed.

He gave one final, jerking shudder and then lay still.

A wailing moan came from somewhere amongst the people, joined by more as they called to him. Called to the Forsworn, the Briarheart to rise again, to walk among them.

Doona walk. Doon stand. You died well. Stay doon, love…and remain my love.

But it was to no avail. Eyes opening slowly, empty of all life, the man lifted himself like a draugr at the waist. The hagravens, one still consuming with snuffling snorts and grunting champs the heart, cackled and cawed in rejoicing; as the man lifted himself from the altar to stand.

Stand, unliving yet alive…the briarheart beating inside as the shaman placed the Horned One’s headdress upon him with quaking fingers.

And stumbled back, no longer able to restrain her grief, the unseemly tears as the newest Briarheart of Deepwood Redoubt walked among the cheering, applauding Forsworn of the Reach.

All over and ruined. Failed, to keep her own heart pure. For she had cried at the end as a child;
weak and wavering. They knew. They saw.

Ochone! She had failed him!

Wailing, tearing at her hair at the sight of him standing so still as the People patted his shoulders and marked his chest with the holy blood, the shaman was dragged off to the side. Held fast by grim faced witchblades and pillagers, as she sobbed limply in their arms.

Craning her neck back, the shaman watched for as long as she was able as they carried her bodily away. Away from the only home she had ever known as they cast her to the ravine, where she fell hard. Rolling, tumbling down the mountain slope and bashing her shoulder and hip into the icy cold wetness of the stream runneling through the rocks.

One of the pillagers threw her a waterskin and a knife. Her hair, long and matted, obscured her vision yet she grasped the things. Clutched them to her nakedness, as she noted the crudeness of the knife. The aged leather of the waterskin.

They did not expect her to live long, then.

“Be off, blood-traitor. Ye profane the Gods with yer unseemly grief. Off with ye!”

And so off she went, stumbling and slipping along as she blindly threw herself away. Away from Deepwood, from the mist-strewn crags of the Reach. Towards the southwest. To civilization. To the Dwarven city that dripped silver and blood of her people, crying out to her even now for vengeance.

Into the the churning cesspool of Markarth. Home of the hated, the high and mighty Nord.

To Markarth, Nemain the Forsaken would go.

Chapter End Notes

Excerpt from good ol' Wikipedia:

Diodorus Siculus asserts that a sacrifice acceptable to the Celtic gods had to be attended by a druid, for they were the intermediaries between the people and the divinities. He remarked upon the importance of prophets in druidic ritual:

"These men predict the future by observing the flight and calls of birds and by the sacrifice of holy animals: all orders of society are in their power... and in very important matters they prepare a human victim, plunging a dagger into his chest; by observing the way his limbs convulse as he falls and the gushing of his blood, they are able to read the future."
The Message

Chapter Notes

Refresher course on People of Markarth -

Muiri is featured in a Dark Brotherhood quest where you are asked to kill Alain Dufont, a bandit that stole her heart (and her adopted family's valuables, tossing her into the cold).

Everyone else is real. My OC Dragonborn is the only thing that belongs to me, really.
*tear*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“Delivery fer the silversmith.”
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She stood outside the door as the Redguard counted out her septims, taking the package without sparing her a glance. Inside the stone dwelling a woman spoke in tender tones. "We sold many of those lovely little necklaces you brought me, Adara. Did you make them yourself?"

The last coin clinked into her her open palm as a young girl whirled into view. "That's right! Papa helped me with the clasps, but I did all the links on my own."

Tilting her head slightly, Nemain watched as the male Redguard puffed out his chest in pride. "Adara bends the silver so naturally. Grandmother would have cried if she saw how deft our daughter has become."

"Well, I'm proud of both of you. I haven't been so busy since those nobles from Solitude come into the city three years ago. You should encourage her to smith more often, Endon."

Carefully tying the coins into her messenger satchel, she accepted the outgoing delivery...a tidily wrapped paper parcel. Noting its destination, the former Forsworn felt her eyebrows lift; her reaction largely unnoticed as the silversmith Endon sighed. "I miss those days, before the Forsworn took up arms again. When you could walk the roads in peace."

Going tense, she watched as Endon’s eyes glazed over, barely registering her still standing there in front of the door.

A slim brown hand reached out to close the door, causing Nemain to jump back as the heavy dwemer metalwork swung shut in her face."Endon, dear, please don't.... Save your frustrations for work."

Further rumblings of conversation sounded inside, too faint to make out. She shrugged, hoisted up her satchel and continued upon her rounds.

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In the heart of the western Druadac mountains, there lay the city of Markarth.

Hewn from rock by the Dwemer in long ages past, its stone streets were continually wet with the spray of a hundred waterfalls...pouring like silver down the craggy slopes.

And as the rising sun tipped over the range of the Druadac, it was said that one could see the falls run red in the rising light of day.

Red as blood.

Blood and silver fueled still the daily rhythms of Markarth as time ground on. Birds chirped, guards changed shifts and work continued ever onward as morn shifted to high noon.

Merchants cried out the quality of their wares to those strolling by, all manner of meats, vegetables and the ever present silver hawked in sing song jingles. Imperial legionnaires in their shining coats of armor stared down passing Bretons who cowered in their robes. Hulking orcs bristling with weaponry rubbed shoulders with windburned Nord farmhands, dust coated miners, red-faced drunks...all mingling in the labyrinthine stairs, trickling streams and passageways of the city of stone.

Day in, day out. The same, unvarying predictable routines.

Striding along with her burden of packages, letters and missives, Nemain scuttled along the narrow passageways. Avoiding the cool spray of the waterfalls, the Breton ducked beneath the spreading arms of the juniper tree, ringing the doorbell with her entrance.

She emitted a rasping croak. “Delivery fer the Hag’s Cure.”

In the gloom of the alchemy shop, she could dimly spy Old Bothela as she mixed powders and potions. Grinding the stub of the pestle into the mortar with quick, sharp stirs, the Reachwoman sniffed as Nemain approached.

“Good. You’re here...I be near finished with yer potion. Muiri, you are wanted.”

Sparing a rare smile - barely a twist of lips - for the venerable alchemist, Nemain turned at a sound. A clatter of footsteps from the upper rooms announced the arrival of a young Breton woman, running fingers through her hair. Her fair features lit up at the sight of her package, waiting at the counter.

Grabbing the papered parcel with both hands, Muiri danced in glee. “He sent it! I knew what we shared that night was special to him. See? See, Bothela? What do you say to that?”

"Y’should be more careful with the men y’pick, dear." Pouring the contents of the mortar into the alembic, Bothela adjusted the heat carefully. A sound of paper ripping overshadowed the bubbling of the old woman’s alchemy table, as Muiri opened her package; exclaiming with a shrill cry at the fineness of the silver amulet she had received.
“Oh, look! A heart! He crafted me a loveknot heart, Bothela! Mmm, wonder if I can get him away for another ‘private lesson’ at his forge.”

Nemain nearly yawned, far more interested in what Bothela was crafting. From the moment she awakened until the evening meal, the old one was seldom idle, and since Bothela remained her best customer, Nemain would grant her the courtesy of waiting for what should have already been prepared. Old friends were granted privileges few others enjoyed - the luxury of a few minutes time spent chatting being one of them.

Crinkling her dark eyes as the glow of flame increased, the Reachwoman counted under her breath as the solution in the alembic began to bubble and froth. With a hiss, the potion settled into a glassy emerald hue. Bothela smartly poured the green solution into a smoked bottle, capping it with wax. “A married man be harder to pin down than a luna moth in a storm. Surely you’ve learnt by now, child.”

Sighing inwardly, Nemain held her tongue as the young woman visibly sulked. "He said he loved me..."

"...Real men prove their love.” Turning from the alchemy table, Bothela shook a finger at her apprentice. “Words...eh, words be as empty as the air they run through. Just like that trinket ye’ve got there. Y’think this Endon will be any different than Alain, dear?"

Her face puckering, Muiri slumped against the counter. Her hands tightened around the silver chain, turning her knuckles white. “It feels different.”

Briskly, Bothela handed the potion to Nemain. "Cease moping aboot, girl. Tears won't change what you've done, or what the man did. Tis all in the past."

"I was such a fool. How could I let him use me like that?" Muiri banged her head against the counter, sniffing. Her face may have been lovely before, Nemain reflected as the woman wiped her nose on her sleeve. But this childish petulance had ruined her allure entirely. The coiffed hair, the carefully applied cosmetics had all been smeared to a black ruin. More chimney sweep than carefree maiden.

-And she had no time for children’s games. “Payment, please. Fifteen septims.”

Muiri lifted her head, her red rimmed eyes glaring at Nemain. “I'll pay you when I’m good and ready, witch! Can’t you see I’m busy!?" Lowering her head again, her sobs became exaggeratedly loud, her thin back rising and falling with each wet-sounding heave as Bothela and Nemain shared a look of annoyance.

The owner of the Hag’s cure stepped behind the counter and slid over a pouch of septims. “Tsk. Fine. Fer you, dear...along with this.”

The potion was still burning hot to the touch. The messenger handled it carefully, wadding a spare linen wrap around the bottle to prevent it from breaking in transit. Bothela watched Nemain's actions approvingly. “T'will be most potent in the following forty eight hours. Och, Muiri...enough! Stop that snivelling this instant.”
Adjusting her satchel to allow for the new weight, Nemain didn’t look up as Bothela spoke once more, her gravelly voice firm. "We all get used, dear. Tis living with it, enduring it that makes ye a woman."

“How can I! That Dufont told me he loved me, and I believed him!”

Turning to leave, Nemain huffed softly in disgust. Her soft voice was even more hoarse than Bothelas. “Y’let everyone use ye.”

Bothela coughed, hiding a grin as Muiri tossed her head and snorted. “Well, we all know you’d never be caught dead in a man’s arms, Nemain.”

The young apprentice leveled a pitying glance at the messenger’s roughspun grey gown, patched in places with thick thread. Examining the leather brogues tied with knotted string, all the way up to the thickened scar that wound around Nemain’s throat, barely concealed by the wild thicket of mousy hair that fell tangled down to her knees. “Not that any man would want you, with the way you present yourself.”

The messenger sighed. “Tis just pain, Muiri. All of it. Doesnae matter who you lie with, or why. Best to learn these truths now, while still young.”

A hand grasped her shoulder. Patting Nemain with a wrinkled claw-like hand, Bothela fixed a sympathetic frown upon both women. “Pain makes you strong, girl. Tis a gift to the gods. A message, one of the few ways to reach their ears. Pain be power.”

“Pain be shame.” Gently stepping away from the old alchemist, Nemain bobbed her head. “I must away. Got more deliveries to make. Later, Bothela.”

“When was the last time ye combed your hair? Come back for supper, we be having fish!” The Reachwoman warbled, banging the cupboards as she grabbed more ingredients.

Muiri sniggered. “I think she sleeps in that nest of hair. Winds it around her like a blanket in the Warrens...ouch!”

Releasing the young Breton's ear, Bothela waggled her finger in warning. “Mind yer manners, m'gel. Ye owe me fifteen septims cash. Now, get to it...I need five packets worth o' nirnroot ground and prepped fer that tincture t'day. Chop chop!”

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Shame.

Hurrying along the busy streets of Markarth, Nemain kept her head down. Not daring to question the spark of self pity Muiri had fanned from a cold ember into a niggling doubt. *Was she truly so altered, that a man would not look upon her with favor?*

Errands. She had errands to run, deliveries to make to keep bread in her belly and gold in her hand. Catching her reflection in a glass latticed window, her eyes shone like lanterns enclosed by the dark
mass of hair. What do ye know. You do look like a wild fright, y'natty nob.

Shaking off pointless fancy, she climbed up the steps, ignoring the priest who stood sentinel at the abandoned house. Cautiously circling the Nord Yngvar, who at once noted and disregarded her, the leather of his armor creaking as she slunk past him.

Shame. She had distracted the Gods, long ago with her own faults. Drawing away the attention of the Et’Ada to herself, her own pain rather than Galan. Galan; with those bonny laughing dark eyes and a sweet smile, always for her. Whose noble sacrifice had nearly been complete.

-Until she broke. Until she cried, her pain marring the solemnity, the rejoicing that attended a Briarheart’s becoming ritual. Mocking the Gods, the gift of his pain with the expression of her own. But that had been years ago.

Nae time for dawdling! Hurrying up the winding stone stairs in a practiced cadence, she spared a tiny smattering of pity for Muiri. Young impetuous Muiri - with her tender broken heart. Whining and bitching, ceaselessly complaining of the injustices of love and life. The girl had been fairly coddled in Windhelm. There be the loyalty of Nords for you. Nearly adopted by a noble clan, the Shatter-Shields…and tossed out upon her rear, once the trouble she had brought upon them by courting that upstart, that thief Alain Dufont was made openly apparent.

Hardship, indeed. The young chit was fair and well fleshed. Even working in the Hag’s Cure, Muiri wore fine linen, new leather boots that still stunk of the tannery and now, a silver pendant. Silver that could land the girl with a belly of trouble were she not careful.

Nemain thought of the taste of horsemeat, cold and bloody on the tongue. Of chilblains paining hands and feet, the sound of children crying in hunger for mother, for bread. The hard grit of pine thrush eggshells, ground into flour. Spoiled. How can such a one know true pain?

Silver and blood. The only currency in Markarth that mattered, aside from septims. Muiri would make her own mistakes. And perhaps, Nemain thought unhappily, more blood would run red over that silver heart, that fine metal knotwork as well. Should have said more. Warned her off. But youth be ever sae bold, especially in matters of the heart.

Banishing thoughts of the youngling from her mind, she called out in her harsh caw of a voice as she entered the dwemer section of Understone Keep. “Aicantar! Special delivery.”

“Excellent! You’ve kept me waiting, but I’m sure your company will be worth it.”

Calcemo was nowhere to be seen, the Altmer expert on Dwemer research most likely puttering about in his museum at this time of night. But his nephew Aicantar straightened from where he had been crouched over an enchanter’s table; the cold blue reflection fading as his hands carelessly swept over the runes.

Normally solemn, the Mer’s golden face broke into an ecstatic grin at the sight of Nemain padding
silently towards him. “Ah. I have your robes all ready for you, friend. But instead of septims... well, I wonder if you wouldn’t be willing to reconsider my offer?”

She pressed her lips tightly together as his amber eyes twinkled, unsure of what to say. “Aicantar. It be nae what ye think. Hircine’s Blessing tis...not for the uninitiated.”

“So initiate me! The only reason I agreed to follow Uncle here to this wastebin of ambition was to discover how the natives do magic! And what could be more native than a Forsworn fertility ritual?”

Nae much, she shuddered. The Altmer drew out a shining length of grey cloth, taunting her as he dangled it in front of her face. Setting her jaw, she glared at him as he smiled smugly. “You want it, you know you do. I enchanted these robes to enhance Illusion spells myself. So what do you say? Bring me along with you, so we can dance naked and howl at the moon! Come on!”

Sucking at the inside of her cheek, Nemain gazed upon the robes with longing. “The payment be fair. Meet me at the stables in three days. Cor, ye’re a fool. But ye’ve paid...ye have, and dear t’will be the cost. Aye, I’ll take ye to the sacred grove.”

Holding tightly, the elf stepped backwards. Hid the robes he held behind his back, as he frowned at Nemain. “I thought it was tonight. By the Eight, I don’t know if I’ll be able to get away from Uncle then. It has to be tonight!”

“It cannae be. The moon waxes full in three days time. I shall see ye there, or I willnae. The robe t’will hold until then. Now give me what ye promised, elf.”

The golden face cringed in dismay. “Give me my- the potion, first.”

Snorting softly, the messenger handed over the newly crafted potion. Aicantar took it, cradling it in both hands as he unstoppered the bottle and inhaled deeply. Only to nearly drop it, as the sharply planed face crumpled in disgust. “Feh! That stinks!”

“T’will do what it be meant to do.” Ignoring the sudden flush of rose gold that tinted his cheeks, Nemain stepped forward and held out her hand. “Payment, Aicantar. Give me what you owe.”

The elf stood, his finger rubbing repetitively against the glass of the potion bottle. She wondered if he even realized what he revealed, with his anxious fidgeting. Howling indeed. He’ll be howling in agony when th’ blessed ones realize just what he dosed himself with. T’will make him rue the day he decided to ‘prolong his stamina’. Pah. Male pride.

“Howling indeed. He’ll be howling in agony when th’ blessed ones realize just what he dosed himself with. T’will make him rue the day he decided to ‘prolong his stamina’. Pah. Male pride.”

“Anyday, now. I be having all sorts of errands to run.” Fire bloomed in her palm, as she wriggled her fingers, beckoning. “...So...”

Hovering in indecision, Aicantar’s shoulders sagged. “Right. I did promise. One minute, Nemain.”

Turning to the enchanting table, the Mer plucked up a blue potion and drank it, deep to the dregs. She watched, allowing the flames in her hand to be snuffed out; magicka spooling back somewhere deep inside as the High Elf began to mutter an incantation.

In the space between them, something rippled. Almost invisible, a distortion in the air...

Then a roaring, as a portal appeared in a blaze of white light. Stepping through, horned head bent
over, as what could only be a dremora straightened and blinked night-black eyes. Stark and aggressive in the whorled, nearly tattooed face.

Nemain nearly sneezed at the sudden, cloying smell of brimstone and rotten things. “And here is your payment. I only hope it is worth it.”

“The payment be fair,” she repeated idly, taking in the size of the dremora that had been summoned. The air around it fairly crackled with heat. No small task, keeping this bodger under her thumb. “Since y’hold the reins, would you be sae kind as to command it t’follow me?”

Aicantar waved a long fingered hand airily. “Kynreeve, I command thee to follow this woman wherever she wills. Cause no trouble, and do her bidding.”

The dremora’s voice was a low growl of boredom. “As you say, conjurer.”

Rubbing the scar at her throat, Nemain cast Aicantar a self-satisfied smile. “Well done. In three days time, then.”

“Three days!” The elf called out, as with a flick of her fingers, she motioned for the dremora to follow. Out of Understone Keep, past the startled guards and into the streets of Markarth. And beyond into the wilds.

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“Delivery fer Reachcliff Cave.”

Eola appeared inside the cleverly hidden entrance, smiling. “Well, well. If it isn’t my favorite messenger. Do come in.”

The dank stone seeped with chill, the cold penetrating her very bones as Nemain led the dremora further in. Stone benches flanked a table set for a family dinner, complete with a vase of flowers and carefully folded napkins.

A towering altar of gruesome spectacle ruined the otherwise homey scene. “We’ve been waiting.” One of the diners moaned. “What’s on the menu tonight?”

Familiar faces; the butcher Hogni Red-Arm. A High Elf whose name she couldn't quite recall, wearing a necromancer’s robes nodded at her approach. Banning the hound-trainer and Lisbet from Arnleif and Sons trading store.

All were present and accounted for. Best tae get it over with. “Dremora, I command ye to lay upon the table and sleep.”

Eola stepped up beside Nemain as the bulky Kynreeve did as he was asked. Stiffly lying supine upon the cleared space of stone, a faint exhale was heard as eyelids closed over those ebony black eyes.

Something prodded her side.

Nemain looked to see Eola offering a Nordic embalming knife. Newly sharpened, by the glint of
newly shining steel at its edge. “You do the honors, friend. I do love watching you work.”

“I claim rights to the liver!” Hogni salivated, as the others groaned.

“You never share the best parts, butcher.”

“No one appreciates them as I do, elf!”

Taking it in hand, she hefted the strange weight of the blade experimentally. Tested the edge with her thumb, a bead of blood rising from her callused skin. Seeing the anticipation in the faces surrounding her, Nemain made her face passive. Nearly blank, as she approached the Dremora; the demon sleeping so obediently upon the altar of Namira.

It wasnae the same. Only a few of the people of her blood attended. Banning was the only one present who could claim full birthright to the feasting; the taking of strength from the one being fed upon. Something that was supposed to be, well. More than this.

But it mattered little. For she was no longer shaman; bound to serve the Reachfolk with holy offerings of blood and bone.

And this was not her Reach. Not anymore.

Ignoring her impulse to make a grand show of it, Nemain stabbed down into the chest with one swift stroke.

The Dremora died with a gurgling growl on his lips, as she carefully sliced around the vessels and valves. Sautering the organ with burst of heat from her fingertips, the better to preserve the heart for its new owner. Wet sounds of lips being licked, silverware fingered in terse desire followed, as she ignored the stares. The hungry gazes of Namira’s worshippers.

Keeping her distaste from showing at this selfishness; this complete lack of ceremony and meaning, Nemain cracked open the ribs and slashed the chest cavity, opening the innards to full view.

Lifting the heart out of the chest with a smooth sweep, Nemain stepped back. “He be all yours.”

They’d eat anythin’. Anyone. Eola even admitted tae devouring a draugr, which be too sickening to contemplate. How she managed to chew an’ swallow such dry, ancient flesh...like eating a boot. I’d at least soak the boot, first.

As she watched the diners tear into the carcass of the kynreeve, Nemain wrapped the daedra heart in a tidy linen bundle. It had been well done, she thought critically, as she hefted the weight of it in her hand. The ends had been cleanly seared, with the main flesh untouched.

“I’ll be back in a fortnight,” she called out, accepting the gold from Eola’s trembling hands as the Breton’s face turned longingly to the table.

Mashing, sounds of chewing lingered in her ears long after she quietly left the cave.
Later in the night, Moth gro-Bagol the Jarl's Blacksmith came awake, grabbing a sword near at hand as the door creaked open. The orc relaxed, baring his tusks in a gaping grin as Nemain sauntered inside...her hand dangling a dripping red package like a necklace for show.

“Special delivery, dearest smith. Didja miss me?”

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The orc snored; like a metal rasp sawing away in his sleep.

Carefully tugging her hair out from beneath her neck, the Breton rested against the curling black hairs of his green chest. Marvelling at the strength, the filthy promise of those muscles as her womanhood throbbed tenderly from the satisfaction it had received that night.

Moth gro-Bagol was a friend. A good customer who paid quickly and paid well for timely goods.

But far more precious than prompt payment was his parsimonious speech. He had asked her, only once in their years of casual sex and occasional sleepovers. “Little Thistle, do you want more than this from me?”

Resting upon his chest in the steaming baths, pumped and heated by the strange dwemer machinery that never seemed to tire, Nemain took but a moment to collect her thoughts.

“What we have...tis good, Moth. I cannae give any more. Doon have anything tae...tae give back.”

His large hand smoothed down the skin of her back. “Is it my race, Thistlebloom?” His harsh rumble held a hint of vulnerability, as she traced a finger along the dip of his collarbone. Touching the scars from his trade, the healing weals from burning iron and steel.

She smiled sadly at the massive orc lying so still beneath her. “Nay, Moth...och no. I think you be beautiful tae behold. Nay, dinnae laugh y’ great brute! But my heart - what be left of it - lies buried in the Reach. This be enough. What about you?”

His hands slowly dragged her further up his chest. “For me? Yeah...it’s enough. More than I ever hoped for, Thistle.”

There was an art to kissing a face that held a jaw full of tusks. Nemain had perfected it; using her skill to mold her smaller, delicate lips around the valleys and plains of the orsimer’s lips. To show him without words that she did indeed care. Even if that caring tended more towards a pleasant friendship than any upwelling of lust, or lapse of that other damning and ruinous emotion.

Love. Love was quicksand, dragging those unlucky enough to be trapped in it down to inescapable depths. Love was pain, and shame, and was certainly nothing she’d ever seek intentionally, ever again.
Yet despite what conclusions others may have drawn from her behavior, Nemain was not completely heartless. A truly cold woman would have left Thonar Silver-Blood without her services...alone at the mercy of his wife.

"Just once more, if you please. Cast them again. I promise I shall be content with whatever omen the bones do say."

And as she did every Morndas, Nemain pasted a courteous smile upon her face and shook the bones. Runes, pictographs and carvings of beasts littered the polished bones that were a blend of wolf, mammoth and man. The way they lay upon being thrown could reveal portents; signs of the future that Thonar, ambitious and restless Silver-Blood that he was, sought after.

And paid her very well to decipher for him. “That, there.” She pointed to a reddish knuckle that had fallen upon a flat scapula. “This shows a fight. Violence comes tae yer clan, an' the flat length of the bone shows inevitability. Says that it cannnae be helped.”

“Hmm.” Tapping a blackened tooth circled round by smaller, more miniscule bone fragments, Nemain pushed a hank of hair back. The better to see, as her grey eyes shifted back and forth.

Stretching her second sight as Mother had taught her so long ago, the shaman hovered her hands over the bones. “Dark...a dark warrior cometh. Many will stand against him. They will fall...like trees below a giant's mighty strides...”

She could nearly see it; see the warrior, the fallen, the battlefield...all shrouded and blurred. Lifting her hand to her head, she winced as the vision bled away. “That be all. Just a glimpse. I cannnae see any more.”

Through her pounding headache, Nemain could see his pinched face smooth with effort. “Very well.” As she scooped the bones back into their holding pouch, a bag was thrown at her knees that clinked heavily. Not bothering to count the septims (in front of the Nord, at least) Nemain bowed low. “Yer too kind, milord.”

“Yes, yes. We will see what comes of it all. Next week, witch.”

*Shaman. High Priestess of the Coven of Deepwood.* She didn't bother to correct him. “I be here next week, at yer service.”

Escaping the depressing closeness of the treasury, she spared a glance for the Forsworn brothers and sisters who swept the floor and tallied the accounts. They nodded at her, the merest dip of head confirming their alliance.

*I see you. And ye see me, Reachman. Darksister. We stand together in this test of time. Soon.*

Heavy the septims lay in her purse, like a weight upon her mind.
Nord-given or not, septims bought bread.

And if there was one thing the Warrens lacked, it was nourishing vittles. Nemain picked her way through piles of trash and fecal waste, nearly tripping over bones as she gagged. In one hand, she balanced the meals she had bought fresh-cooked from the inn. “Garvey! Garvey ye great lump, where be Cairine? I have a potion tae treat her ataxia.”

Almost as though he slithered from the shadows, Garvey stepped into the weak light given off from Nemain’s uplifted hand. “Bah, I doon care where that useless bitch went off tae. Give me sum o’ that.”

Dodging his grasping hands, Nemain turned the hand holding magelight into a crackling inferno of lightning. Too bright to look at directly, the sparking ball forced Garvey away. His ribs near showing through the threadbare excuse for a shirt, he snarled at her. “All right, keep yer smalls on aye! Last I saw, Cairine was back to the left. In the room with the extra bucket.”

"I’d gladly give ye something to sup if I ever saw ye lift a pickaxe or pluck a potato, you rogue."

Extinguishing the electricity, the shaman clocked her tongue in annoyance. Brushing past the loathsome man, she only spilled a fingers worth of stew as she carefully opened the door with her elbow.

“-Cairine? Cairine, I brought y'something fresh to eat. If I be hungry you must be famished. Be ye…”

*Dead.*

The Breton was sprawled upon her stomach, arms limply flung forward, leg propped up under her. A skeever chittered at Nemain, beady eyes bright as it sucked something wet into its whispered snout.

Judging by the multiple gnaw marks upon Cairine’s bony back and buttocks, the shaman knew what meal the rodent had consumed. “Away! Scat, ye disgusting thing!”

Not wanting to leave such a spread, it took her another blast of lightning to fell the skeever. As the fur smoked, a rank aroma rose up from it... mingling with the sweetish scent of rotting that Cairine gave off.

Placing the stew and bread carefully upon a flat rock, Nemain turned the woman over.

*Blue bruises. Lax limbs. Dead at least a day. Garvey y'lazy shit, ye noticed her at least a day too late, Hircine take you.*
Sighing, Nemain pulled the rapidly cooling meal towards her. Ignoring the scent of death, she shoveled the food quickly into her mouth, almost moaning at how good the fresh leeks, beef and onions tasted. The last she had eaten was a crust of bread at Moth gro-Bagol’s bedside, as they readied themselves for the day.

And that was two days past. She was *starving*. Licking the bowl, she held it close to her nose, just smelling the onion-beef scent. Better than any noblewoman’s perfumed oils, for what flower could stave off the roiling pains of hunger?

Casting her mind to memories of her dead friend, she shook her head. “I didnae know, darling. You didnae tell me the ataxia had come sae bad. Why didnae y’let me know?”

Patting the corpse on its head, she mused over what to do.

Most bodies from the Warrens were flung into the fast moving river to rot away; often becoming stuck in the waterwheel or deep in the rocky bends until Mulush gro-Shugurz became disgusted and used a pole to break up the remaining bits and bones.

She didn’t favor that end for Cairine’s body. Nor could she stomach (she blew a breath out at the mental pun) taking her to Reachcliff Cave. It was not to be borne.

It could only be done by fire.

Summoning flame to both hands, Nemain allowed it to play along her fingers. The strange film of magicka that allowed her to draw from the Aetherius somehow kept her from burning, as she was about to burn. The first spell she had ever learned was how to light a flame.

*Mo luaidh, ye must bring the fire from deep within you. That’s it. See? Even just a tiny flicker...there. Now you be a proper mage, girl. And so begins your training.*

She was about to burn the corpse to ash, when her eyes caught upon the half-filled pouch of septims lying near the empty bowls and trash.

Her arms drooped, falling by her sides as the fires extinguished. Hunger was a harsh taskmistress.

But Nemain had learned that lesson long ago.

Grasping her knife, she quickly slitted the body (for in this instant, it was far easier to view Cairine as just so much meat) to crack the ribs by shoving the blade atwixt them and jerking hard. The heart came first. Then a goodly length of skin, and flesh. Working quickly and methodically, Nemain struggled to ignore the smell, the face turned to the side so still. For this was no ritual partaking but a harvest.

“What do you be doing in here sae loud...by the Horned One, no...earrghth!”
The following morning, as Bothela fixed up a replenishing potion for the Nord sellsword Vorstag, the doorbell tinkled as it creaked open.

Hurrying to greet the newest customer, Muiri stopped in her tracks.

-And slowly backed away, as Nemain brushed by. Carrying her grisly prize.

“Is that…” Vorstag grimaced through what looked to be a painful hangover, as a bloody package splatted atop the stained wood countertop. His nearness flecking him with blood as he wiped his face in disbelief.

Tapping her fingers on the wood, Nemain fixed him with a grin full of teeth as Bothela hurried over, potion in hand. Her rough voice was a silken river filled with rocks.

“…Special delivery.”

Chapter End Notes

Celtic translations:

Ochone - Exclamation, expression of sorrow
Mo luaidh - My darling, my dear

I figure the Forsworn are based upon the Pict-Celt people of Britain, driven back by the Anglo-Saxon (or Viking!) Nords in the Elder Scrolls universe. Seriously, check out the history - so sad. They employed similar terrorist tactics. Very much a kill-them-all and let God sort them out kind of people. As opposed to the Stormcloaks, who favored more hit and run, guerilla style fighting.

Anyhow, so based on this reasoning, my version of the Forsworn will be Celtic-Pict, with loads of stuff to draw on from the Druids, Wicker Man, pagan junk...oh my. Going to have SO much fun with this.

Feedback is good. Always good.
The Task

Chapter Notes

A beautiful song for the soundtrack of this story. A Fan-Made tribute to Markarth, named Markarth. Written by Mattia Cupelli.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ocUTXub59c&list=RDcIVMqbdgQZs&index=5

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The shadowed, swaying trees of the grove of Meitheall had been cast in the light of the full moon. A cold, clear uncompromising light. Pale and pure.

...But within the grove the fires of a warmer, more earthy nature burned.

In the clearing surrounded by sacred trees, the darkness was shattered by a vision of sexual bliss. Sounds of groaning, sighs of pleasure as the orgy devoted to the God of the Hunt and the Goddess of Fertility wended on. Bodies laid out, bent over... contorted in positions of ecstasy as the great mass of them shifted and moved nearly as one. Skillfully placed torches on pikes highlighted the beauty of it all...men and women of all shapes, colors and sizes flowing in and around one another upon the trampled grass. Smoke blew from scented braziers, burning herbs sacred to Dibe and Hircine. Prompting the masses to continue licking, touching, tasting-

One body, one purpose. A sweating, glistening tribute.

Nemain beheld it with a twist of foreboding in her chest. The haunting sounds of boldas, hollowed gourds upon which ridges had been carved and were scraped with sticks, floated through the air along with the ever present drums.

“Aicantar, you dinnae have to do this. We be not properly welcomed intae the grove yet. And once started…”

“-I won’t...can’t stop. I see, now.” His golden throat bobbing as he swallowed, Aicantar stood stock still. Shifting awkwardly as he continued flushing a bright rose gold, seeming not to want to look...yet unable to tear away his eyes from taking in the incredible scene before him.

She felt for the fool of an elf. She truly did. Hircine’s Blessing easily overwhelmed even one who had visited many previous such festivals, as she had...though Nemain had been banished long before she could try to bear a child - a gift from the gods.

The fruit of the joining, to be loved and treasured and raised. She had been one such god-child.

-And like an old ache, paining her without prompting, the memory of her first time resurfaced.
Sweat slicked black hair parted beneath her fingers as his mouth fastened hungrily upon hers. The fires of midsummer burned brightly not far away, yet she felt lit from within as he moved atop of her. Their nakedness allowed for a rubbing friction that was slowly becoming addictive even with its foreign feeling. For there was an intimacy that took her breath away; the man she had chosen to give her virginity, her first blood to being exactly her height. And so, nothing broke the connection between their eyes, grey upon black, as they strove together. Stoking the inner flames onward, ever higher as he prepared her with clumsy hands and desperate mouth.

Readjusting their limbs, so that his hardness lay directly between her legs, Galan sucked in a quavering breath. Large dark eyes, usually so mirthful, so teasing were now bold. So serious, as she looked straight back at him with wanting.

“...Say yes. Yes, my taisce, my treasure. Let me be in you.”

She could barely speak the words. First blood, her first becoming as a shaman...in all this, he had been with her. Would give, always so giving. Male to her female...seed to soil. Always there. “Be in me! Do it! Just - augh!”

-For it hurt, it hurt... this pinch of pain as he thrust himself deeply into the place no man had gone before. His arms fairly shook with the strain of it, holding himself up off of her chest as she wheezed. Her breath slowing, as she fought through the sharpness of it...not wanting to draw out what was surely an unpleasant thing, Nemain gave an experimental it...not wanting to draw out what was surely an unpleasant thing, Nemain gave an experimental thrust.

A tug, really. Little more than a tilt of her hips.

Yet it was enough to break the floodgates, for Galan made a sound; a wretched, joyful noise, as he wrapped his arms round her and took her, hard and fast. So fiercely that her buttocks fairly hammered the ground; her breath coming in fits and starts as suddenly the pain peeled away into a tense, pulsing pleasure that made her rake her nails down his back, oh goddess Dibe, was this love…?

Nemain remembered, and dismissed the memory that was equal parts pain and pleasure. After her first visit to the Temple of Dibella, she had stood as Aicantar was doing now. Nearly mesmerized by the strangeness of their worship. Their obeisance to a golden goddess that seemed far more vain than motherly. A cool, distant metal figure that recalled none of the earthy fertility; the sheer pleasure of womanhood and sex that Nemain had been taught was her due and right from the moment she could phrase the question of 'why'.

"Open your heart to the noble secrets of art and love! Treasure the gifts of friendship. Seek joy and inspiration in Her mysteries. Come to me, Dibella, for without you, my words must lie dull and leaden without the gilding of grace and sagacity to enchant the reader's ear and eye. Come to Dibella!"

Yes...Nemain had been less than impressed.

Beauty. Pleasantness of face and form - what good did that do, when faced with th' terror of raiding bandits, or the struggle tae feed a starving clan? Would a fair face warm them in the frigid snows of a Druadac winter?

Pleasure bound men and women together, the twisting roots of a tree that grew ever higher, sank
roots eternally deep. All Reachfolk knew and were taught - they were stronger together.

And the idea...the very illusion of agency in this cycle of life was futile. Blood ran hot. The body burned with its own desires...even mortal ones, untouched by blessings of Hircine or bound by sacrifice to a Hagraven. Hunger, sleep, sex...all were gifts that meant one was alive. Gifts to be appreciated and sated.

“Welcome, strangers. Do you seek the gloaming path?”

Nemain peered across the darkness into the torchlight. A woman, red haired and wild, with snapping green eyes and a tangle of greyish-green woad streaked across her face. Her accent painted her as a Nord, strangely enough.

Eyeing her cautiously, Nemain noted that the woman went about nude. And seemed quite comfortable that way, though she could tell Aicantar was having difficulty keeping his eyes focused above her collarbone.

Nudging Aicantar, she motioned towards the woman. Who bared a smile filled with teeth, the eyes shining strangely in the moonlight. One of the blessed, then. A werewolf.

The High Elf stammered out his decision. “I seek the...the gloaming path. Though I do not yet know the way.”

Those reflective eyes stared unblinkingly back at him. “Then I will guide you to it. My name is Aela, and you are…”

“-Aicantar!” The Altmer cleared his throat, seemingly regretting his eagerness. And perhaps his decision to down the entire damn stamina potion. “M-my name is Aicantar.”

“...Wonderful,” purred Aela, as she reached out a hand and swiftly tugged him towards her. Stumbling down the slope towards the clearing, Aicantar looked back with amber eyes blown wide.

Nemain waved to him, shaking her head at the other worshippers who approached. She would not be partaking, this night. Or any night, really. She had learned her lessons, long ago. And Moth gro-Bagol was not nearly so demanding in bed as she imagined some of these wildlings would be.

*Good luck, elf.*

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

“I hate you. You know I hate you, you little witch bitch. Why did you let me do this?”

With the coming of first morning’s light, the clearing had been emptied. Only the flattened grass, covered with unmentionable fluids, strange smells and burned out torches remained.

As well as one particularly incensed elf.
Chortling as Aicantar barely managed to walk, his face revealing the true discomfort he was in, Nemain beckoned for him to sit. He sat, hissing in pain as she tucked a fresh robe around his shoulders. Barely holding in a snigger as she heard him passing the slightest squeak of gas.

She looked upon the Altmer with amused derision. “Well. Consider yerself initiated, me foolish friend. So, what d’ye think of our native traditions here in the Reach?”

“You’re crazy! You all are! There was this smoke, and that drink and I-I couldn’t stop! Even when the men started in on me, and I don’t even like men, oh by the Eight…”

Stirring the fire, she poured a restorative powder into a mug of boiled water and carefully handed him the drink. “Careful, ’tis hot. Ah, now. Ye’ve learned. And I dare say...y’enjoyed yourself verrah much. Perhaps you shall even be a father now, aye?”

Nearly spitting the tea all over himself, Aicantar sputtered. “What! Oh no, oh no...that wasn’t what I had planned, when I talked myself into this!”

Seeing her laugh out loud in a rasping cough, Aicantar narrowed his golden eyes. “You knew. Knew that it would be like this. You...you deserve every terrible thing that will ever come your way!”

“Och, aye.” Her smile was lazy, still stretched upon her face as she sobered at his curse.

“...Aye, I do. I deserve it all, though I doubt you be the one to impart such things. Let us be off, then. Much ground to cover, ’till we return to Markarth.”

“Faugh. I hope your robe itches like mad, you crazy Forsworn.”

“...Hush. Doon y’ken...there be nae Forsworn in Markarth’s city walls?”

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“Come on in, messenger.” Uaile ushered Nemain inside the luxurious home. “He be awaiting for ye in the inner rooms.”

Scuffing her leather brogues against the thickly woven carpet, she gazed around her in wonder.

Like most dwellings in Markarth, the manse of Nepos the Nose was hewed from stone and lined with bronzed dwemer tubing and machinery. The benefits were obvious, she thought as she walked further inside. The strange magicks of the ancient ones (technology, Calcemo had impressed upon her the proper term once when she dared to ask) kept superheated air pumped through the pipes. Merged with water, the tubes often emitted clouds of steam...hot vapors that heated the residences of Markarth.

Well. The wealthy residences of Markarth, at least. Nemain dwelt in the Warrens with the other Forsworn too poor to afford a home. Twisting roots and the smell of mildew and damp were her lot. Not this...this warmth and heat, so foreign that it stung her fingers and toes; used as they were to
being perpetually cold.

Watching as the house servant’s back turned, she carefully stroked a thick fur lying upon a carved wooden chair. *Soft.* The pelt would retain heat well, a comfort in the chill of the night. This place was fairly dripping in furs, of all sizes and shades. And blankets, woven in Nordic patterns and stacked near the cupboards where numberless bottles of wines, meads and ales were displayed. All the furnishings were old, but well tended and gleaming with oil. Books, carefully dusted, had been stacked in the looming shelves on either side of the fire.

And before the fire, idly turning a page in the book ‘Mystery of Talara’ that he held close to his hooked nose, sat Nepos.

“*Fáilte,* Venerable Elder,” she intoned in greeting as she approached the high backed chair. Standing respectfully to the side, Nemain folded her arms behind her back as she waited for the old Breton to notice her presence.

Another page turned, whisper soft, in the book he studied. “Nemain. You have been busy.”

In dismay, she realized she had smeared a layer of grime from her brogues into the carpet she stood upon. Uaile rolled her eyes, and tsked...beckoning her forward as Nemain hurriedly removed her shoes. Coming with bucket and brush, the house servant let out a shake of her head as the woman blushed at her own filthiness. *Nae time for a bath. Not when th’ summons come.* “I be ready to serve the King in Rags, whenever I be needed Great Elder.”

“Hmm.” His rheumy eyes turned to take her in. “Come closer, dear.”

Resisting the impulse to bristle at his command, Nemain stepped forward into the old one’s line of sight. Fingering her grey, much patched dress she sucked at the inside of her cheek. *Nothing fer it.* She owned no other clothing, and often would duck herself in the river fully clothed to wash herself.

A second dress, underthings, new shoes - maybe she *would* indulge, if this job turned out to be profitable. Nepos rarely called upon her, but when he did (her belly *growled* at the thought) she ate like the High Queen herself.

For a month, at least. Making it well worth whatever indignity she might suffer at the hands of this wealthy one, who dirtied himself in parlay with the Silver-Bloods. “What may I be assisting ye with, Nepos?”

Hunched over as he was, Nepos the Nose straightened his back to better look upon her. The padded wool and fur ruff of the Nord finery he wore seemed to weigh upon him, as the aged one moved so slowly to turn towards Nemain.

Yet, for all his slowness, his wit was still quick. “What would your mother say, if she saw you *súile a dhéanamh* at that orc?”

She shifted upon her feet, feeling a need to run. To hide. “She doesnae care what I do. Nae anymore, Nepos. Y’ken that.”
“Hmph. Melka may have undergone the Change, but you be still her *daor iníon*. Daughter dear.” He coughed, setting his book to the side table with shaking fingers. “I see nae point in continuing to use you, if you are uninterested in returning to Deepwood Redoubt, girl.”

“I be interested! I be completely invested in this venture! What reason have I given ye tae doubt, Nepos? Every job…” she bit her tongue at the invective that nearly slurred past her lips at the word, the thought of Thonar Silver-Blood… “-every reading o’ the bones that I do, I write a report that ends up in yer hands. Y’know as well as I do, that everything - *everything* that I work for be tae raise Madanach back upon the Mournful Throne.”

“Aye, Nemain. I see.” The nostrils in his prominent namesake quivered. “That be well.”

Standing nearly upon the hearthstones themselves, she shrank back as Nepos leaned forward. He raised a knotted hand, taking her dirt encrusted fingers in his.

His voice was strong, despite the exhaustion that bled from every syllable. “You do well to remember it, girl. I need you...you and your *dílseacht*. Loyalty be more precious than even silver, these days.”

He continued grasping her hand, absentely petting it as he became lost in thought. “Markarth and the Reach be our lands. Tis why we are the Forsworn, Nemain. We cannot claim the home that is rightly ours. But then during their war with the elves, we had our moment. We drove the Nords out of the Reach in a great uprising...bringing peace at last to the Reach. Two years peace.”

Allowing Nepos an elder’s right to woolgather, Nemain let her hand lay limply in his. “I remember, old one. We were happy here, Mother and I. T’was fair peaceful under Madanach’s rule.”

Squeezing her hand in commiseration, Nepos released her. “Then the Bear appeared. Ulfric and his men came. Those who call us Reachmen cruel and savage, ochone! They did not see...see the cursed Shout that broke down the gates. Feel the fear as the northmen came to steal our lands, to rape our women. Even the very silver, the lifeblood of the Druadac, they stole. And those of us who did not run or die fighting were executed.”

“Yes. I still can recall it, old one.”

“...You were young, yes. I can still see the headman’s axe run red with blood. The trees swaying with dead men and women. Even their own kind, if they didnae ally with Ulfric and Old Hrolfdir, were hung by rope in the trees, or cut down by the sword.”

“...You ran, Nemain. But ochone...who could fault a child for escaping to the hills? They killed the women and children, too.”

Grinding her teeth as he continued, almost talking to himself, Nepos the Nose reclined in his seat. “And so, except for myself and Madanach, the People live no more in this part of the Reach.”

"You, Nemain, be one of the few who stay. Who fight. Fight for him, for Madanach. He be the King in Rags. A man who once held all the Reach within his grip. He stokes the passions of the downtrodden in this city. Directs them to kill the enemies of the Forsworn in our name. All from inside Cidhna Mine. A Nord prison. Och…” he spat into the fire, his spittle sizzling in the burning logs. “The irony be quite thick.”

“Twenty years I have sent young men and women to their deaths, to unknown ends flung by the arrowpoint of Madanach’s quill. And I grow weary of it. But now, Nemain...we may see a change that may turn the tide forever in our favor. End the killing, once and for all.”
Coming to attention like a hound scenting its prey, Nemain leaned forward. “What? What be the task, that could bring about such victory for the People?”

For the first time since her audience began, the elderly Breton’s wrinkled lips pursed in a sly smile. “So eager, still. Yes. You know of the war that stirs in Skyrim beyond our borders?”

Her hands fist in her threadbare gown. “Aye, I know of it. What does it matter? They are there, and we be here.”

Nepos shook his head at her. “Near, far...it all runs round. Like water from the sky, back to the ground only to be lifted into the clouds once more. Nemain. You must leave Markarth.”

Her throat caught with what she had been about to say. The dryness causing her rough voice yet more trouble in speaking, as she swallowed repeatedly. “…Leave, Elder? I - I have nae funds. Nae weapon save me magic. Where would I go, and what would ye have me do?”

Still scrutinizing her form, Nepos removed a bag that he tossed to her. It heavily clinked as she caught it in her hands. “Here are your funds. You have your robes now, yes? So you are halfway there. Prepare yourself for the journey to Windhelm. For you have been assigned to assassinate the Jarl of Windhelm himself.”

A smile curled upon the face of Nepos the Nose, almost savage in the flickering firelight. “…The Bear, the Butcher. The Voice that threw down the walls. He who ground us under the boot of the Nord and the Empire. Kill him. Do it painfully or quickly, by poison or point of blade I dinnae care, but kill him.”

“Kill Ulfric Stormcloak. Return to me with his heart, and I will see that the King in Rags pardons ye for your past.”

She hardly breathed as she clutched the life-saving treasure to her chest. Her mind spun, creating lists of what to pack. What to purchase for such a lengthy journey, as Nepos sighed back in his chair. “You can return to Deepwood, Nemain. Your Briarheart walks the crags still, waiting for you, Melka tells me. Should you be successful, you would be famous among us. High Priestess and Shaman to all the People of the Reach. What say you?”

Feeling the edge of the septims bite into the flesh of her hands, Nemain felt as though she were floating. Such a glorious task! “I’ll do it. Gladly. I will do the bidding of Madanach, and bring ye the heart of Ulfric Stormcloak!”

Waving his hand to dismiss her, Nepos closed his eyes. “…Good. Do not fail. And do not die - your first task should be to fill that belly I hear grumbling so incessantly. Cor, I think I could blow you over, with one great sneeze.”

“Eat, Nemain. Then go.”

Bobbing her head, an unknown manservant ushered her out of the house as she fairly flew down to the market.
Her head was in a cloud...her empty chest somehow warm, thrilled with excitement and fear that she brushed away. Such a task. Given by Madanach himself, to one so lowly. To kill the Great Bear himself!

This could change everything. With Ulfric gone, and the civil war routed the Empire will be distracted. Occupied by asserting their force upon Eastmarch and the Rift. T’would be the perfect opportunity to rise up and reclaim Markarth for the Reach...to be recognized as our own land, by the Empire of Cyrodiil itself! None could gainsay our claim then!

One man. One death. So many possibilities.

Sitting herself down upon a stool at the Silver-Blood Inn, Kleppr greeted her with a phlegmy snort and a nod. “What d’ye want, ya Breton beggar?”

Pushing twelve gold septims towards the barkeep, Nemain smiled. An edgy energy kept her feet twisting in their brogues; her grey eyes alight with fervent purpose. “A plate of the house special, one bottle of ale and - oh, an apple pie. Och, I feel I could eat a mammoth, right now.”

Kleppr grunted, fingering her septims with grease-streaked hands. “Hrmph. Got no mammoth, but the goat roast is freshly done, with roasted potatoes and carrots. Is that acceptable, yer ladyship?”

Lifting her nose at his obvious disdain, Nemain sat up proudly upon the stool. Filthy and starved she may be, but the gold...the septims lying so solidly against her belly changed everything. And they be real enough. I bit them meself...they’re solid gold. “Well, get started then. I’ll be a’waiting yer victuals right here.”

Tapping her foot against the solid wall of the bar (her legs swung freely, childlike... damn these Nords for being so tall) Nemain cocked her ear as the skald began to play and sing.

And as that sourmouth Kleppr delivered a steaming plate of food upon the counter before her, Nemain tucked in with grateful relish. Mindfully slowing herself down, as she chewed and swallowed so as not to choke. To make herself sick on such richly spiced food, after scrabbling for wild onions and birds eggs; consuming only streamwater and moss for so long. Her meals had been few, ill and far between...but that was all over with, now.

She had funds. She had purpose - a place to go, and a home to return to, once her task was complete.

And in the empty space behind her ribcage, as the music continued to play loud and merrily, she felt the faintest flicker of something long thought lost.

Hope.
“Yeah, I’ve got a map of Skyrim here somewhere. Held onto it, after serving my time in the Imperial Legion. Sure it’ll come in handy on your little field trip, Thistle.”

Nemain accepted the map with a thankful nod. “Moth, you saint. This be all I needed. Now I willnae be lost, taking the road east towards Windhelm.”

“And a long road you’ve chosen for yourself. Why you want to visit that block of ice up north...nevermind. Sure you’ve got your reasons. Just...stay safe out there. Kill anything that looks at you funny.”

“Och, aye. I will.” Holding up a hand, she cupped a ball of flame. Holding it beneath her chin, she could see Moth gro-Bagol’s tusks stretch with his smile, as she made a face in the underlit shadows. *Like a regular ghoul, or bean sidhe. I’ll scare ‘em right off.* “Don’t worry about me Moth. I’ve been practicing.”

And just for show, she sent the fireball hurling into his forge; flames spattering the sparkling coals upon impact as a cloud of ash rose from the molten heat.

Coughing, she laughed as they both emerged grey-faced and fairly covered with soot. “Er...sae sorry aboot that.”

“Oh no. By all means, leave me here to wipe off every surface you’ve coated in ash, Thistle. I had nothing better to do today. Just Jarl Igmund’s personal effects to repair. That’s all.”

Still chuckling under her breath, she helped the blacksmith dust off the tools, the weapons arrayed upon tables and chairs. Even flapping out his laundry, to shake off the soot. “By Dibe, this got intae everything! Why do ye have sae many possessions, eh orc?”

“Huh. Guess this would seem like alot of stuff, to a Reachwoman.” Finishing their perusal of his things, Nemain decided that he could attend to whatever was left.

Three days it had taken her, to gather her things. To order potions from Bothela, cold resistance and health vials and magicka replenishing potions, all carefully stowed away in their wrappings. A new knapsack with stout leather straps. Her Illusion blessed robes from Aicantar - who still frowned and blushed upon seeing her, the twit. His own damn fault for spearheading through my warnings. And now, she had a map to guide her east.

She had prepared everything. Travel rations, waterskins...and leather-soled travel boots, made special for her by Moth. “The boots fit verrah well. I hope the wet-proofing takes, with all the snow I fear I’ll be wading through. Your Thistle be well protected now, thanks tae you.”

“You’re a small, prickly thing. It hurts to hold you, sometimes.” Gathering in a hug, she smelled iron and sweat - and a faint hint of juniper soap, as she buried her head in his chest and forced herself to relax. To enjoy the embrace, brief as it was.

“Mmm.” Feeling her feet touch the ground once more, she craned her neck back to see his face, so far above her. “Doona miss me, friend. I’ll be back soon enough, before yer bed gets cold.”

His laugh was an amused rumble. “Who says it gets cold?”

Rolling her eyes at his jest, she pushed at the taut muscles of his midriff. *Not a budge.* The orc was surely half giant. “I say so. If ye want tae dip yer wick in other women, feel free. Just keep yerself sober for my return, aye?”
“You’re a real bleeding heart, Thistle. Makes me all teary and shit.”

She rasped out a laugh, patting the thick green bulge of his bicep. “I ken. I ken it well. See ya, Moth.”

He watched her go, the waving mass of her hair flapping in the wind as the tiny figure strode off to Malacath knew where. “Gods watch over you, my Thistlebloom.” He rumbled quietly, fingering the bruisemarks she had made upon his throat that very morning, in something very close to sorrow.

Don’t know why I worry. Not like this city is any safer than out there. Markarth kept her on her toes, kept her sharp. And now she’s gone off somewhere I can’t mind her. Better worry about hammering steel, not the woman. Nothing like living off the land to teach you how to fight; how to survive.

She’ll be fine.

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“Once more! I swear...every time I see your dirty Reach-born face I image a sabrecat. Closing its jaws around your head!”

Nemain closed her eyes and held her breath, counting to five. Patience. One more casting o’ the bones...then yer free. A shame Thonar is away, tupping Lisbet and leaving me with this harridan. “At once, milady Silver-Blood.”

“And don’t get that look, all smug like you know better.” Betrid snarled, tossing her head of golden braids back over her shoulder. Reclining in the chair, she kicked out at Nemain - hitting her in the shoulder as the Breton prepared to throw the bones for another reading.

-Causing the bag to fly from her hands, scattering the talismans every which way over the treasury house carpets. “Fool! You clumsy Reach-bitch! Pick it up and try again! Shor’s beard, I don’t know what Thonar pays you for, you incompetent cunt.”

Restraining herself from looking up, Nemain crept along the carpet to collect the bits and pieces of bone. Cautioning herself, yet again, to not react. To not even blink. Like water, be still. A pebble drops, and it calms immediately. Nae need to fuss. You’ll be out of here in a matter of days. Be like water.

Settling herself upon her knees, she smoothed the grey sleeves of her robe away from her hands and cleared her mind. “Once more, milady. Concentrate on the bones.”

A haughty sniff her only response, Nemain’s eyes flitted up to see Betrid at last occupied in something other than tormenting her. The tiny bottle of skooma dripped slowly, but steadily into Betrid’s waiting mouth, and that pale throat rolled as it swallowed down the drug.

The Nord’s eyes when they rested upon her once more were dazed, with black pupils fully blown
wide. Nearly dropping the empty bottle upon the floor and not the wooden table she intended to lay it on, Betrid motioned for Nemain to continue.

_Fool of a Nord._ The bones made a clattering rush, as they dropped upon the stone flagged floor near the carpet. Sifting through them, Nemain’s quick grey eyes chose and discarded several, before latching onto a greyish chunk of mandible and a shiny glazed patella. “Hmm. This be interesting.”

“What.” Betrid’s voice drifted sonorously through the treasury. “If I don’t like it, I won’t pay up. So make it good, Reach-scum.”

Her fraying temper snapped. _That’s it._ “See this greyed piece o’ bone, Betrid? This be yer husband. Thonar.”

Plucking the patella from where it lay, Nemain brought both pieces up to eye level for Betrid. “And this be Lisbet, the merchant from Arnleif and Sons. The pieces tell me true.”

The Nord’s voice rose in a strident whine. “Just tell me what your meaning is, soothsayer. Don’t jaw on about it.”

Allowing the bones to fall from her hands, Nemain spread her palms wide. “The bones cast them, to lay upon one another perfectly aligned. You saw, did ye not? Thonar atop of Lisbet. As he is now, for the bones say true.”

Feeling a twist of spite worm into her chest, Nemain smiled at Betrid’s paling face. “You didnae know, did ye? That yer precious husband finds ye lacking? Shame, that. I suppose looks are nae everything.” She intoned virtuously as Betrid’s jaw clenched.

“..._Liar._ You Reach-bitch, you liar! Forsworn! You know what we do to Forsworn found here in the city?!”

Still crowing mentally about gaining the upper hand for once, Nemain barely ducked as a sword came whistling overhead. “We...KILL THEM!!”

Bones scrabbled underfoot as Nemain hastily dragged herself away from the Nord hacking drunkenly at her. Though Betrid was completely in her cups (and drugged to boot) the woman had been trained in bladework at some point. Battering away, Betrid held the sword steady, as she did her level best to take Nemain’s head off her shoulders.

Eluding the wild swipes, the Breton finally managed to balance upon her feet. The new leather squeaked around her toes; vaguely she wished she had more time to wear in the boots before travelling. Blisters were _such_ an annoyance. “Betrid, just...pay me what ye owe and let’s be done with this foolishness. Surely you werenae _that_ ignorant of yer man’s doings?”

“Never should have come here!” Betrid continued to lunge and strike, her teeth bared in a grimace as she attacked.

Feeling a fine fury rise up from somewhere deep inside, Nemain glared at the Nord. The Silver-
Blood, her elegant clothing even now trailing in folds of rich cloth as she spun and struck. *Nothing fer it.*

Heating her hands, Nemain wreathed her fingers in gouts of flame. Tilting to the side, as Betrid strained to cut her once more, she clapped her hands to the Nord’s head. And smiled, to see blue eyes grow wide. To smell that blonde hair sizzle, as the fire began to redden her fair skin. “Such a swollen head, tae think y’could take me on, Nord.”

Increasing the temperature, her hands tingled as Betrid began to scream; long and loud. Sharp, ripping screams that only grew more frantic as Nemain held on tight. Squeezing for all she was worth, as the sword dropped from the woman’s hands.

Fingernails tore as Betrid struggled to claw her, to free herself from the Breton’s vise-like grip. “I’ll take me payment now…” Nemain crooned, lost in the sensation.

That heady feel of power, so rare. Nemain savored it, even as she was nearly deafened by the pitch of the Nord’s unending screams.

-Which ended abruptly, as the back of the woman’s skull imploded. Spattering pieces of cranium and boiled brain matter spackled the walls of the treasury. Blinking against the spots in her vision, Nemain moved her stiff, hot and near-cooked hands away. Allowing the blank-faced corpse to slide from her grasp, as hanks of that blonde hair dangled from her fingertips...connected by the barest strands of skin to part in gory clumps.

Flicking her fingers, she rid herself of every trace of the Nord. Feeling very numb - *ice cold, like falling through a lake...* Nemain took in the scene around her.

Broken Betrid, fallen upon the floor. Her smashed out skull a gaping red wound. *Silver-Blood in name only, it seems.* The oracle bones still spread out upon the carpet and stone floor, crunching under her boots even now as she looked at what she was stepping on.

Picking up the greyed bit of mandible, Nemain pondered what should come next as an old Breton shuffled into the room.

Still pushing his broom along the floor, the man she vaguely recognized as the servant Donnel slowly shuffled his way towards her.

Eyeing the corpse of Betrid Silver-Blood, the old man cast his eye upon Nemain. Her hands had lit up with spellcasting the moment she spotted him approach. Fire and lightning arose from her palms as she sweated, nerves trembling the tips of her fingers as she waited for what the houseservant would choose to do.

*She’d kill him, if she had to.* Yet fortune smiled upon her once more as the wrinkled face split into a wide grin. “Good work, that. Saved me a lot o’ effort you did. You’d best be on yer way now, girl.”
Tilting his head, Donnel seemed to be listening for something. Still somewhat in shock, Nemain forced herself to hear past the pounding of her own heartbeat in her ears. Straining her senses, she could faintly hear the sound of someone shouting beyond the Treasury house walls. For there was a pattering of metal shod foosteps. Ringing in her ears, as sound gradually restored itself from the damage Betrid’s screaming had done.

Guards. Guards were coming for her. Coming now.

Time to run.

Donnel shrugged, pushing the pile his broom had made into an orderly heap. “Be off, girl. I’ll tell Nepos you be on yer way. Cast Invisibility, if ye have it.”

“I have it.” she managed to utter, adrenaline making her loathe to relinquish her grip upon her magic. Forcing it back down, she lifted her left hand high, to cast a shroud of invisibility upon her.

And not a moment too soon. Banging, pounding upon the treasury house door ceased, as Donnel cracked the door wide.

Slipping past the guards intent upon the limp body, Nemain forced herself to slow down. To place her footsteps evenly, upon stone and not upon water where it might make a splash. Reveal her blurred form to the guards who were glancing about, even now.

Creeping along warily, she made her way to the great double doors of the front gates as the call rang out, chasing her with its echoing cry.

“To arms! To arms!”

"A Silver-Blood has been murdered! Betrid is killed!"

"-Forsworn here, in the city! To arms !”

Chapter End Notes

Irish Gaelic Vocabulary

Ochone- Expression of sadness, sound of exclamation
Meitheal- Working together towards a shared goal. Appropriate in view of a devotional or festival.
Fáilte- A Thousand Greetings
súile a dhéanamh - ‘Making eyes’ at someone

As always, if I'm wrong and you know better...comment so I can fix it. I'm not a native speaker of Gaelic.

Comment and critique, people. Comments feed the beast and warm the cockles of me heart.
Here's a super nifty little video on the history of Ulfric Stormcloak. Who Bethesda likely drew from historically for his character, etc. Cool stuff.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHk069z4dtA&index=3&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzalpxQ6w

Aaand more sweet fan-made music. I love it! Soundtrack for this chapter: 'The Darkest Days', created by Digital Shaper.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxFTAd2hlWY&index=12&list=RDou0ueSip4PA

"One of the less attractive aspects of human nature is our tendency to hate the people we haven't treated very well;

It's much easier than accepting guilt.

If we can convince ourselves that the people we betrayed or enslaved were subhuman monsters in the first place, then our guilt isn't nearly so black as we secretly know that it is.

Humans are very, very good at shifting blame and avoiding guilt."

-David Eddings

The juniper bark rope - hastily made and barely long enough to do the job - lay like a dead snake in her hands.

Her stomach growled once more. Twelve days. Near two weeks it had been since she had eaten anything but a single rock warbler egg. Even the shell she had crunched between her teeth, after licking the insides clean.

After that, her passage north through the Reach had led her to only starvation and near frostbite. Her spells were weakening - for it was the body that fueled the strength needed for magicka to draw upon.

-And the body required regular sustenance. Nemain had eaten nothing but bits of moss and streamwater since that egg.

She had tried - had crafted fishtraps from twigs and hastily rolled twine to no end, for the winter
storms were upon the Reach. The fish in the streams and ponds had swum deep, far out of her grasp as the rain fell. As she despaired over her empty traps, feeling the cramping of hunger upon her; the rain turned to snow.

And the soaked wood she gathered would not catch fire, no matter how she tried to light it with shaking hand and fading flame. She had been cast naked, alone but for a crude knife and worn waterskin, out into the wilds to survive. Or not, she thought as she huddled beneath a rocky overhang.

The rope she had crafted was another way. A bitter way, perhaps - the way of the coward, to take her own life. But it was a choice nonetheless.

She twisted the rough bark in her fingers.

Her stomach was tight and small; its emptiness laving at her spine with sharp, insistent pains. Checking, Nemain touched her cheeks. Unsure if she was indeed crying, as the rain had fallen upon her in the wet of the high crags. No - she had not cried since that night. The night, twelve days past, when Galan had died by her hand. Reborn, as Briarheart.

She knew...or thought she knew, that the part of him not sacrificed would remain the same. His mind would be whole, intact. He could speak to her, if he so chose. Could fight, hunt, smith…

Do everything, except love. For the heart she had taken at his behest had been eaten by a witch. Personality, free will, humanity...all given in sacrifice to the Gods. Unfeeling, cold...he was now Briarheart, born for war.

The rope lay limp in her hands.

Lifting it, she fashioned a noose. The noose she numbly hung over the lip of stone overhead...taking care not to trip upon the wet rock, for it was a quick death she was after. Not a lingering death by broken neck or twisted foot.

Standing upon the stone, she placed the loop of the rope around her neck. Tightening it with slowly steadying hands, as her mind calmed. Better. Far better to die than live in a world where Galan walked like one dead. Heartless. Hopeless. This was the right choice.

She took a deep breath.

And jumped off the rock.

.....“Guuuhrgkh!”

Jerking awake, Nemain started from the dream that wasn’t a dream.

Far off, she could hear the barking of a dog.

No...Patting her throat to reassure herself that the noose was no longer there, Nemain strained her ears, the better to hear as she stood from the hastily hollowed out pile of broken boughs and leaf
litter.

Many dogs. More than one, all barking, howling as they caught her scent.

If they were this close, she reasoned, then she had less time than she wished to lose their trail. Her map was of no use; she had left the roads days ago. Left them for the pathless wilding woods that she knew were called Falkreath.

The trees groaned and swayed in the wind of the oncoming storm. Unfamiliar, eerie, so dark as she wrapped herself thoroughly in the mud coated mildewed stench of her robe. Hefting the weight of her knapsack upon her back, Nemain cast one look behind her at the west.

More barking. One of the hounds howled, almost a question as the tone of the plaintive sound rose at the end. As if the beast were crying out, where are you?

The wind shifted, making the great boughs sigh high above her. They were speaking too.

Ruuunnnn, ruuunnn...

Stepping over twisting roots and rocks that sought to trip her, Nemain felt the pitter-patter of raindrops falling upon her face. She knew Banning; knew the master of hounds fair well.

She also knew that his wages were paid by Jarl Igmund. And Jarl Igmund’s seat of power was fueled by the silver that poured in from Cidna Mine, threaded through the hands of the Silver-Blood Clan. The clan whose matriarch’s head she had exploded, boiling the brains inside the skull until it had burst like a faulty kettle.

The barking drew nearer.

Time to move.

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She was lost.

Nemain had never, she thought frantically as she pushed through even more ferns and scratching bushes, left the Reach. Not once in her life had she seen any vista but that of the mist-wreathed crags of her heartland, beautiful and stark. The ever present rush of streams and waterfalls had been her lullaby, the stunted juniper tree and trailing mosses speckled at times with white, starry flowers the only greenery she knew.

Unlike the towering forests here that blotted out the sky. Casting her into darkness and shadow, making her jump at every cracking twig, every rabbit that dared to leap into the open.

Further east, the weather had shifted. The clouds pregnant with rain over Markarth had burst into sharp, slicing sleet, soaking her even as she stumbled through the woods. Though the ominous
treetops shrouded her view of the sky, this cold wetness would be her death.

And she was running out of cold resistance potions, as she uncapped her very last one. Holding it high above her head, as she waited for the very last drops to fall upon her tongue, Nemain shook it; shook it fervently as she stuck her tongue inside the glass lip of bottle. Smacking her lips she sighed in relief, as warmth stole through her. Chasing away the pain of the stinging chill. It would return, she knew, with a vengeance.

Where am I?

She no longer heard dogs barking. No more howls awakening her troubled sleep; forcing her ever onward as she pushed herself along, footsore and trembling from exhaustion. Nemain estimated she had been on the lam for nine days from Markarth and the treasury house.

Nine days, eight miserable nights of cold and hunger and pain. She had taken only what she had worn on her person to cast the bones for Betrid Silver-Blood. Two days worth of rations, which though eaten sparingly had only lasted four. Her knife, well worn and curved from many sharpenings upon the whetstone. A waterskin - not that it did any good, she thought in a panic. All the water she drank went straight through her, as though it had been poured through a sieve rather than a person. Nothing to halt its progression through her guts...she no longer bothered to drink water anymore, to stave off the hunger pains. It was not worth the constant stops to relieve her bladder.

And her robes were a sodden, torn mess. The enchantments laid upon them only strengthened her Illusion spells. They did nothing to protect her from the bite of wind, the blast of cold from rain, snow and water.

The few potions she had dropped unthinkingly into her pack were almost gone. The bulk of her supplies remained tucked safely in Moth gro-Bagol’s spare chest, back in Markarth.

If she did not seek shelter, warmth soon...she would succumb to the shivering hypothermia held only at bay by the sliver of time her potion had bought her. And Nemain was far too tired to sustain an extended hand of flame, to heat herself.

The desire to run; to flee far from the Reach had become superseded by the pressing needs of her flesh. Shelter. Where be a muckity-damned cave? A rocky overhang? All I see be trees, nothing but these cursed, scratching trees and this damn eternal snow!

Wallowing in the misery of it all, Nemain did not see the Imperial soldier who stepped out from behind the tree until it was too late.

Thwack!

-Stupidly, Nemain worked her mouth open and shut. Somehow, she was now lying flat on the mud of the ground, as the Imperial stood over her with his sword still sheathed. No more than a youth, really; his dark eyes gleaming with excitement bracketed by the shining metal of his helmet.

“I got one! Hadvar, look! I got a rebel! Haha!”

A heavily accented voice responded. Nord, she realized in foggy apprehension, as steely bars lifted
her up and away, her awareness flickering like a candle in a draft.

“Huh...this citizen doesn’t look like one of them. But she is wearing their colors. Better to be safe than sorry, soldier. Well done. Get her up.”

Giving the order to stand down was the right choice to make. Yet the words tasted like ashes in his mouth.

Damn the scouts for not reaching them in time! The Imperials had come out of nowhere, outnumbering Ulfric and his men at least five to one. It would have been a worthless waste, throwing what strength remained at the shining, clanking bastards who had hemmed them in. Preventing all chance of escape, as the military governor himself dropped down from his horse to gloat.

They had learned, the Jarl thought in tight displeasure. Learned how to move more silently in the crunching snow. Had filtered through the trees like shadows, taking him and his men completely by surprise as they made their way to Darkwater Crossing.

No use dwelling upon chances lost. Tightening the filthy gag that had been forced past Ulfric’s chapped lips, Tullius curled his lip in scorn as he yanked the knot of the cloth. Yanked it hard.

And though he did not smile, the Imperial general bore a self-satisfied sort of look, as two legionnaires pushed Ulfric, making him stumble as he made his way to the cart with the other prisoners. "Ulfric Stormcloak! You are guilty of insurrection, murder of Imperial citizens, the assassination of King Torygg, and high treason against the Empire. It's over."

“It will never be over, Imperial dog!” Ralof spat, as an Imperial soldier bound his wrists and prodded him by swordpoint into the cart. “Not as I live and breath!”

Not bothering to respond, Tullius turned on his heel and began issuing orders. Clapping wrists to shoulders in a quick salute, the two soldiers he had addressed mounted up. The Imperial guarding Ralof smacked the back of the Nord’s head as he climbed in, causing the man to pitch forward.

“Shut up, and get in the cart, traitor.” The sword tilted towards him. “Your turn.”

Shaking his head at Ralof, who had turned florid with fury at the disrespect shown to his Jarl, Ulfric managed to haul himself onto the wooden seat without help. In the distance, he could see three other carts filled with the surviving Stormcloaks. Blood and dirt streaked faces turned, the familiar faces watching him attentively as Ulfric settled himself more comfortably against the creaking bench of the unsprung seat.

Only he, Ralof, and a sullen looking Nord with a bush of brown hair sat in this wagon. Hunching over, Ulfric rubbed his nose with the rough rope of his bindings. Feeling the sinking weight of fatigue close over him, he closed his eyes briefly. Shutting out all distractions, as he sought the peace - the clarity that came when he meditated. He sorely needed it now, for he could not think of a way to free his men. Not while he remained bound and captive.

A faint cheer arose from the Imperials, as Tullius finished addressing them at the head of the caravan of prisoners. “...Skyrim belongs to the Empire! Now get moving...the closest fortified town in this
frozen backwater is Helgen. Everyone stay sharp.”

“Yaahgh! Ulfric’s head on a pike!”

“Death to the Stormcloaks!”

“Skyrim is won for the Emperor! For Titus Mede!”

This is our homeland, Tullius. All the blood spilled in this war is on your head.

Feeling the cart begin to lurch forward as the Imperial snapped the wagon horses’s reins, Ulfric’s bitter musings were interrupted as he nearly fell off like the others, as the cart jerked to a sudden halt. “What’s this then, soldier?”

In the distance, three figures were seen trudging through the woods. No...four, he realized, as one of the Legion soldiers split off from the other two. Who were fully occupied between them, subduing the yowling, screeching thing that might have been a child.

No... he amended the thought, as the soldier’s grip upon her robes pulled tightly against small, but definite breasts. A woman. A Reachwoman. It was nearly impossible to tell, what with the crackling mass of wild hair that shrouded her features. But her diminutive height, the magic that sizzled even now from fingers bound tightly with cloth and cord…

Ulfric narrowed his eyes, the better to see the figure that struggled even now to free herself from the tight grip of the two legionnaires. “Found this one close by. Not sure what she was doing here, honestly.”

“She’s a Stormcloak spy, Hadvar!” The Imperial on her left scoffed, kicking with a steel-toed boot and causing her to flop forward in the mud. Muffled grunts and squeals arose, as the soldier ground down with the flat of his heel, keeping her pinned. Her legs kicked furiously, seeking purchase upon the ground as the soldier guffawed at her efforts. “Haha - filthy bitch. Think we can have some fun, before the headsman has his way?”

The one they called Hadvar sighed. “No, private, you may not. Get her into the cart with the others. Now.”

With one great heave, the soldier threw the woman bodily in the cart. Rolling with the force of it, her head smacked against the wooden planks of the wagon. Hard.

The blow must have knocked her out, Ulfric reckoned. There she lay, sprawled and unmoving against Ulfric’s boots. More like a bundle of tangled wool on a spindle than a person.

He slid back on the seat, assiduously moving his boots away from her reek. Even through the grotty stench of the gag, Ulfric could smell her; a revolting combination of sour sweat and the musty rankness of soiled clothing. Wrinkling his nose, he turned his head away. Knocked out or no, she faces the same fate as the rest of us.

Again, the cart jolted as it began to move forward, the rollicking motion tossing the men to and fro, as they held tightly to the wagon’s siding. Bracing against the bumps, Ralof wet his lips...wincing as
his tongue found a fresh scrape. “Wonder why she is here.”

“Ain’t it obvious?” The unkempt Nord who looked as though he had swallowed a mouthful of vinegar sneered, deliberately treading his foot on the woman’s slack hand. “She’s a Forsworn. Plain as the nose stamped on your face, you traitor.”

Ulfric shot the man a quelling glance. Some silence would not go amiss. Even without the use of speech, the force of his gaze seemed to do the trick, as the man slumped backwards. Picking at his bindings with the nail of his thumb, eyes darting around as the wagons wended their way through the paved forest path.

Moments passed. Every breath bringing them closer to execution.

_He had been so sure_, Ulfric thought mournfully. Sure that Tullius would desire to stretch out the victory. To parade them upon the streets of the Imperial City. Show the White-Gold Tower the fruits of the general’s labors.

If they had undertaken the journey through the Pale Pass to Bruma, it would have afforded Ulfric time. Time to plan, to scheme a way to save his soldiers, his people from the noose and the axe. As the wagon rumbled onward, his mind turned in helpless circles, tripping upon the same race of thoughts. The desire to fight warring with the yearning to flee.

_Not to be helped_. They were sorely outnumbered, in strange territory. Guarded by these smug southern dogs, as they were herded to the slaughter. But, Ulfric reflected as the putrid bundle of cloth shifted, revealing wide gray eyes...where there was a will, there was a way.

They weren’t dead yet.

“Hey.” Ralof helped the woman sit at last, across from him on the wagon. “Hey, you. You're finally awake. You were trying to cross the border, right? Walked right into that Imperial ambush, same as us, and that thief over there.”

"Damn you Stormcloaks.” Ulfric counted the horses bearing officers down the string of wagons, mentally tallying their numbers in his mind. He kept part of his awareness focused upon the conversation in the cart, as the slight Breton sighed in dejection; hair obscuring her face once more.

“-Skyrim was fine until you came along. Empire was nice and lazy. If they hadn't been looking for you, I could've stolen that horse and been halfway to Hammerfell.”

_Unlikely_, Ulfric thought darkly. _The fool had chosen the most treacherous path on the southern border. It was a miracle he had not been stopped sooner._ “You there... You and me, we shouldn't be here. It's these Stormcloaks the Empire wants.”

Ralof shrugged. "We're all brothers and sisters in binds now, thief."

"Shut up back there!"
They all fell silent, waiting for the Imperial’s horse to lag behind once more.

Turning his head slightly, Ulfric saw nothing but the trees and distant mountains. Somewhere down the path lay Helgen. Down the bench from him, the Reachwoman shivered from the cold.

_No doubt wishing for her ragged Forsworn finery. Beaded pelts, bones, and foul things of that ilk._

Stretching his legs, Ulfric curled the toes up inside his boots and flexed; forcing himself to focus once more. _Think. Shor gave you a head, so use it. Find a way out of this trap, before it's too late._

Brooding, he barely registered the thief speak once more. "And what's wrong with him, huh?"

"Watch your tongue. You're speaking to Ulfric Stormcloak, the true High King."

"Ulfric? The Jarl of Windhelm? You're the leader of the rebellion. But if they've captured you…"

The man’s voice trickled to a pathetic sob. “Oh gods, where are they taking us?”

Ralof’s face grew grim, his blue eyes distant. "I don't know where we're going, but Sovngarde awaits."

At that, the woman lifted her head, fixing an astonished gaze upon Ulfric first, then casting a look at Ralof and then at the thief as the man began to babble, "No, this can't be happening. This isn't happening!"

“At least we die heroes. Tsun will be waiting for us.” Ralof’s voice was dry with resignation. “Our ancestors. Feasting. Mead."

Feeling saliva pool behind the gag, Ulfric felt reluctant agreement with the thief as he moaned. “Gods, what I wouldn't give for some mead right now…”

The horses’s hooves clipped upon the stone more loudly. _Damn._ Easing his head back slightly, Ulfric saw that the cobbles of the road were becoming more solid. Less overgrown by grass and moss, not as worn as the path they had previously been rolling upon.

Helgen was drawing closer, then. “Hey you. Forsworn - I'm called Lokir. What brings you into the cold grip of the Empire anyhow? I know you're not one of the rebels.”

Turning her face more fully to the back of the cart, Ulfric saw her grime coated features pinch in a look of disdain. “No one. I be no one, going nowhere.” Her rasping voice was heavy with the lilting accent of the westfolk, confirming his suspicions of her origin.

Not that he needed much confirmation. It was, as the thief had so inelegantly expressed it, plain as the nose on his face.

Ignoring the thief as he sneered at her dismissal, she scooted further away from him on the wagon bench. Ulfric glared right back as those grey eyes lingered upon him, taking in the black heavily furred cloak. The rune-beaded braids, the beard...seeming to count the links in the chainmail armor he wore, all the way to the silver threaded embroidery of his boots. Unabashed in their examination, their calculating scrutiny.
With, he thought in amusement, not a small amount of hatred. *Reachborn. She has cause to despise me, then. A shame she won’t be inclined to help us, should the opportunity arise.*

Ralof’s voice cut through the silence fraught with tension. “What Hold are you from horse thief? Whiterun? Haafingar? The Reach?”

Lokir snarled back. “Why do you care?

The woman broke away from the showdown first, looking down at her wrapped hands as she flexed the ropes that held fast. Remaining quiet, her lips white as she sucked the insides of her cheek in frustration or fear, Ulfric couldn’t tell.

Ralof huffed, his tone betraying his impatience with the horse thief. “Because there won’t be any Holds once the Imperials have it their way. No Jarls to rule over them. Just Legion soldiers and martial law.”

“Every man, woman and child of Skyrim is part of this rebellion, horse thief. Everyone has to fight for the freedom of the Nine Holds.”

The woman scoffed suddenly, strands of her ashy hair twisting in the sudden gust of wind from the trees. “Nine Holds, pah. You be optimistic, Nord, if you think all nine Holds be unitedly interested in anything but mead.”

“Freedom of the Nine Holds?” I don't remember the Empire sweeping up every cut purse in Skyrim, before you bastards started butchering their soldiers.

About to respond, whatever Ralof would have said was cut off by a soldier announcing, "General Tullius, sir! The headsman is waiting!"

Far ahead, Ulfric felt his stomach drop as he heard the general heave a put upon sigh.

"Good. Let's get this over with."

"Shor, Mara, Dibella, Kynareth, Akatosh. Divines, please help me." Lokir mumbled under his breath, nearly panting with ill-disguised terror.

Ignoring the other prisoners completely, Ulfric retreated to the calm within himself. Beyond what he blocked out, dimly he could still hear the Riverwood native waxing on about juniper mead and sweethearts. Something about walls and towers.

*What was that lesson Arngeir liked to expound upon? The stone in the river? The flame in the void? Ysmir's beard...how can I be at peace when everything has gone to shit?*

"Get these prisoners out of the carts. Move it!"

For the third time in the past hour, the Reachwoman spoke, roughly. "Why’re we stopping?"

"Why do you think?” Ralof’s eyes were sympathetic as she looked around, taking in Helgen. The
walled gates closing, as soldiers prodded the Stormcloaks out of the wagon carts. Wet squelching sounds of mud underfoot, as countless feet trod the churned up courtyard of the town, where its citizens remained along the sidelines. Watching out of curiosity, or perhaps boredom. **This place is truly the ass-end of nowhere.** “End of the line. Let's go. Shouldn't keep the gods waiting for us.”

Feeling his nerves jangle with the pins and needles of movement after remaining seated for so long, Ulfric jumped down. Grunting against the gag, which showed no signs of slipping despite the careful workings of his mouth, his teeth.

"No! Wait! We're not rebels!"

To his left, Ralof snorted. Stood proud, as the soldier Hadvar approached with a swarthy Imperial Captain, holding a list of parchment. "Face your death with some courage, thief."

Shaking his head frantically, Lokir approached the Reachwoman as she hopped down. Nearly pushing her against the wagon, as he gesticulated to the Imperials. "You've got to tell them! We weren't with you! This is a mistake!"

Shoving Lokir away, the woman fixed her eyes upon him once more. In something akin to triumph, he thought with distant awareness. **The Forsworn crowing over the victory of the Bear's demise. A hollow victory. Her head will roll next to mine, soon.**

Breaking apart, the cowardly thief ran. And was felled by a swift arrow, shot from an Imperial bow. "Anyone else feel like running?"

**Nowhere to run.**

"Step towards the block when we call your name. One at a time."

Sparing a glance for Ralof, Ulfric saw the loyal Stormcloak made a not-so-subtle gesture at Hadvar. Ulfric thought it might have been the finger-oath so favored by the Dunmer, as he had seen it flicked his way multiple times in Windhelm. Something similar to a nonverbal *fuck you.* "Empire loves their damn lists."

Ignoring Ralof stolidly, Hadvar read from the lists. "Ulfric Stormcloak. Jarl of Windhelm."

Stepping forward, Ulfric tested the ropes of at his wrists. Still holding firm, despite how regularly he had been straining since they had been tied. Somewhere behind him, Ralof whispered softly. "It has been an honor, Jarl Ulfric."

Nodding, he walked over to where his men and women stood. Amidst the piles of straw and sodden upturned earth, what was left of his honor guard remained. Grim and stoic, despite the jeering and occasional, poorly aimed vegetable from the natives of Helgen.

Striding to the forefront of the huddled prisoners, he received several nods and proud smiles from the sons and daughters of Skyrim. They who had followed. They who would die, for this land now doomed to split asunder beneath the dying claws of the Empire.

Shifting from foot to foot, enjoying the freedom of motion, Ulfric pondered who would attack Cyrodiil first upon the inevitable dissolution of Titus Mede’s reign. Aware, as he felt during every fight, of the breath in his lungs. The beat of his heart, coursing blood through readied limbs,
preparing for a fight that would not come as Ulfric grimly watched Tullius approach.

He consoled himself that the end was not far off. Skyrim would only suffer a few years more, Talos willing. *That upstart Colovian warlord could only hold onto the threadbare shamble of alliances for so long*. Appeasement was never a true solution, and the Empire had given away too much to remain intact for a decade, let alone another hundred years.

Would it be Elseweyr? Those Khajiit had been so ingratiated to the Aldmeri Dominion for the supposed miracle of restoring the moons. Or Hammerfell, wreaking retribution for the coward’s path the Emperor had trod with the White-Gold Concordat, leaving them to fight alone?

He barely remembered his father’s face. A mere blur, overshadowed by other boyhood memories spent in the silent halls of High Hrothgar. Would old Hoag be ashamed upon their reunion in Sovngarde that he had died under the headsman’s axe?

It was not the valorous death that inspired songs and bard’s tales, to be sure.

"Ulfric Stormcloak. Some here in Helgen call you a hero. But a hero doesn't use a power like The Voice to murder his king and usurp his throne."

And even now, bound and gagged, Ulfric felt the Thu’um rise from within him. Rumbling his chest in a Shout he was unable to give voice, as Tullius continued his gloating speech. Clearly for his own benefit.

"You started this war, plunged Skyrim into chaos, and now the Empire is going to put you down, and restore the peace."

He nearly tripped upon his own boots, looking around for the echoing roar, twin to the sound his very heart burst with inside. *What was that?*

The Stormcloaks behind him shifted and muttered amongst themselves. “What was that?” Hadvar uttered in astonishment, standing in place before the headsman.

The military governor made a dismissive gesture. “It’s nothing. Carry on.”

As the Priestess of Arkay proceeded to speak the last words; rites of Arkay offered to quell the rage of the gods at this injustice, no doubt, Ulfric turned his thoughts towards home and beyond.

He found himself wishing for the cold, clean winds of Windhelm, not the damp rotting vegetation of these mouldering woods. The temperature, the smell...it was all wrong. *Too wet. Too warm.* Though judging by the near-constant trembling from the Reachwoman somehow still destined for the chopping block, these woods were probably cold enough, for those born without ice in their veins.

Perhaps he would watch the grand rebirth of his homeland from the hallowed halls of Shor. Ulfric only hoped he would be found worthy by Tsun, to cross the whale-bone bridge into Sovngarde.

He’d find out soon enough. One of his men stomped forward, interrupting the wheedling tones of the priestess with a show of courage. “For the love of Talos, shut up and let’s get this over with!”

The woman in her robes sniffed. “As you wish.”
Not every man was bold enough to walk willingly to his own end. His soldier was bold. Placing his head upon the block, it was but a moment until the headsman grinned wildly behind the hood. Bringing the mighty waraxe down, a great swing of silvered steel.

The head parted with a meaty *thwunk*, toppling into the basket. A gruesome harvest, with the Imperial captain callously shoving the body aside, preparing the block for further heads to roll.

*A true Nord, to the last.* Ralof seemed to agree, echoing the sentiment with the whispered praise, “As fearless in death as he was in life.”

“Next, the Breton in rags!”

Walking up from the rear of the assembled Stormcloaks, the Forsworn looked like a child. Her head, with its broom of hair barely topped the shoulders of most present. And yet she walked, head held high. Like those torn and filthy robes were a sable coat lined with the finest silk.

She cast him a lingering, triumphant look as she walked towards the blood soaked stone block. Folding herself down without a fuss, Ulfric could see her cheek become smudged; red so bright against the dirt marred paleness of the Reachwoman’s face.

*Your end, and mine. There is no triumph in this, Forsworn. Where is the victory? Who will sound the horn?*

“What in Oblivion is that?”

“...A dragon! A dragon!?!?”

“The end times! The end times be upon us!”

“Get the battlemages out here! Now!”

Stunned senseless, Ulfric’s thoughts tore off, whirled into Oblivion as the dragon that had appeared out of nowhere opened its gaping black maw.

-And Shouted, the concussion of it bringing fire and rock to burst forth from the sky.

He barely managed to gather enough wits to shove the Stormcloak behind him out of the way, a massive rock crashing down followed by more falling from above; as Tullius was distracted with mounting a defense.

Perhaps they would survive this after all...

*Need to move, need to move now!*

Chapter End Notes
Ugh...Helgen. I've played this opening sequence SO. MANY. TIMES. I did try a mod that filled in dialogue and stuff, adding Ulfric with Ralof as the Dragonborn escapes through the fortress. It made it slightly more tolerable.

But because I love alternate universe fics, I'm a-gonna shake things up a bit. Watch for it in the next chapter.

And puh-lease comment, if you like this fic. All commenters get a sweet roll.
The Fall

Chapter Notes

Chapter soundtrack: The Neopagan group Heilung, performing 'Krigsgaldr'
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7ZqZVunCb4

I don't own Skyrim, or the Elder Scrolls Franchise. Bethesda does. If I did, I would have the Companions at my beck and call. Rubbing my feet. Bringing me mead. Serenading me with sweet bardic tunes...

Alas, it is not to be.

*edited July 21st 2017 for gaelic grammar changes*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Once you place that crown of liar on your head, you can take it off again, but it leaves a stain for all time."

-Terry Goodkind

"By the Horned Consort and Maid, Mother and Crone...that black wyrm saved me neck. Surely it t'was a sign; an opportunity.

A chance to take his heart with me own hands!"

Testing the strength of her bonds, Nemain peeked over at the two Nords.

Massive, hairy blonde-bearded giants. Just one of their boots could have fit around her thigh. So tall, her neck ached with all the straining it was asked to do, to stare at them - him in the eyes as they wended their way through the fire and screams of what had been Helgen. Thonar Silver-blood was downright puny compared to the Stormcloak and the Jarl.

She had been ready. Prepared to lay down her life if it meant the Bear of Markarth would follow her soon after.

Death by beheading. Old Nepos would never receive the heart, but the deed would have held true.
The purpose would have been accomplished, whether she lived or not.

Only, the giant dragon had come. Come to interfere, to delay the execution. Cannot decide if I be lucky, or cursed now. The gods must have sent their serpent fer a reason. Now...where be that damned exit?

The Jarl’s voice was deep. Rich. Like butter, or honey. With the slightest hint of bitterness run through it, as they caught their breath in the quiet of the circle tower. She had expected him to sound different. Cackle madly, perhaps. By Dibe, what an imagination you do have. “I don’t know where that dragon came from, but without it we’d all be a foot shorter, and a lot less talkative.”

The overly cheerful one (Ralof she remembered...cor, Nord names were so strange) swallowed, blue eyes wide. “That thing was a dragon, no doubt. Just like in the children’s stories and the legends. The harbingers of the end times!”

Dragon. Drake. Wyrm. The old tales mentioned worshipping the mighty beasts with sacrifice and song. Silently, Nemain rather agreed. It had been a mighty surprise, that dragon attacking when it did.

She still bore the smears of blood upon her cheek from lying down upon the chopping block. Could smell the iron rich tang of it, salt and metal so familiar. And fortunately not her own, against all odds. “Ralof, let’s get her unshackled.”

“Aye. Come on, you need your hands free.”

All too easy. Not lessening her vigilance in the slightest, Nemain watched both Nords closely as Ralof cut the binding ropes, the wrapped cloth that kept her fingers constrained from spellcasting.

Wriggling the freed digits, she mentally exulted in the sensation. Her mana, that pool of magic she drew from deep within her - it was fully replenished since that gods-awful ride in the wagon, as she desperately struggled to free herself from those Imperial bastards. She felt near reborn; jittery with raw adrenaline.

-Though she’d be quite the fool to make her move now. She could still hear the roar of the great dragon outside, shaking the very walls. And this Ralof seemed a loyal sort. Nemain would have to separate them both, perhaps surprise Ralof from behind...

And then, then she could promptly tackle the problem that was this Ulfric.

“Reachwoman.” Startling to find her herself addressed by her prey, Nemain turned.

“Nemain. My name be Nemain.”

Lazily, Ulfric gestured. Sweeping the entirety of her body with one casual wave of his arm. “Find yourself a weapon and armor. The Gods help those who help themselves, after all.”

Ralof shrugged, his hands searching for a way to open the barred door that led downward. “You may as well take Gunjar’s gear. He won’t be needing it anymore.”
Almost, she idly thought as she took in the man’s mane of wheat-gold hair, tidily braided and beaded in rune-cast silver (from Markarth’s mines, no doubt) she wished she had a goodly amount of sacred cedar oil. A cask, properly sealed and prepared, to preserve the severed head of such a mighty foe. To display Ulfric’s head with pride among the People of Deepwood Redoubt.

She had seen the skulls other Forsworn wore about their belts. The heads of the hunted; beasts of prey and man nailed to the hide tents, the high walled stone brochs. And had been envious, at the visible symbols of piety and strength. A head worthy of embalming often was brought out at every Moon turning; every festival of Imbolc and Yule, to brag proudly about the fierceness of the foe. How the head had been taken, and why. A tangible trophy of battle prowess.

Did Galan Briarheart now sport the skulls of his kills around his slender waist? How I miss him.

Nemain was no fool. She would survive; live to die another day. Live to kill. Pulling off the axe, the chainmail cuirass and padded blue wool off the body of this Gunjar, she shucked off her despoiled robes with a sigh of relief. She heard gasps and a muttered oath of Shor’s beard! As, uncaring of her nakedness, Nemain wiped the dirt and blood off of herself as quick as she could with the ruined cloth. A shame...she had lost a friend over obtaining that damned robe.

Donning the heavy Stormcloak gear, the length of the chainmail fell past her knees. The fit of it was all wrong; what was meant to fit over broad shoulders was unwieldy, bunched up around her elbows. Making it difficult for her to handle the chipped axe, even though the sleeves were short. Cursed giants. Fear thuaidh!

Whatever happened, she would be ready. Magic had not let her down yet. Still wearing her own well-shod boots, Nemain allowing a handful of fire to bloom in her left palm, as her right hand gripped the axe haft. “Ready.”

Ulfric was staring off into space, contemplating the wall. “Aye…” Ralof seemed to be struggling with himself, dismay fighting with mirth for place upon his windburned features. “I see that, woman. You have no shame at all, do you?”

Standing at the ready behind the Nord, Ulfric’s blue eyes were sharp upon her as she opened her mouth. Preparing to give this Ralof a piece of her mind about what truly constituted shame, when sounds of metal clanking and harried footsteps ruined her thought process.

The three ducked almost automatically; seeking shelter against the curved walls away from the door as what had to be the Imperial Captain rattled the barred door. “Get this gate open!” The woman barked, as with a sound of metallic jingling, the door unlocked. The keys.

Readying herself with anticipation (for there were only two, in those ridiculous metal skirts) Nemain allowed a slight smile to grace her lips. Ralof smiled back, those sky lit eyes shining.

Until Ulfric, dour as ever, stunned them all with a jarring blast of sound that issued forth from his lips. “Fus...Roh-Dahl!”

Skittering away from him, nearly shoving her fingers into the cracks in the walls to keep herself upon
solid ground, Nemain felt a jolt of panic at the very real - very physical impact of the Voice. *The Thu'um of the Northmen!* The force of it knocked the captain over, smashing her cohort against the wall; where he slid bonelessly down, dead.

“Stormcloaks!” the woman managed to rasp out, as she brought the short heavy blade of Legion make to bear, as the men circled around her.

- -like ravens circling a wounded pup, separated from the pack. *An easy kill.* Remaining at some distance, Nemain watched as Ralof lunged; his axes slicing, biting deeply into the woman’s neck. She shook, dark eyes fading and mouth growing slack, as the blood pumped thickly over the Nord’s knotted hands.

Kicking her body free of his axes, Ralof crouched in a guard. Watching for more movement from the darkened corridor.

Nothing moved but them. “That’s the last of them. The others must have found another way out. Come.” Uncaring of the blood that dripped blackly upon the keys, Ulfric unlocked the gate that led downward. “Let’s be off.”

“Aye. Before that dragon brings down the keep upon our heads.” Ralof jerked his head at her, inviting her to come along. “Follow or not, Reachwoman. But the best chance of living beyond this day lies in numbers.”

Shaking her head at the thought of going it alone, she voiced only part of her thoughts. “You be right.” *And I’m not letting either of you out of my sight, fear thuaidh.*

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Down, down they went. Into the bowels of the fortress, two Nords and a Forsworn. Two more Imperial quaestor awaited them in what appeared to be a dining hall. A merry, crackling fire a strangely homey backdrop to the screaming men who drew upon their entrance, as the Nords seemed to tense. Preparing with limber swings and shifting feet to do battle once more.

“These two be mine,” she told the Nords, striding forward past Ralof’s squawked objections.

Dropping the axe, Nemain twisted lightning and frost in her palms. A bit of winter’s breath; to end the men who pounded down the narrow dark of the hall, teeth shining in the firelight as though they bore fangs as well.

A sizzling boom erupted, as she tossed the handful of electricity nearly numbed with cold. One man choked, his eyes rolling in the back of his head as he fell over, caroming with a dull crash of metal off of the other man, who furiously shoved him away. And came at her once more, a wild blankness in his eyes that she felt twin feeling for; deep in her empty chest.

“Calm,” She spoke resolutely, watching as the fight left the Imperial’s surprised eyes. As he dropped the arm holding his sword, seemingly confused at his surroundings, she struck.

-Impaling him through the eye with the ice spike she had steadily been growing since releasing the first volley. The man’s mouth moved in an ‘o’ of shock, death coming as swiftly as it had for his companion as she released her grip on the icicle. And stepped back, watching in smug satisfaction as this one fell before her as well. Almost, she thought in black amusement; like the tendons of his legs had been cut by some unseen blade.

Turning back to the Nords, who had sheathed their axes to watch...Nemain kept her face wiped
clean of any smile. “What be you lumps doing back there? I guess I doon need ye after all.”

Ulfric’s face was stoic. Unreadable. “We will see, won’t we. I hear more noise coming from down below.”

“I don’t think this day is ever going to end,” Ralof lamented, as he stepped cautiously over the dead bodies of the legion soldiers. Ulfric’s response was merely a sigh, as she fell in line with them once more. Always keeping close watch of him.

Her hands fairly *itched* to cast a spell at that hulking back.

*********

The torture chamber passed by in a flurry of fire and steel.

She was slowly tiring, she could feel...Nemain panted, gasping as she bent double over at her knees as the bodies cooled at her feet. The fine furs and armors the Bear wore were now heavily spackled with blood; his Stormcloaks that had survived the pitched battle (and the torturer’s assistant’s axe) wearily trudging over, to be closer to their Jarl.

“Imperial dogs. There’s nothing that’s too low for them,” A Stormcloak woman muttered, kicking the old Imperial who had flung surprisingly skillful bolts of lightning and fire upon the intruders.

Ignoring the rest, Nemain fiddled with the cage containing a lone prisoner. Dead for some time, by the smell. The greyed face that sagged beneath the hood appeared to be a Breton; the race her People were most closely associated with. *Yet sae different...none of the Bretons in Markarth sought to claim kinship with Reachfolk. Rather the opposite.* The robes the dead one wore would do, for now.

This time, she was so outnumbered as to feel the need to seek shelter, while changing. “I be ready to go in a moment,” she called out as Ulfric and the others looked up from their whispered conversation in surprise.

The steel bars of the torturer’s armory was enclosed enough that she felt the pace of her heartbeat ease. Easily defensible, one way in, one way out. And no other magic users, no bows and quivers visible to shoot her through the cage, should they choose.

Flinging the hateful Stormcloak armor away, she put on the robe and hood with alacrity. It smelled like sweetish rot, fresh from the ripening corpse...but the enchantments held strong, still. Nemain sighed, to feel power respool within her, magicka flaring fresh. Tingling her fingers with a near electric buzz, as she stretched her hands.

Striding out to the Nords with renewed vigor, Nemain scratched at the heavy bulk of her hair barely contained by the hood. “What now?”

“We find a way out,” Ralof spoke, taking in her new getup with slowly raised brows. “Further down. Past all the bodies and skeletons hanging in cages.”
“Just like home, eh Forsworn.” Ulfric’s voice was dry, his back turned to her as he took the lead. Staring at him incredulously, she stood there, frozen as the others brushed by. _What does the Bear know of my People. Nothing!_ 

Hissing silently beneath her breath, Nemain followed.

She was grateful for the edge the enchanted robe provided; for the next open room contained many surviving soldiers who had somehow breached the under tunnels past the dragon. Her hands filled with flame, and it was but the work of a moment to focus her firebolts upon a gleaming puddle...catching the spill from the upturned barrel of lantern oil alight.

Three Imperials were caught; running around on fire, screaming as they beat at themselves frantically. Trying to put out the blaze, eventually halting as they toppled. Ralof nearly walked right into the inferno; his Jarl pulling him back barely in the nick of time, as the Imperial Captain (a grizzled male, this time) stumbled and fell in his place. Screaming, flesh sizzling as his face made contact with the superheated liquid.

It took them a long time to stop moving. To die.

Nemain watched, passionless as the last one fell. The pink maw of his mouth’s interior shockingly bright against the seared blackness of his skin. “Done watching then?” She intoned carelessly, popping her knuckles as Ulfric cautiously approached her, the handsome face of Ralof still agape at the burnt corpses.

“Good work.” Ulfric’s low voice begrudged her even that small amount of praise. Her hackles rising at his near-mocking tone, Nemain backed up against the wall. Ensuring no space existed, for him or the others to sneak up behind her. _To bring her down, pulling, tearing at clothing to take what had not been freely given. Fear thuaidh enjoyed that. She remembered Markarth..._

No. Not now.

Nemain would not think on that. But she did recall the concussive force of that Shout. And somehow, the Jarl was still speaking, as her mind came back from where it had flitted away...“Between us and the dragon...not many Imperials will be getting out of Helgen alive today.”

“We’ll remain behind,” the Stormcloak woman offered helpfully. “There are bound to be others that survived. We’ll steer them the right way.” The older bearded Nord beside her grunted in affirmation, his hands still gripping the waraxe.

Ulfric nodded. “May Talos shield you from all harm.”

Not bothering with a farewell, Nemain ducked her head as Ulfric passed her to take the lead, pulling the lever that sprung the gate. The only light a guttering torch, as Ralof stepped in stride next to her, his eyes upon his lord. _Perfect._

They had lost their escort. As all three passed through the narrow passageway, she glanced back. No Stormcloaks were watching; they had left the chamber of bridges, no doubt to seek more of their
comrades.

Placing her hand lightly upon Ralof’s wrist, the Nord looked down at her with his brow furrowed. Smiling becomingly, she rubbed her index finger against the thinner skin of the inside of his wrist.

-and thought upon faltós an bháis, the fear of death. Whispering beneath her breath, as Ralof’s mouth parted in the same emotion.

_Fear._

Ripping his hand from her, the Stormcloak took off. Slipping and stumbling in his haste to get away from the Forsworn, as she allowed herself the smallest of smiles. And fingered the dagger, the bone handle worn and familiar in her grip.

“Ralof?” Ulfric turned…

-barely evading her, as she slashed towards the pale flash of throat uncovered by chainmail or cloak. _Damn him!_

Turning, no step wasted, Nemain hid her knife beneath the furl of her robe. Stabbed out, only to feel her knife torn with unimaginable force from her hand, as the words _Zun Haal Viik_ washed around her like a wave. Deafening her ears, as she clapped hands to them.

Wobbling, almost falling against the rock wall of the tunnel, she struggled to gather herself together as Ulfric’s eyes hardened. Blue ice, like a lake she had seen once high in the mountains. Merciless and unforgiving, as his lips parted once more.

Clutching the wall, she prepared to be Shouted to death. His eyes still boring into hers, as she slowly summoned handfuls of lightning (to deaden the nerves, shock him so she could run, run away far away RUN) still both man and woman stopped; stood stock still as the floor beneath them rumbled with the force of a distant roar.

Hesitating, her very nerves jangled in some gut-deep warning as something shook the walls; shivered the very floor. Barely having enough time to even draw breath to scream, Nemain watched in disbelief as the ground rises above her - as the very world broke and the walls fell on top of them, _crushing_, and with a spiking pain she knew no more.

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

_Darkness._

So dark; yet her eyes have finally, _finally_ opened all the way. Little good it does her...there is nothing to see. Ears ringing, an insistent tinny whine that she shakes her head to dismiss, yet she finds...her head has hit stone. _Trapped._

Blinking, searching, Nemain sees nothing but the dark.
The dark and damp, for something is dripping close by. Wetting her right hand. She doesn’t dare to lift it, to lift her hand to taste, to smell...for her hands and knees are holding her up. And the rock pushes against her, pushing down into the spine of her back. Every vertebrae rejects it; the muscles straining as she grits her teeth; to hold herself up against the crushing weight of-

Ah. She remembers...the tunnel collapsed.

One shift. One movement, and this precarious balance will tip. Nemain did not wish to find out what would happen, should the rocks looming about her fall.

-and near coughing at the grit in what air remained, she choked back a sob. All that planning, all that starvation and desperate pain and fer what? To die alone, here in the dark? Turned to paste by th’quaking tantrum of the black wyrm...

Why save her, only tae let her life pass in such a way?

Were the gods laughing??

If they wouldn’t, she would.

Nemain would have guffawed at the hopelessness, the irony of her situation had the rocks enclosing her not chosen to quiver and shake at that particular moment. Silt and roots shifted beneath her hands as they grasped what felt like soft earth, pebbled with gravel. And still, the rumblings continued.

Holding her breath, she froze. Awaiting any sound, any hint that the air supply she drew upon would be taken from her. One of the great stones crack and sigh, popping with the tiny clatter of pebbles upon her hair, as she struggles to be still. To breathe, her frantic pants the only sound in the dead stillness of wherever she had been buried, close and bound with boulders on every side.

Nemain forces herself to breathe, slowly. To conserve her air; precious air and be calm, calm fuck calm! she is buried and this is shit and she is going to die here-

No. Breathe.

Nearly sipping at the air with cracked and swollen lips, for she felt no draft - Nemain counts to five. Then pauses, and counts to five once more.

Rock on every side. Rough under her palms, the knees where she crouches on all fours tangled in her robes. Stone rough enough to tear the cloth and scrape against her tingling skin; smooth at her left, one enormous piece of cave-floor angling above her like the sloping wall of a tent. Feeling about her, she can tell...fallen rocks and pebbles and slag behind her and to her right, mortared with earth...the mass of it untold in the dark and heavy, pinning her with sheer weight against the smooth sloped wall on her other side.

Her legs are hidden beneath the smaller pieces of rubble too, held immobile from knee to toe in a grip as solid and unyielding as any prison. Testing her toes, as they curl in her boots...Nemain sends out a silent prayer of thanks to Moth, for the fine quality of his work. Her feet remain as yet unbroken.
And she does not think; she cannot know, of course, but she hopes...the trickling upon her hand is not blood. Fair grazed and bruised she may be, but she does not feel lightheaded. Not yet.

Oh Moth gro-Bagol...if only ye were here now, tae help me.

The great sloping rock above her shifts, pressing down with blunted edges into her spine, her hip, the back of her neck to bend it low; Nemain grunts beneath the vastness of it.

She does not know what fair chance has kept the rock from crushing her so far. She is no warrior; has not the strength to push back for long, and grimly she knows...will entertain no illusions as to the outcome of this collapse.

Breathe. In. out.

More breathing, shaky and terrified. As though she were yet a girl once more, running. Hiding. Still fleeing away from the dark day. The foul day, when all she had known and celebrated had been turned on its head. To weigh upon her as the rock did, even now.

Unable to push back her mind when the body demanded all her attention, Nemain remembered.

Year 176 of the Fourth Era.

She had just passed her eighth winter, with Aunt Petra and Mother Melka giving her the very first doll she had ever owned. A carefully sewn sackcloth girl; with black feathered hair and bone button eyes. She loved it so! And not even Galan's teasing, poking it with his wooden sword could remove her grasp from her dolly. She would name it Siobhan, after Seanmháthair - her Nana, who had just passed on to the afterlife that spring.

Recalling with perfect clarity the fine woolens her mother had worn to the death wake; a nearly blackened blue beaded with the symbols of the priesthood, Nemain sobbed into her Máthair's chest. Arms patting her back, as the waterfall near Understone Keep wet her hair with cold spray. Like mist made solid in form.

“No tears, mo stór. Nana loved you so. It would pain her, to know you be sad at her passage to a better world. Be at ease. We be safe, here.”

But safety had not lasted.

Nemain remembered the moment...the day her trust, nay her faith in the safety that mother could provide had been cracked forever. For the Bear; the Bear had come!

Had crashed down the mighty bound walls, bypassing the dwemer doors in favor of crushing through the mortared stones. Releasing a flood of soldiers...woad streaked Nords and swarthy Imperials into the city. To kill.

And the rivers and falls ran red with blood; the cries of her people echoing in the heights; screaming as they were cut down by the sword and the axe. The gurgling gasps of those strung in the trees, as she and Mother were bundled away in the giant arms of the Northmen, to captivity.

To be questioned. Tortured, though Mother wouldn’t let them have her. Had left in bindings, the High Priestess of the Et'Ada, forced to leave with the leering guards who touched Mother in places she knew were sacred; only to have her return with clothing torn...to weep, long after Nemain pretended to curl up in sleep upon the hard floor. Weep in deep, heartbroken sobs...why, Nemain
And as she heard Mother cry - her beautiful Máthair, who didn’t even cry at her own beloved mother’s cremation - as she felt the guards poke her with sticks and joke in her hearing about what lay beneath her rags...hearing Galan cry out as they beat him bloody to the accompaniment of loud, rough laughter; a thread of hatred took hold in the young Forsworn’s heart. Never to be removed, for ochone, ochone her People...her land had been forsaken!

Seized, by the Bear of Markarth. Ulfric Stormcloak.

She had seen him, once. Beardless and young and blonde, his face resolute as he stood near the old Jarl Hroldir and the Jarl’s son Igmund. Young for a Nord chieftain, it was whispered, for all that he had spent his youth mewed up in the austerity of the Nord’s sacred mountain; the Throat of the World. Studying the Voice with devastating effect, battling the elves down south. Ochone, who could stand against the power of the Thu’um?

“...Let’s away!” Galan had spoken to her, white face pinched with strain. “They be killin’ bairns, now! Children! Anyone who lifted a sword for Madanach, or be related to one such, they be stringing up like summer apples, Nemain! I can’t…” his head sagged forward, forehead meeting hers through the bars, as their fingers entwined. “Doona let me see you like that. No. Come with me. I’ve the keys, for they got drunk on a hidden stash of mead. But we must away now!”

“Mother!” Whispering as loudly as she dared, Nemain tugged at her mother who slept fitfully in the corner. Watching as mother’s sharp black eyes took in the situation at a glance, she pulled at the spoiled finery of her robes once more. “Máthair, we be going now! Get Petra! Get everyone who can cast a flame or fire an arrow! We go!”

“But where?” Galan moaned, the cell door squeaking open beneath his trembling hands. “The Nords be drunk, not blind! They will see, they will see us!”

“There be ways outside of the city that no Nord knows,” Máthair whispered roughly. “The dwemer left us the hidden path. A tunnel I know of, still. Leave everything behind. Even your doll, mo stór. Time to be a woman, now. And fight.”

-And as she banished the fear, by reminding herself of her previous triumphs in escaping a far worse fate than this...something cold and alive skitters across the back of her hand.

She screams. She knows she shouldn’t, the rock could fall at any moment but she can’t help it; a high shriek that echoes.

Somewhere in the ensuing silence, over the high, thudding beat of her heart in her throat, she hears a moan.

A moan that sounds disturbingly close.

“...wh-who lives…?” She manages to rasp into the dark, allowing not a trace of the whimper she feels to be present in her voice.
No response. No answer...only the slow, deep breathing of one closer than she believes could be true. A rock shifts upon her shin; she realizes when it stirs that it is a knee.

She can feel legs...long legs stretching past hers into the scree, now that she knows it is not rock but the stiffness of armor. The man (Ulfric!) must be upon his side, enclosed by stone as she is. The breathing continues; a slow steady sound that becomes obvious, as she thinks to hearken more closely to it.

_Pit-pat, pit-pat..._ the tapping of water on her right hand. She flexes her fingers, not willing to compromise what hold she has upon the ground. A gust of air; barely more than a sigh blows across her hand.

The head, then. Right next to her...huh. She had thought herself truly alone. And the pattering of what she had thought to be water, mineral rich from the caves is in fact...

“Be you bleeding?”

She hates, _despises_ the quaver in her voice, but she cannot help it. She must ask. For she cannot see his face, see anything but the blackness sinking into the stone.

A staggering gasp. Then, a movement...so faint she almost doesn’t recognize it as belonging to a hand. Touching her forearm. “...Ralof?”

The stones shift, cracking and popping as she nearly sags with the despondency, the pain of being trapped with _him_. “No.” She laughs, a terrified sound. “Take a wild guess, Nord.”

Rock crumbled. Pebbles flying against her arms, dirt swept into her face as he moves and she coughs, spitting flecks of gravel out. “You...what…”

“The tunnel collapsed. We’re trapped.” Fear colored her tone to be more panicked than she would have liked, as the stone continued to bear down upon her. Her neck fairly ached with the pain of it. _Not much longer_...

The small chamber fills briefly with the creak of armor and the rippling of pebbles cascading down to the right of her. Movement stilled, as Ulfric breathes and she forces her heart to beat again, by the sheer willpower of her inner stubbornness. _That Nord nearly brought down the rock upon us!_

His voice speaks, in a dazed slur. “My legs are trapped.” More shifting. “Think I’m wounded. Faugh...my head...”

She hears the scrape of steel as Ulfric touches the rocks above, testing its nonexistent give - the push of what lies around them. The scratching sound moves left, then right, then outward past their heads. Nothing but rock in every direction, impossible to shift as she knows...and just as unyielding. Black as pitch, but the sound is near enough that Nemain knows...his arm cannot straighten in a single direction. Arm brushing the side of her face, she struggles not to shy away.

His voice sounded more certain. Bleak. “We’re trapped. I can’t- I don’t feel any openings.”
“I already told ye that. Stop wasting air!”

"Be still,” Ulfric speaks, more quietly than she expects. A sound - his hand taps lightly against the rock wall above her head. "There is a draft here. Can you feel it?"

Tamping down the terror; the desire to flee as she struggled to focus beyond her own pain, she slowly becomes aware of the slightest breath that is not his. More faint than a butterfly’s wingbeat. But it is there.

A draft. “Well.” Her voice is a crackling husk, still gritty with dirt she has swallowed. “At least we be at nae risk of suffocation.”

He shifts next to her. Testing the wall of stone, his massive shoulder rolling against her spine, causing her to gasp at the suddenness of contact, the pain of her spine scraping against boulder rock. “Here...let me…”

No. “No, y’fool, don’t move, no!-”

A distant stone cracks, the sound like the world breaking, and the ceiling collapses.

Nemain shrieks, deep ripping screams, over and over as the bulk of Ulfric bashes against her body. Replacing her support of the rock, as his own broadness squeezes her. Heavy - so heavy, she cannot breathe, cannot draw in a wisp of air from the flatness pressing in and down, to the sides...crushing - Agony, as he rolls with her out from the weight of boulder and blockade of stone, as the weight of the rock shears itself. Dropping a litter of pebbles, roots and wet earth sifting over them both, as they roll, her body fairly crushed by the arms holding her close, over and over... painpainpain until they stop.

Stopping still, free yet not free, in the abrupt frigid wetness of a stream.

Convulsing beneath him, she realizes - she is not breathing. She breathes - dragging in deep gulps of air despite the Nord atop her. Realizing that in the strange greenish light of cave mushrooms that Ulfric has drawn a knife upon her.

-Drawn it and laid it cleanly against the throbbing vessel of her throat, where it lay cold and insistent. Hard, just like the cast of those frozen lake eyes as he examines her beneath him. Watching her like an insect writhing, stuck on a pin.

Two can play at that game! The point of the knife digs into her flesh when he feels her hands, heating. Pulsing with flame, with electricity where they lay trapped under the bulk of his chest and thigh.

They lay there like that in the evanescence of the fungi, waiting in gridlock for the other to make a move.

He spoke first. There was nothing of silk in his voice now. “Don’t.”

“Doon what?” She moistened her chapped lips, still coated in dirt. “I can stop yer heart if I so choose, Nord. One grand zap o’ electricity, and I can-”
The knife point twisted, splitting her skin. She bared her teeth in response, as his breath ghosted over her once more. “Then, you’ll die, Reachwoman. And all for nothing.”

“It wouldnae be fer nothing. Ye’d be dead, too.”

He laughed, a sharp snap of surprise. “Aye. True.”

Silence wends on, as both contemplate their next move. She trembles to hold onto the magicka, the flame and the lightning for everything hurts most awfully. Her back, in particular, feels as though she has been trampled underfoot. Raked, gashed by a sabrecat lion from the great weight she had borne for too long. The joints of her wrists are loose and unresponsive. It’s a good thing she doesn’t have to threaten him on her feet; she’s not sure she could stand, at this point.

More heavy breathing. His hair has landed upon her face, one silver beaded braid landing upon her chin near her lips. She is tempted to lick at it; to remove the ticklish thing, but doesn’t dare.

For he is still staring at her, in a mix of perplexity and -Nemain realizes as her stomach lurches- with a coldly calculating awareness. She is missing something, somewhere, because the dagger slowly -deftly retracts its sharp point.

And he speaks again, the deep sonorous tones vibrating against her chest. “Can you heal, Reachwoman?”

“Aye. I can heal.”

He tilts his head. “Will you kill me, should I choose to let you live?”

Sucking at the inside of her cheek, Nemain thinks. Tracks the blade still lying against the flat of her cheek. Taking in his gaze, still probing her. Practically counting every eyelash, in the dim bluish-green phosphorescence of wherever they are.

The stream is cold beneath her back. Wet and unpleasant. She shivers, shifting as his legs twitch against her. “How can I trust yer word, Bear of Markarth?”

Ulfric laughs, a dark sound. “What oath can I...or you make, for that matter, that we would both believe? I think I should just kill you now. Take my chances with this head wound.”

She swallows as the knife returns; this time pressing into the hollow of her throat. Dragging down, tearing the cloth until it rests atop of where her heart beats. “You could. But then, who would help ye dig yer way out o’ the cave? Or make a fire.”

He is silent, then.

“...Truce?”

It is getting harder to breathe, with him atop of her. “Swear by yer Talos that y’will nae harm me.”

A pained scoff. “Very well. By the love I bear for my people and my faith in Talos, you will not be
harm. Though it is no more than you deserve.”

Realizing he was waiting for her to say something, Nemain huffed. “I swear by the Et’Ada and the
darkness that eats all things, that I will do ye nae harm.”

“There. Simply done. Now, release your cursed magic and I will let you up.”

Her breath coming in fits and starts, Nemain screws her eyes shut. And slowly, though it feels utterly
wrong, *so wrong* to do...she relinquishes her power.

**********

There is nothing to burn.

They are in a small enclave, twelve paces by four across. Sixteen by seven if she walked it; for she is
that much smaller than the giant of a man she has shared this caved in tunnel with for the last
immeasurable span of time.

It is getting colder, and her flames are weak. So weak, as she hovers it in her palm. The warm of it
comforting even as it pulls from her strength, her mana reserves, as Ulfric sits as close as he dares to
the fire dancing in her hands.

The stream has thoroughly drenched her back and his legs from the knees down. Not much to do
about it here; they are both wet and cold and *gods*, so miserable.

The Jarl of Windhelm tried to call out, a while back. Shouting for Ralof, for anyone to hear their call,
to help dig. Like Ulfric, she tried to shift some of the rocks that have buried them in this
place...somewhere deep below the bridge they had passed through. To no avail, the rocky slab has
blockaded the hole so well; has been filled in by so many smaller rocks and runnels of dirt-

No more roaring. The dragon must have moved on.

Nemain shivers. The sporadic, fine trembling has given way to a full body shake as the temperature
drops down. And the wet, the unexpected dip in the stream - her robes were fair soaked. *It’s a shame
none o’ the wood from the bridge fell down with them.* Nemain has already tried burning a few
matted clumps of spiderweb, but the substance sticks and makes a mess. It does not burn.

They have barely spoken a word to one another since he released her. Rolling off of her form to
remain in a crouch. Gingerly touching the head wound that still bled, oozing steadily as he weaved
unsteadily upon his knees.

Hardly managing to pull herself to sit up, Nemain had beckoned to him. Marvelling somewhere in
the part of her mind not completely consumed with survival over the cruel irony of it all. “Lean
over.”

He shot her a look of distaste. “No. You come closer.”
Shoulders and wrists audibly popping, Nemain growled. Then scooted closer. “There! Now let me at yer head. Stubborn Nord.”

The wound upon his left temple had matted the hair into a thick coat of dirt and black-ish grime. “Head wounds bleed fast and long, but be simple tae heal. Here-” He shied away, as she laid her fingers upon it.

And exhaled in one long, loud sound of vexation, as she summoned healing hands - golden strands of light, like filaments of sunshine - to wrap around the torn and gashed skin.

Laying her hands more fully upon his head, he turns to stone under her hands. Like a sore tooth, she thought, the wound went deeper. The rockfall had injured the soft tissue beneath the bone of the skull.

With a mere moment’s concentration, she stopped the swelling that would eventually have taken his life. “There. How do ye feel?”

“Cold.” Watching her wrap the robe even tighter around herself, Ulfric rolled his eyes. And opened his arms. “Come here.”

“No!” Pushing her rump further away, nearly landing back in the stream, Nemain casts a beady eye upon him. “Why?”

“Because you are going to die of the freeze like that. I can tell. Do you want to die, Reachwoman? Remain here in the ground, already buried? For I will tell you, this is not how my life will end.”

“I can still create flame. Tis not my fault there be nothing to burn, here. Go away.”

Another male sigh. “Very well.”

**********

Time is almost impossible to tell, here in the cave. Nothing but the mushrooms, green and glowing, to give them vision. No pinpoint of light visible; no way to shift the great walls of rock surrounding them. They had tried, and nearly brought down a boulder the size of a horse upon them. Nemain had urged him to wait until whenever morning came; to try anew after some sleep.

Ignoring her advice, the Nord had continued to dig. Tossing rocks, intentionally she thought with a scowl, at her as he scrabbled at the pile of tangled roots, clay and pebbles. After what must have been hours, Ulfric gave up digging. Ceased shouting for Ralof, for help. In the far corner from the stream there he lay, seemingly asleep. Though she could tell, even through the befuddlement the cold has laid upon her, that the rest he obtained was of short duration, and poor, as he twitched. Eyelids rolling in his dreams.

The convulsions had stopped long ago. She was too cold to shiver; a bad sign, she thought to herself as she struggled to call forth even the barest hint of fire. No use - her magicka was tapped dry. Nothing but the biting, bone deep cold and the green phosphorescence, now, to stand vigil over her as she died.
She had promised. She would not, would not kill him where he lay. No matter how tempting it seemed. Nemain had promised. Nemain would keep her word.

And so she sat, on the far side of the cavern. Nearly in a trance, as she contemplated different methods of death, and ranked the pain of each in her mind as a way to pass the time.

Burning by fire? Bad. Drowning? Equally horrid. Death by being devoured alive? Surely the worst. She'd seen it; seen it happen to the goats and elk that the wolves of the Druadach mountains ate. They ate them while the animal was still alive...pulling the guts out, steaming upon the snow, eating. Tearing at the innards of the still-living, whether it be man or beast. Death by the cold...

It wasn't the worst way to go.

Nemain must have passed out, for when she came to, her cheek was lying numb in the glacial water of the stream. Unable to move, to call out... she realizes that her hair had frozen into a nest of spiked icicles. She tried to speak; a mere squeak of noise the only whisper of a sound she could manage.

Suddenly, a shadowed blur. Movement, as he crouches near her. “Little fool.”

Helpless to resist, her head lolls upon her neck as the Bear she has feared all her life unwraps her from the nearly stiff, frozen robes. Crystals, she thinks, her eyes struggling to focus.

Ice crystals, so pretty in the green of the fungus. Catching the eye like gemstones. She doesn’t register her nakedness, so fascinated is she by the loveliness of the killing cold, until she moves as though she is in a dream; the numbness of her flesh pulled back against something burning.

Something velvety, padded and scorching hot. He took off his chainmail? Nemain thinks in confusion. Tendon marbled arms covered in a smattering of fine golden hairs pull her closer to the burning of what must be his bare chest.

Ugh! It is nearly unbearable, as she thaws out against him. Pins and needles, like an arm crushed during sleep coming awake. He holds her tightly, not allowing her to move, as she tries to weakly squirm away.

Through the muddled haze of hypothermia, she realizes he is scolding her. Ulfric’s deep voice - strangely accented by the Northern dialect she is slowly becoming familiar with, expounds in a litany of her faults. “-fool woman. Made you a promise, and now this. You reek like a privy and a soldier’s field tent all in one.”

After licking her lips a number of times, Nemain manages a retort.

“You...smell...like shit...yerself.”

“Well. The Forsworn lives again.”

Silence, for the space of a hundred heartbeats. The pain is easing; mellow warmth seeping through her from her back.

Didn’t Nords have more hangups over nudity than this? Too tired to be curious, Nemain yawned
and wrapped her cold feet up against what felt like a thigh. Making him hiss, as a hand pulled her feet away.

She replaces them, further up in the sauna of his stomach.

"Should have let you frost over, witch. How do I know you won’t try to eat me, should we be trapped here much longer?"

A ragged laugh escapes her, as she feels the chest behind her expand and contract. “Heh. You be safe from me...Nord. You would taste...like mammoth dung."

“I’ve seen your people’s idea of feasting, Forsworn. I’m still not convinced I shouldn’t kill you now.”

Shifting, touching...until she pushes the ice-cold skin of her nose between his pectorals. Feeling him jerk against her, she smiled vindictively. “I’ve seen yer idea of surrender. Not sure I should offer it, Butcher of the Reach.”

He did not respond, and as she waited for him to say something Nemain relaxed even further. Slipping into a sleep deeper than any she had enjoyed for months.

When she awakened, she found herself on the far side of the room once more. Covered in the thick black furs of his cloak, she sat up. And looked over, as the Nord breathed slowly in slumber.

...Leaving her equal parts confused and annoyed, as she contemplated kindness.

Kindness, integrity...and the unexpected source with which both could be found.

*Gods damn ye. Think I liked ye better when y'were the bogeyman in my mind, you rottty bastard.*

Chapter End Notes

Lots of the gory stuff in this fic is based on actual Pict-Celt traditions. Cannibalism, ritual sacrifice, stoic acceptance of pain, berserk rages...even the preservation of heads. Hardcore stuff, am I right? Truth is stranger than fiction. 'Nuff said.

"(The Gauls) cut off the heads of enemies slain in battle and attach them to the necks of their horses. The blood stained spoils they hand over to their attendants and carry off as booty, while striking up a paean and singing a song of victory, and they nail up these first fruits upon their houses just as those who lay low wild animals in certain kinds of hunting. They embalm in cedar oil the heads of the most distinguished enemies and preserve them carefully in a chest, and display them with pride to strangers, saying that, for this head, one of their ancestors, or his father, or the man himself, refused a large sum of money. They say that some of them boast that they refused the weight of the
head in gold" - Diodorus Siculus.

Source citation: http://www.celticheritage.co.uk/articles_headcult.cfm

As always, comment and review. Let me know if you think this AU is veering over the rainbow in terms of characterization. Wouldn't want Ulfric to get all tetchy now, would we.
Hey, we've got a native Gaelic speaker proofing my stuff! Oh yeah! Thanks Hagen! Let me know if I'm doing it wrong.

*now edited for my mistakes thanks to Hagen. You're the best.*

I don't give a fuck- is cuma liom sa diabhal (is cu-mah lum sah dia-val)
Go fuck yourself - Téigh trasna focáil ort féin (Tay-g tras-nah fuc-al urt fay-n)
Northman - fear thuaidh (far hoo-ig)
Cúl Tóna - arsehole

Also...check this out. I 'LOLed'. It's that good.

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/436778863851543197/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"In the end, everyone is aware of this:

Nobody keeps any of what he has,

and life is only a borrowing of bones."

-Pablo Neruda

There is a light.

Small, just a pinpoint high in the rocks above them. Barely seen, but for just a moment the sun shone through it; warming Nemain on her arm where it fell.

And since nothing truly felt warm to her since that strange embrace; the hard heat that brought her back from the killing cold, she noticed. “Hey. Fear thuaidh. Look.”

Ulfric shifted from where he had been lying all morning, sitting up to stare at the direction she pointed. “We’re too far below ground for that to be the sun.”

“It could be. The sun, I gather. If we fell below th'bridge, then the wall...this stream...we must fain 'ave fallen for'ard, rather than backwards.”
He made a small noise of assent. “Possibly. Let’s find out.”

After much slipping and awkward fumbling, she manages to climb him. Hauling herself up upon his back, the linked chainmail he had replaced slick beneath her bare and grimy feet. He nearly snarls at her, when her hands tangle, snagging the braids in his hair. His hands were iron bands around her knees, as her thighs pressed against his head. “Faugh! Just...get up. And tell me what you see.”

Narrowly avoiding a fall, Nemain squeezes his head to maintain her balance. Wishing sourly that she had the strength; the tree-trunk thickness of thigh his people bore, to pop his head off like a jazbay grape from its stem. Then we see how the Bear likes it, being crushed. “Higher.”

His hands grasp the back of her legs, and suddenly she is standing; wavering from side to side as her feet dig into what must be his hands. As her hands scrape into the rock, seeking to hold, to dig in for better purchase she slumps; practically sitting atop his head.

“Off! Stand up...gods, you stink! Stand up!”

No more than you do, ye bastard. Managing to tighten her legs, a smattering of victory emboldens Nemain as she manages to lift the level of her eyes towards the hole in the stone. A small hole; barely the size of her palm. Enough to signal someone outside. Enough to hope. “We be close to the woods.”

Somewhere below her, Ulfric’s head turns. She hears an irritable sneeze, and a tug as the ends of her hair are pulled. Peevishly she blows a strand of it from her face as well. “What...peh...what do you see out there?”

His hands tighten around her ankles, as she pulls more of her weight to rest upon the rock. Her fingers squeeze into a tight crevice, allowing her to rest somewhat. “Trees. Sunlight. Snow. I’m sure, if I can just...hand o’er yer knife, man.”

A low bark of scorn. “I’m not giving you a weapon, witch. Besides, digging the blade into the rock would ruin it.”

She scoffs right back. “Y’think I need a knife to hurt ye? I be a mage, milord. Tis my word - and my word alone - that keeps yore heart beating, butcher.”

The sound of his agitated breathing is her only answer, and she turns her attention to the task at hand.

Wobbling, as her knees being to buckle from being locked tight for so long, Nemain nearly tilts sideways, until an inelegant lurch brings her back to the hole. Worrying her lower lip between her teeth, she shoves a hand through.

-And laughs wildly, relief flooding through her as rock begins to crumble around her thrusting
fingers. “I’m through! Me hand fits! It’s breaking, the...I feel it crumbling!”

“Good. How big is it? Can we get through?”

“Nay…” she almost tips over, until he nearly headbutts her back into place.

Ass. “The hole...it be too small.”

“Well, widen it then!”

“With what, yer blitherin' head? It be hard enough!”

Suddenly, her fingers jammed into the crevice and through the hole are all that holds her aloft. The stolid support that has held her up vanishes. “Augh…oy!”

-and suddenly returns, one sided. Hardly daring to look down, she remains transfixed. For the view (she can see the sun!) of evergreen trees and clear sky is intoxicating. Something nudges her belly, prodding her.

His voice is strangled, as though he is speaking through his teeth. “Take it!”

Releasing her hand from where she has jammed it through the hole, Nemain licks her lips and reaches down. Only to pull up a stone, darker than the surrounding rocks, with flinty planed edges. An actual rock, and not a piece of the mortared wall heaped about them. “What be this?”

The other hand joins its partner in lifting her up once more, this time placing the balls of her feet upon the shoulder padding of his cuirass. Ulfric’s voice was impatient, chiding. “Hit the hole with the rock, and make it bigger.”

*Easier said than done.* But she would try.

Digging, carving into the ragged border of the hole that was gradually growing larger, Nemain mashed a finger between the wall and the stone. Sucking it, she spat out gravel and carefully unwedged her hand from the crevice, to try anew. *Thwack*-*thwack*-*thwack*, the rock painstakingly chipped away. Only the smallest of stone fragments falling, pattering below as she nearly forgot who was holding her up, being so focused on the work.

*There.* She had made a hole nearly wide enough in diameter to stick her head through. Panting from the effort, she gripped both sides of the hole. Preparing to check with her head just how likely the chance of escape was, any time now…

-Until she fell. Pinwheeling both arms, her hands were full of rubble torn from the hole as with a squawk of dismay, she fell backwards.

Flat onto Ulfric, who softened her impact with a groaning *whoosh* of breath.

She wasn’t thinking. Didn’t think, as those arms reached around her. A cage of steel, a trap. Touch that must have been impartial, unintentional. Barely a graze really, as those hands trailed over her
breasts, seeking to push her away.

No! Blindly throwing her arms back, she practically screamed it; shrieked the spell that would propel him from her. “FEAR!”

-and nearly broke her jaw, as he bodily heaved her from him. Hitting the wall, where she slid down in a daze, watching as Ulfric floundered in the stream, staggering like a man drunk.

She almost didn’t register the words the Nord was speaking, over and over, in harsh horror. As Nemain lifted a shaky hand, to touch where her chin had bashed into the stone...she watched Ulfric in a kind of disinterested lethargy as he gasped and sobbed. Nearly vomiting up the words that spilled, a name. A phrase?

Blue eyes unseeing in their panic, the man shook as his fingers scrabbled in the earth. Pulling up the small hairs of roots, unearthing the deep snaking traces of the mushrooms that glowed.

“...no point. No point, all done...wen, no Elenwen, nonono I YIELD! I fucking yield, stop it, stop that...fuck you elven bitch! Nononooo…”

Almost, she lifted a hand. To take it back.

But the spell ran its course; faster than she would have thought. That, or his resistance to coercion was unnaturally strong.

Nemain rather thought it was the latter, watching him pant face down in the stream. Still grasping handfuls of earth and stone, as his hair dragged in the running water. A ruin, the braids entirely unkempt from where she had snagged them in the filth of her hands, clumps near torn out by her jouncing fall upon him. She watched him, the muscles of his forearms bunching. Tearing, as he raked his hands through the dirt in a fury, his face hot with rage.

Shrinking back, she did not ask to widen the hole again.

********

It was near nightfall again when he brought out the bread.

She had been touching the mushrooms that grew on the walls, quibbling over whether or not to try roasting it; to make the fungus more palatable. Or simply eat it raw.

It would probably not poison her, she thought as she hefted the weight of the thing in her palm. It might make her sick; loose her bowels, when there was next to nothing inside. And then, it would be the lack of salts, of minerals that would be her end. Nothing to retain the water left inside of her, the
last of her energy.

*Better nae t’chance it.* Her stomach made a gristling complaint, a mournful sound that echoed in their stony bower.

Ulfric remained in the far corner, where he had stayed since she had cast Fear upon him. Turned away, a shadowed block in the darkness. Refusing to speak; even as she waxed on about climbing. Scaling the slick rock, reaching the hole to widen it. To tear, to claw their way out of this tomb, for surely - someone must be out there.

She didn’t spare an ounce of contemplation upon the hidden doubt that no one was searching for Ulfric. Surely not for her - she was no one. Nobody would miss her. But the Jarl of Windhelm? Leader of the Stormcloak rebellion? Those soldiers of his couldn’t have gone far. Not with those injuries, those painful burns.

Hope was near as hollow as her belly, at the moment.

Something hit her in the back.

Turning in a pique of frustration, for surely...how long could he blame her, for defending herself? She saw it.

Saw the chunk of bread; rough with poorly husked wheat and what looked to be grains of barley. A handspan in width; barely more than a crust.

Nearly, she leapt upon it, to devour it...but didn’t. She wouldn’t. It came from his corner of the cave.

Holding back from the bread - *food!* - that taunted her with its nearness, in some lingering sense of self-preservation. Nemain looked at him, shrouded in that ever-present silence. “What’s this?”

And realized as she listened more closely that he wasn’t quite so silent at the moment. Sounds of chewing…

Ulfric swallowed what must have been his rations, though she couldn’t see... she could hear him. Listening in envy, as the wet sound of the his throat convulsing, pulling in sustenance made her weak with want of it. “What it looks like. Eat it. It’s all I have left.”

“What makes y’think I want anything from *you*?”

He laughs. The condescension...it is faint, but undeniably present. “Just eat it.”

Moistening her lips, she felt saliva pool against her teeth. Gods, *t’was food.* Bread.

How many days had she eaten nothing but bits of grass? Moss taken from round rocks and clumps of bark, drinking water ‘till it flowed through her, straight from her through to bladder, unobstructed?
She was *starving*. “I have th’ mushrooms. Lichen I scraped up, mixed with the...the water.” *Cor, that looked good. Bet it was still soft. Rich bastards always ate the softest bread.*

The bulk of him shifted. “...then. Give it back.”

“**NO!”**

Shame fills her, both for her reaction...spurning what doubtless the Bear thought to be a kind gesture, and her weak will. Her damnable hunger. So kind, a scrap of food for the poor filthy Forsworn. *She hates it! She hates him!*

Clinging to what pride remains, she turns her back to him once more. “L-leave me alone!”

Water drips from the rocks, joining the course of the stream as silence greets her statement.

A long, hardly audible sigh. “It is only bread.”

“Dinnae talk to me, else I decide that ye might actually taste better than that crust, Nord.”

Later, as the soft sounds of his breathing even out into slumber, she wraps the heavy weight of his black furred cloak about her.

Carefully, so quietly she creeps from her side of the cave - always watching for him, to awaken and spy upon her, she snatches up the bit of bread.

Aware, as he snores quietly in the corner...Nemain eats the bread. *Slow. Slower,* she cautions herself, for her hands want to push the entire piece in, just for the glorious sensation of feeling the fullness of something that is not gritty plant matter in her jaws.

Piece by piece, she makes it last, almost moaning with the fragrance of it in her nostrils, bread...until every crumb is licked from her fingers and even rooted from where they fell, every spare bit picked up and eaten from the cavern floor.

Tempted to riffle through his pockets, his clothing for more, she crawls over. The light of the fungi casts his hair almost completely chartreuse, bleaching his skin with an eerie pallor that troubles her.

He is no longer snoring. Timidly, she prods his shoulder...shuffling back when he shifts over, rolling to his stomach. Burying his head in his arms. There is nothing in his pockets, as she pats them ever-so carefully. Nothing in the tunic she can barely lift, terrified as she is of waking him.

Nemain is furtively plucking up what crumbs he has dropped, when a warm hand falls upon her knee. Freezing in place, she holds her breath. Praying it is just an accident. A move made from some dream.

*No such luck.* “If you’re not going to use the fur,” his sleep-thick voice drawls “...then give it back.”

Reluctantly, she tightens her hold upon it, wrapping her thin fingers in the plushness of the cloak...even as he begins to tug it from her. “I need it.”

A soft snort. “Then sleep.”

Torn by indecision, she falters as he draws her down. Pulling the cloak over them both, he turns the
slab of his back to face her, even as she curls in upon herself.

Soon, his snoring resumes. Slowly loosening the clenched state of her muscles, Nemain lies flat on the ground, staring at nothing as the fur traps in the impressive amount of body heat he is giving off. Warming her, bringing life back into the chilled extremities of her hands and feet, as she desperately tries not to twitch. To awaken him with her squirming discomfort.

His voice, when it sounds again, is annoyed. “Go to sleep. And cease digging your elbows into my back.”

Making a sound of frustration, she tries...digs into the stone ground, to get comfortable for the rocks are everywhere and she is disgusted by her want of his heat...until he rolls over.

Setting her on her side with one massive hand, Ulfric turns over again with a muffled oath. Pushing his back against hers, as slowly she stills.

What in Hircine’s name be he playing at? And why? Why would the Bear of Markarth want tae keep me alive?

Her thoughts circle themselves like vultures circling a kill, until she sinks into dreamless oblivion.

The following morning, they discover that the mushrooms do not make them sick.

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

Thunk-clink. “Nut clusters drenched in honeycomb.”

She picks up the next pebble. Tossing it, the rock nearly lands in the circle they have drawn in the dirt. Thunk-clink. “Pine thrush eggs, boiled near t’the point of being jellied. With salt sprinkled on top.”

His turn. The rock he throws plunks against hers, shoving it out of the way. Plink-clunk. “Horker steak, grilled rare. The best piece of meat is on the shoulder, almost always well marbled with fat. Rubbed in spices, garlic...Ysmir’s beard. No more talk.”

She laughs despite herself. “Fancy. I’d be content with stew nigh every day. Fresh vegetables an' eggs. That bread was good, by the way.”

He hmmphed in thought. “It was stale. Hardly an afterthought. I shoved it in my pocket before we were overtaken by the Imperials.”

“T’was good.”

They had reached a sort of tentative truce, the morning she had set a rock plate of cut up mushrooms before him. Almost on a dare, they had both nibbled the foamlike flesh, grimacing at the bland flat taste as it went down.
And their slow, sporadic complaints at the disgusting nature of their breakfast had sparked a new, more torturous conversation about food. Almost, she thought in amusement as he stood peering out the hole once more, trying to see out as he climbed unsteadily up the rocky face - like they had reached an accord in truth.

She still fancied his head, embalmed in a bucket. But she’d at least give him the courtesy, now, of a quick and painless death. Garroting with a wire, or poison perhaps. *I’d owe him that, at least. Fer the bread alone.* “What d’ye see?”

Not bothering to answer her, Ulfric watched for a minute more. Two minutes, as she picked up more pebbles...stealthily replacing his pile with the more jagged, uneven bits. Three minutes.

She threw a pebble at him, causing it to bounce off his arse. “What is it? Trying tae fit that giant gooley head through the hole again? I told ye...it willnae work.”

“No, I see…” Clearing his throat, as the words seemed to stick in his craw, Ulfric shouted suddenly, his deep voice booming in rounded echoes off the cave walls.

“Ralof! Over here, up here! Ralof!”

Sounds of footsteps crunching in the snow. Something blotted out the light. “Ulfric! By the Gods...didn’t think we’d see you again! What are you doing down there?”

“We were caught in a rockslide. A cave-in, doubtless from that dragon. Are you alone?”

Shifting, as she spied a blue eye peer through the hole; widening at the sight of her. “Trolls blood! She’s still in there with you?”

Ulfric’s voice was dry. “Yes. Are you alone, Ralof? Where are the others?”

“They made their way to the Falkreath camp, east of Helgen. Thorygg Sun-Killer bid me return, to look for you, or your corpse. Talos was watching out for you, I’d say.”

“You may be right. Can you break this hole open any wider?”

A smattering of earth and snow nearly hit Ulfric in the face as Nemain watched; hoping against hope as the Stormcloak shuffled outside. Kicking, by the sound of it, at the rock. Forcing in with his boot. “Aye, if I had a pickaxe. Which I don’t. Tell you what...you stay here, and I’ll return with more men. We’ll break you out of there my Jarl, in no time at all.”

The Bear sighed in what might have been satisfaction. “Good.”

“Do y’have any food?” Nemain asked hopefully, rising from the ground to stand on tip toe. All the better to spy Ralof, who took the sight of her in with something approaching caution. She almost regretted casting the illusion spell upon him.

But at least, she reasoned, she had not gone with her first inclination of simply slitting his throat. He had found them, after all, when she had been trying to resign herself to a slow, starving death.

Ulfric’s voice broke the stream of her thoughts. “It would help, Ralof. Whatever you can spare.”

“Aye.” A haversack stuffed full was wedged into the hole, Ulfric catching it deftly as it nearly spilled
the contents out into the cave. He handed it off to Nemail, who nearly danced with excitement. “Anything else?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Ulfric watched the Forsworn do a happy jig; the haversack bouncing in her arms. “Firewood. Enough to last the night. Come back from the camp as soon as you can. And bring Galmar, if he is around.”

She spun and twirled, the length of hair almost like a cloak as he watched an actual smile spread upon her face. *That strangely familiar face*… “Tell him something has come up.”

“Something important.”

***********

Warming her hands, stuffed full of food, Nemail lazed before the bright, crackling fire.

The simple pleasures were often the most gratifying, she reflected as she sipped her bottle of mead. One entire bottle, all hers. The Nord across from her had finished his mead long before, when the sun had still hung red in the sky. He sat sprawled upon his side, poking a stick into the embers. Apparently deep in thought.

And not nearly as drunk as she was, Nemail thought with a stifled giggle. A *lightweight*, he had called her, when the first few sips had taken hold. *Milk drinker*. She’d show him!

Tipping the bottle all the way up, Nemail drained the last drops of mead...down to the honeyed dregs that caused her to smack her lips in satisfaction. “What?” She coughed, as Ulfric shot her an amused look. “Dinnae want to waste it.”

“...Ugh. No one drinks the sludge at the bottom. There’s more mead, if you want it.”

A lсtulcs改装者 escaped her lips. *By Dibe and the Mother, she hadnae felt this free in ages*… “No, fear thuaidh. But if there be more fish...?”

He tossed a chunk of cooked salmon to her. It fell in the dirt, almost rolling into the coals before she snagged it up. Wiping it carefully with her finger, tongue between her teeth, Nemail tried to eat the fish. “Hot! Hothothot!”

Ulfric groaned, rolling onto his stomach with a sigh. “Blow on it. Are you really not the child you appear to be?”

Granting him a mighty sniff, she almost inhaled the salmon steak, eating it in four bites. Licking her fingers of the juices, she realized he was watching her, blue eyes veiled. “Would a bairn try t’kill ye, Bear of Markarth?”

“You didn’t succeed. And yes...I’ve seen many good soldiers cut down by the youth of your People. Folk of the Reach.”

“Then, they deserved it.” She hiccupped, feeling her insides quiver as she pressed down with both hands. *Too much mead...it burned.* “Fear thuaidh like you...you take. Take and take, until there be
nothing left to give. What choice do we have, but tae strike back?"

Still watching her, the fire outlined the rough planes of his face as he smiled thinly. “Almost, we understand one another.”

“I’ll never understand you. Fine...one more round of mead. We be free of this place, come morning.”

Reaching over, she pushed her hair back so as not to catch fire, as he handed her an unopened bottle. Their fingers scraped together, glancing off clumsily as she tugged it away from him. “Thanks…” she muttered, not wanting to examine the twist of troubled feeling that had cropped up, despite the good cheer she currently enjoyed. A night full of eating till she could eat no more; of warmth and drink and newfound hope.

And, she reflected as she watched Ulfric take off his boots with a sigh, strangely bearable company. For the Bear. She sniggered at herself, feeling red spots burn high upon her cheeks. From the fire, no doubt. She could hold her liquor.

_Tomorrow. Worry about tomorrow when the day dawns, and you be out of this hole in the ground. No more worrying tonight._

And now it was dark. Only the cold and the snow, trapped outside of the merry atmosphere that the fire cast in the small cave room. _What a difference fire made!_

Allowing a tendril of flame to dance upon her fingertips, she plucked at her robes. The reek of them offended her even moreso now that she had attended to other needs. “You ken we can bathe at this bonny camp of yours? With warm water, and soap?”

His face blurred in the flames, wavering in and out of her vision. The amber light turned his golden hair near reddish gold; like a briarheart. “Yes. No doubt they have prepared for our arrival by now.”

“Oh, cor, that do sound delightful.” She moaned, flopping backwards. The empty bottle of mead clattered to her side, as she began untying the sash of the robe. Unwinding it, as her heel splashed into the stream and she let out an undignified eep of surprise at the sudden cold.

“What - just what are you doing?”

Nearly finished, she sat up and shrugged out of the sweat and dirt soaked cloth. “Washing my robes, o' course! Look…” Nearly stumbling into the fire, she shook the cloth at Ulfric, who was watching her...his face wary with something she couldn’t quite put a name to. “Tis disgusting!”

“I wasn’t aware that Forsworn cared to bathe. Or clean their clothes. Don’t your people wear hides? Or perhaps you run naked, when you're not running about clubbing babes and the elderly. Or out burning Nord farmfolk out of their homes?”

She gave him an exaggerated leer as she shimmied out of her smalls. “Only on Tirdas, Nord.”

Feeling pleasantly tipsy, she waded into the stream that barely covered the tops of her feet and crouched down. Swirling her robes in the cold water, she hummed to herself, happy. Beating the dirt, the ingrained sweet-rot smell of the corpse that had worn it before her, Nemain placed a large rock upon her smalls. Letting the current wash her underthings clean, as she brought up handfuls of water to drink. The coolness of it was soothing, after the burn of the alcohol and the drowsy heat of the
Letting her robe fall flat to the stream, she stumbled past Ulfric to the trickling waterfall that poured from the cavern wall. And gasped, as she thrust her head beneath it; allowing the water to saturate her hair.

“Mmm,” she moaned, scratching her hands in her hair. Feeling the tangles, the knots and burrs that she would be forced to tease out laboriously later. Much later, when she had the luxury of a good comb and an uninterrupted length of time not spent worrying about where her next meal would come from, or who was hunting her.

*Tomorrow. Worry tomorrow. Not now.* She fell over in surprise, as a warm hand touched her shoulder, tentatively.

“Soap. Here...use it well.”

Feeling it slip through her fingers, she bumped the Nord as she bent at the waist, nearly falling over in her haste to grasp the sticky thing once more. “Oh, it be the good kind! Yes - wait…”

Picking up the soap, she lathered it in her hands as she fastened a gimlet stare upon the Nord backlit by the fire. Nothing visible of him but those eyes, glinting in what light penetrated past the bulk of his form. “You. You stink too. C’mere.”

Feeling altogether frivolous, she threw a handful of soap lather upon him. It stuck to his face and neck, causing him to blink. “What? Doona be a hypocrite! Get clean, you mucky squog.”

His voice was carefully guarded. “I didn’t understand half of that. You’re slurring your words, Nemain.”

“Y’know, I think that be the first time ye called me by me name.”

Toddling over, she began to undress him, sliding the soap under the opening of his tunic as he stumbled in shock. Pushing her away with those large, beastly paws. A bear in truth. “Hahah hah! Get clean!”

Walking backwards, she followed him, digging the loop of her finger in his tunic lacings to hold him still. “Come on, Bear. Butcher. Whatever ye call yourself now. Must get clean, tidy clean for the beheading…” Laughing wildly, she landed with a thud as he shoved her away.

“You’re sick. You and all your kind, woman. Get your clothes back on.”

“Or what?” Nemain mocked. Wringing out her hair with one hand, she grasped the soap more firmly and began rubbing herself down with it; eyeing him as he swallowed. And turned away, facing the wall as his jaw clenched. She continued breezily, “You, me...we both ken, once we get out o' here, that ‘tis every woman - or man for himself. Or bear, in your case. Do you have chest hair that curls, fear thuaidh? Be it like fur? Can I see?”

“You’re a foolish drunk.” Catching her as she reached out to check his chest hair, Ulfric dragged her over to the trickling spring. She yowled as he grabbed her neck and dunked her beneath the waterfall. Making her sputter, as she batted at him with unwieldy arms. “Finish up. No...don’t touch me. Wash yourself, Reachwoman.”

Feeling his hands work the soap suds out of her hair, she sighed and leaned against his leg. Wrapped an arm around it, as her thoughts bubbled away, rising like smoke out of the hole. Whisked away to nothing. “I won’t make it hurt, y’know. You’ve been uncommon kind, with the...the bread. And the
fur. You needn’t ha' done that. For that good deed, I’ll be sparing ye what I originally had planned.”

“Oh?” She felt his hand close around her throat. And lift her up; her body following like a puppet on a string, as Ulfric raised her to a standing position. Soap still smeared her arms and legs as she was confronted by his face so close. Somber, yet somehow amused, those blue eyes watchful as she frowned. Wriggled a bit in his grip.

“Aye. For I must take your heart, Ulfric. Back to Markarth. It be the only way to go home, y'see. To kill you, to take it and show it to Ne-” she managed to bite off Nepos’s name before it left her lips. Feeling queer, she leaned against the chest that fairly radiated heat, even so far from the fire. “Tae someone. It wins me passage back to my old life. Ye understand.”

“Oh, I do. More than you know.”

Letting go of her throat, she watched dumbly...shifting from foot to foot as Ulfric stripped off his tunic. Making her nose itch as he lowered it over her head, lifting her arms like a child as he dressed her, so methodically. Those frozen lake eyes nearly thawed out by the fire, as they looked her over. His voice was a low burr. “Go to bed.”

She yawned and nodded, pulling at the length of his shirt which hit her almost mid-calf. Stupidly tall Nord. Nearly crawling to the fire, she laid herself down. Pillowed her cheek upon her hand, as she saw Ulfric move around the ring of the firelight, bare chested. He laid himself down closer than he usually chose, nearly touching his head to hers as she rolled over upon her stomach.

A thought struck her as funny, even as her eyes drooped closed. “You be fair covered in hair. I was right.” Pulling out an arm from the fabric it drowned in, she patted his chest. Pulled on one of his braids, even as his hand stopped her. “Be that why they call ye a bear, then?”

“No. Go to sleep, Nemain.”

Curling her lip at the order, she defiantly vowed to remain awake. At least, until her eyes closed more fully. She wasn’t tired, no...not really.

Not tired at all.

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

She awoke to the sound of pickaxes chopping at rock.

Sharp, hard dingdingdings that only exacerbated the pounding of her head. Wrapping her arms around her ears, she curled into a ball. Rear up, as the dreaded pounding continued.

-And tipped over, yelping in shock as the Nord showed from where he had pushed her. That arrogant face a blank mask. “Up. Time to go.”

“Go where?” Nemain grumbled, grasping her still soggy robes in distaste. She must have forgotten to hang them by the fire, and now she would be forced to put them on. Ugh. Her hand of fire would
help, somewhat, with the drying process but she’d rather wear dry clothes for whatever woods she must cross today.

“You and I...we be splitting ways now. A favor fer a favor, aye?” He didn’t need to know that she would be dogging his footsteps until his heart lay bleeding in the palm of her hand, did he? *Such ardor tends to frighten the boys.*

She realized she was speaking to thin air, as apparently the man had climbed out with the rope she saw dangling.

At last. *Freedom!*

Hefting the wet weight of her robe and her footwear over her shoulder, she cast a glance over the room that had sucked away days of her life. Nothing left that was important. Her knife had been lost somewhere in the cave in, the only possessions she owned were now upon her person.

One wet, sodden enchanted robe and hood. Leather boots. Her wits. Her magic.

It had gotten her this far.

Up and over, her hands pulled her bodily out of the hole. As she reached blindly out and touched snow, rough hands clasped hers. Helped her along, even as they clung to her as she emerged blinking. Dazed by the bright light of the outdoors, after so long trapped underground.

“...Bear?”

A man wearing a bear pelt over his shoulders and head turned, revealing a weathered face fairly creased with wrinkles and beard. Hoary eyebrows shot up at the sight of her, almost invasively taking Nemain in. From bare, clean feet to the tunic she wore...lingering for some time upon her face. She took a step back, pawing irritably at the hands of Stormcloaks that still held her, tightly. Not budging, even as she gave an experimental shove. Feeling a sourness rise in her belly, she hoped it was the mead from last night. And not what she feared this all might be amounting to.

“Ulfric?”

“Quite the catch, isn’t she?” Pushing past her, Ulfric Stormcloak clapped hands upon the shoulders of the older Nord, adorned in the pelt of the bear. Who returned his greeting with a hearty chuckle. His voice grated, like an unoiled hinge. “I wouldn’t have believed it, had I not seen with my own two eyes, Ulfric.”

“Yes. The resemblance is uncanny.” Turning back to her, she nearly took a step back as she beheld the cold shrewdness in that now-familiar face.

But the Stormcloaks flanking her wouldn’t allow it. Pulling, as she began to shove, to fight...someone began wrapping her hands in thick swathes of linen. Another Stormcloak, face streaked with woad, approached her with chainlink handcuffs. “What’s this all about, then? Ulfric!”

“You don’t know, do you.” The Jarl’s voice was stronger. More sure of itself, now that he was surrounded by his loyal minions. Bracing herself for pain, she headbutted the warrior behind her, hearing his nose snap as she tried to tear herself away from the new bindings, to fight-

“Don’t fight me, Nemain. You’ll be well looked after. More than I would have been, in your tender
He had tricked her! Tricked her with kindness, with that damnable patience. That cúl tóna!

The heavy weight of Stormcloaks piled upon her, as she was slowly weighed down. Pushed to the ground, as someone spread her legs. Put on her own boots for her, the boots Moth had made.

“..geroff me! Ulfric, what do you think you be doing? We had a deal!”

“A deal that lasted as long as we remained trapped.” Boots, edged in silver threading stepped closer. Legs crouching down into a kneel revealed his face, sharply triumphant as he grasped her chin in his hand.

Above her, she could hear Galmar whistle. “You may be right. This could change things for us in the west.”

“I’m sure of it.” Ulfric’s cold blue eyes bore into hers, even as his fingers pressed into her face. “I remember that bastard like it was yesterday. You look just like him, you know.”

Her mouth opened, then shut tightly. Defiant, as she tried to pull away from the long fingers holding her face in a vise. “Who? And what do ye care? I know nothin’! I be no one!”

Ulfric shook his head, an actual smile gracing his features. “Not nothing. I would not spare the life of just anyone who sought to kill me.”

“But you...you are the very image of Madanach, the King in Rags. His daughter is a mighty prize. One I intend to use to its highest potential.”

What? ”Is cuma liom sa diabhal! You’re daft out o’ your mind! I be nobody!”

Galmar chuckled, nudging her even as she was bundled up in chains. Truly, her face must have been a wreck, to cause them such mirth, as she panted in a rage. Beyond words.

“Oh look, she’s speechless.”

“Not for long.”

Letting go, Ulfric stood...allowing her only a view of his boots once more, as they walked off.

“Téigh trasna focáil ort féin you bastard!” She screamed, nearly blacking out with terror as a hood was lowered over her head. Someone lifted her as she kicked and writhed, heaving her over a warm, animal bulk that smelled like horse.

The saddle creaked next to her. That voice - so honeyed sweet, spiked with nightshade - spoke once
more, as he patted her back. “Try not to fall off. It’s a long ride to Windhelm.”

-And she nearly threw up, everything she had eaten. Right there in that hood, as the horse broke into a full gallop. Heaving her up and down, until she wished they had knocked her out, then and there.


It couldnae be. Mother had never said...only hinted that her father was a priest. A servant of the Gods.

_Gods no. It couldnae be. It wasnae possible._

_She was a nobody._

_Not Madanach's daughter._

_Shit._

Chapter End Notes

_Author's Note: Sean Bean as Ulfric Stormcloak? I'm feeling it._

_Oh no. I'm dooming Ulfric to die by association. Damn it all. But he's so perfect for the role._

_https://www.pinterest.com/pin/436778863851542999/_

_Also...here's an interesting nugget of information. I figure Ulfric can't be older than his early forties in the game - no grey hair, generally vigorous, etc._

_If he was about 15 when the Great War started (4E 171) he'd be about 45-ish at the beginning of the events of the game (4E 201). He doesn't look older than 45 to me, and at 15 he would have been close to full-grown and most likely old enough to be considered an adult. That would mean that he was about 5 when he started training with the Greybeards._

_Makes sense. Nemain is in her mid thirties, which jives with her seeing him as a young man during the Incident at Markarth._

_I'm such a nerd._
"Better to have flamed in the darkness,
  to have inspired others,
  to have lived, than to have
  sat in the darkness,
  cursing the people who borrowed,
  but did not return your candle."
  -Neil Gaiman
shrouded with a tangled river of dark hair, hiding grey eyes that mocked. “I’m sure. Ask me again once we’ve reached Windhelm...I may answer you differently.”

“If you say so. Say the word, and I’ll spill her guts onto the ground.”

“Not very hospitable, my friend.”

“Hah! That witch has been nothing but a pain in the ass. I say, let’s kill her. Send her head in a box to the ReachKing.”

“They consider it an honor, Galmar, to embalm the head. Not quite the message I hope to send.”

“Well. Whatever you decide, do it soon. The men are growing impatient. And by men, I mean me.”

Leaving his tent with Galmar close on his heels, Ulfric wove through the Stormcloaks that stood shivering, warming themselves by the bonfire that burned in the center of the Falkreath camp. Nodding, as some of the warriors saluted, parting for him as he passed the blacksmith. The paddock where the horses cropped what little grass penetrated through the snow, a light dusting for the first of Frostfall.

*Talos grant me patience.* The Reachwoman was nowhere to be seen. “Ralof? Where is she?”

The Riverwood native was chopping firewood. Wiping sweat away with his forearm, the man looked exhausted. “She should be back any time now, my Jarl. Siv accompanied her to the river, to bathe and dress properly. Gods, am I glad to be free of her. That woman - she has nearly torn out of her bonds two times today. My Jarl, Galmar...why not release her now? We have no use for a slave.”

“I don’t hold with slavery, son.” Galmar picked up some of the cut wood, hefting it beneath his scarred arm. His mouth curled in disdain. “The Empire would have us become slaves to the Thalmor. And they’re the true enemy, make no mistake.”

Patting Ralof on the shoulder, Ulfric beckoned Ralof away from the woodpile. “The woman is but a means to an end. A way to stop the bloodshed of the western border. Take heart, Ralof. She’ll be out of your hands soon.”

Ralof blew out a breath in exasperation. “Sooner than later, I hope. She’s as slippery as a slaughterfish. Nasty, too. Maybe we could make an exception for her...keep her in shackles, too busy cooking and mending to do much mischief.”

“We are men. Free men who will slay anyone who begs to differ. Don’t see much point in enslaving a daughter of man, if we are to free Skyrim from the bondage of elves. That would be stupid.”

Galmar walked off, calling out behind him as he left “…and you’ll be digging the new privy if I don’t see you stand up to that woman!”

Not allowing any trace of amusement to show, Ulfric watched as Ralof kicked his boot into the snow, his lips nearly white from biting back words. *Smart man. Galmar did not tolerate backtalk at the best of times. And these were decidedly not even close.*

An unblooded ran up, halting right before he could collide with Ralof. His blue eyes were frantic behind their smear of battlepaint. “Sir! My Jarl! The....the Forsworn, she nearly escaped! She did
something...cast a spell! Made Siv attack Orgnolf and Lir!”

Ralof growled, gesturing to Ulfric as if to drive his point home; as the unblooded continued on. “Lucky for Siv, Frygga showed up and hit her in the head. Stopped her from getting out of hand.”

Mentally swearing every oath he could think of, Ulfric managed a tight nod. “Good. Let me know the instant they return. I would have words with her.”

_Treachery bitch._

_Not that he expected much more from a Reachwoman_, he chided himself as he walked off to attend to his rounds. Poor and proud, the scattered and quarrelsome daedra worshippers had not a prayer of retaking the boundless wealth of the Reach. But logic fell deaf upon the ears of the Forsworn. Markarth would never be truly rid of them.

Not as long as the poison their leaders whispered into their ears continued to trickle down, resulting in attacks of terror. Valuable mines had been taken over by a Briarhearts, the undead berserkers leading fists of Forsworn to pillage and murder. Driving sons and daughters of Skyrim from their homes to wander, broken and traumatized, until the arms of Markarth embraced them. The last bastion of order and security left in the western wastes.

_It was his people who suffered_, Ulfric thought in rising anger. _Their_ blood crying out from the earth, marring the peace of his sleep as he remembered all too well the foul craft plied by the Forsworn. Sacrifices, raids upon outlying farms and villages to steal men and women to burn in their hideous ceremonies. He had seen for himself the numberless heads, piled into rotten towers that stunk, circled by ravens. The bodies speared upon stakes, warning intruders away from the hidden vales and brochs.

More disturbing, he had heard of children being taken, as he had gathered information upon the Forsworn during the Markarth Incident and after. The small ones who survived the initial attacks were raised in slavery...and it was whispered, sometimes clubbed and eaten by the hagravens - the foul merger of woman and bird that the Reachfolk revered.

His eyes and ears in the west had even informed him that a young girl had been kidnapped. Some sort of future Sybil to Dibella, the Aedra of beauty and love. No doubt the child would never be seen again; subjected to whatever dark deeds the savages had planned.

And though he had become almost accustomed (some would say overfamiliar) with Nemain, he could never forget where she came from. What she had done. It would have been a kindness, killing her in her sleep.

He nearly had. Had stood over her, that night she had almost died from exposure to the cold. Had thought about allowing her to remain asleep...allowing the chill creeping from the glacier-fed stream to freeze her hair. Gradually covering her body in ice crystals, leaving her frosted over in the morning. The transition would have been relatively painless. She would never have awakened. Far
less agonizing than whatever she had wanted to do to him.

But he had not, for reasons Ulfric did not care to evaluate himself.

She had kept her word. Had healed his head wound; born his company with a minimum of mockery and ill will considering the circumstances. Butcher. He owed her something, for that at least. For the parcel of blood-soaked memories they both shared, from that same year decades ago.

Shaking his head in dismay, Ulfric cast all doubts from his mind. There was no use dwelling upon the past. He had plans.

Ulfric planned to stop that trickle of poison, the orders issued from Cidna Mine. Using whatever means necessary...even the woman, and her familial and clan connections. Thonar Silver-Blood had been suspiciously silent, of late. And that never boded well. “Thorygg. What news?”

Thorygg Sun-Killer turned from the courier to face his Jarl, face white with some untold pain. “The wounded return. They hail from Fort Neugrad, more coming from where we scouted Orphan’s Rock. Some are in a bad way...three at least will need amputations. Healing. We must be ready for them.”

“Then we will be.” As Thorygg turned, shouting orders that stirred the healers from their tents, the noise causing the horses to shy and whinny; Ulfric caught sight of two Stormcloak women herding Nemain between them. Her feet nearly hovered over the ground, so tightly were the women gripping her aloft. The Nord women’s faces were cramped with frustration. He knew the feeling well, as it was one of the many emotions the Reach Witch inspired, simply by being in her presence.

*It would be worth it,* he reminded himself yet again, as he walked to meet them. *Any port in a storm. Whatever advantage he could take from Imperial hands, he would. Even if it came in the form of this mouthy baggage.*

Nemain’s pale eyes shone with a vicious light as she was hauled towards camp. Sparing a moment of his time, Ulfric narrowed his eyes in thought as he took in the changes wrought by two days of Stormcloak captivity.

The crackling mass of her dark hair had been tamed into a coiled braid, piled into a bun with a crudely carved stick. Someone had dug up a red woolen dress, which hung loosely; too large for her slight, bird-thin frame. The boots she brought with her, he had allowed her to keep. She was simply too small for most Stormcloak gear.

Not even the ordinary travel fare, filling as it was, had softened her hollowed cheeks. Regular meals had not made a dent in the signs of starvation in the woman, not yet. Ralof had informed him that after the first day of refusing all nourishment, she had caved in...wolfing vittles down like a famine was upon them. Even picking the crumbs that lay upon the snow, licking the stewpot clean until the cook had shooed her away in disgust.

Full meals at regular hours. The opportunity to bathe and converse, to walk the camp escorted. He would have gladly killed for those same privileges, during his time in captivity. Both times.

But not even his gracious amenities had endeared him to her, or her situation.

Ralof and the others had been forced to come up with new, more creative ways to constrain her
hands from spellcasting. Unused to close association with mages, Ulfric rather thought it was fortunate that they had Nemain to practice upon...layering strips of cloth and leather beneath iron manacles. Keeping her gagged in her tent, after the first night in which she had screamed and howled, singing drinking songs in an uproarious fashion to waken the entire camp. Shaking her chains, hitting the hide walls of the tents with a steadily irritating *thwapthwapthwap* until he nearly walked out himself, to shut her up.

He had taken grim satisfaction, Ulfric reflected as he strode towards the front, feeling her bounce upon the back of his horse that first day of travel. Having endured such treatment himself, bound and hooded, he could attest to the effectiveness of such pointed schooling. The woman had thrown up that evening, once the hood had been removed. Retching repeatedly, spilling the restorative tea Ulfric placed upon her knee with a swipe of her hand.

“If you behave, I’ll see to it that you ride upright on the remainder of our journey.” Reaching out, he pulled a clumped strand of hair from her mouth, where it had stuck. “That is, if you can resist the urge to carve out my heart. At least until we reach Windhelm...I have urgent matters to attend to in my lands. You understand.”

She refused to speak; merely glaring at him. Muttering that fluid language, smattered with the epithets she only called him when truly enraged. *Cúl Tóna. Aiteann.*

*Fear thuaidh.* She would learn, accept that it was he who was in control. Not her. No matter how many undead corpses or soldiers bewildered by illusions that she sent his way.

“Nemain. I offer you two choices.” He spoke, as soon as she drew close enough to understand him above the hubbub of the camp. “You may sit, alone and chained in your tent. Where you will be drugged or knocked out, if necessary. Or you may make yourself useful, healing the warriors who have returned from battle. What say you?”

Wariness colored the lean face, the spitting image of that sly fox Ulfric had entrapped, so long ago. And thought long dead, until the Silver-Bloods had reluctantly illuminated him to the very alive state of the King in Rags. *Those Silver-Blood fools. For all their subtlety, they have not substance. It has already happened - Forsworn amok in the city. Markarth overrun; in silent warfare of shadows long cast.*

She had been truly unaware of her parentage, he mused, for the surprise had been real enough. Like her father, who had fought fiercely...like a rabid dog forced to be put down, he rather doubted she would have left him alone, had he released her upon their escape of the collapse of Helgen. “Make your choice. They come.”

He could hear the moans, the cries; see the soldiers as they were born into camp, some being dragged by their comrades. Others walked under their own power, bearing wounds that left red tracks in the snow. She saw them as well, and seemed torn by indecision. Biting the inside of her cheek, as the two Nord women flanking her fidgeted. Clearly desiring to help the returning warriors, and not babysit the Jarl’s pet Forsworn.

“If I help, I do it in me own way. I be more familiar with restoration spells than elixirs.”
His attention occupied by counting just how many had come back, Ulfric’s lips turned down. *Too few. Too few had returned.* “Do no harm. I will allow you to use your powers for this.”

“My Jarl, what if she escapes?” Frygga supplied, standing at the ready as the witch held up her hands to be freed. The effect was almost humorous, he thought as she shook the bundle of chains wrapped around an entire hide of goat, bound in twine. *Finding the means to cast her necromancy must have been time consuming.* Ulfric idly wondered how she had accomplished it, three times no less.

“She will not seek to escape.” Her face shot up, stamped in shock. Ulfric allowed himself the barest of smiles, tapping his chest with a finger meaningfully.

“How will you kill me, if you leave the safety of the camp? Do you even know where we are?”

“No…” he dismissed her, as she shook with the effort of withholding her acid tongue. Frygga and Siv stood silent, disapproving even as the little Breton eyed him, daggers in her gaze.

“This will occupy your time far better than reanimating the dead. Or terrorizing my warriors. Go.”

Shooting him one last look, Nemain walked away with the Nord women following close behind. He watched as she approached a young Stormcloak who lay in the snow. His unbearded face was nearly white from bloodloss, trapped in a rictus of pain. A similarly young fighter sat next to him, tugging fretfully at the injured man’s arm.

The other arm had been torn off. Too rough to have been sliced by a sword, Ulfric thought. The ragged stump bore the look of a giant’s strength. *And now his men would have to contend with giants, on top of Imperial patrols and Thalmor Justiciars. Damn.*

“What be such an untested one as you doing, fighting for these fools?” Nemain demanded, her slender fingers prodding the wound. Making the wounded boy gasp, as his companion growled at her.

“Our Da was taken in by the Thalmor, for the *crime* of lighting a candle upon a shrine to Talos. In our own home! So we left - so Ma would have fewer mouths to feed. Left to fight for Skyrim!”

“Well, there be one fewer left to fight, now.” Lifting a hand, she closed the eyelids of the lad, who now stared vacantly at the clouded sky. “What? No!” Dropping his brother’s remaining hand, the youth dropped to his knees in the snow, tears flowing down his cheeks. “Herdir! Don’t…bring him back!”

“Doon cry!” She barked, making him jump. “Doona dishonor his death in such a way! The Gods punish those with weak hearts, you thick headed clod. Here…” Shoving aside the torn padding of his chainmail, she drew back her hand…now painted in dripping ochre.

Sniffing her fingers, she delicately tasted the blood. Then spat into the snow, her thin face skewed in a grimace. “Nettlebane! You’ve been clawed by a Hagraven, boy. Get you to the tent, now. We must push the poison out, before it reaches yer heart and stops it from beating altogether.”

One of his healers approached her, hands outstretched. “We can’t do anything for hag scratches, Breton. Let him go. There are others to see to.”

“Nonsense.” Briskly folding up the wadded sleeves of her gown, Nemain took the Stormcloak by the hand and dragged him, still sniffing in the direction of the tent. Sparing Ulfric only a glower, as he lifted his eyebrows at her in surprise. “No wonder you fear thuaidh be losing so sorely. What do you do, cry when Imperial steel cuts ya? Get yer arse to the tent now, else I change my mind. And no blubbering when I press, y’hear?”
Perhaps she will end up being a valuable resource, after all. Ulfric dimly heard the boy respond with a weak moan, as the attending soldiers took his brother’s body away, to be laid out among the others who had fallen.

Walking slowly, Ulfric forced himself to push all thought of strategy out of his mind. Mentally blanking out the myriad plots and twisting threads of ideas that ever fermented...even while resting, as he cleared his thoughts.

Nothing but the snow to see here, as he took careful even steps. Pure white snow now marred by footprints. There by flecks of blood, here a splash of brown earth. Circling around the bodies prepared for their last journey home, unseeing and slack.

He willed himself to look. Really look at each face, young and old. Who had kept their teeth in their advanced years, and who still bore the infant smoothness of youth. Towhaired and dun. Male and female. All sons and daughters of Skyrim who had fought, bled and died for the homeland. Sixteen dead thus far. Far more buried and long gone...more yet to die.

Galmar called out from somewhere deeper in the encampment; the Stone-Fist’s roar nearly inaudible with the wailing screams and suffering that seeped from the healer’s tents. Walking back to where Galmar would be, Ulfric sighed.

As the snow crunched underfoot, he readied himself once more. For doubtless this night would be long. Darkness unending.

_The measure of a man is taken at the moment of his death. I know this for truth, the ghosts of many heroes walk among us. Countless dead haunt countless sleepless nights..._

_When Skyrim becomes whole again, perhaps so will I._

**********

Nemain flew from bedside to bedside, healing and helping where needed in turn. As the night wended on, more and more warriors stumbled into the camp, and those Stormcloaks who were skilled in potions, binding and bone-setting became more sought after. Outnumbered many times by the flood of wounded, the need for succor.

Most who had made it this far survived long enough to be pushed upon a sleeping fur, to be given a health potion and a quick survey of their injuries. But there were others who had to be carried in, screaming for their mothers, for their gods. Those, Nemain ran to greet...hands brightening with the light of healing, as she sought through furious activity to put out of her mind why she even bothered. _Children. Barely more than suckling bairns!_ She held in the guts of one such boy, his mouth opening and closing in a yawing scream of silence, for his vocal cords had rasped out an hour before. It was a delicate task; coiling the looping intestines back into the cavity that held them. She was forced to focus, ignoring the calls for help, the pleas for water. The occasional, jarring shrieks of those whose legs and arms were being sawed off.
Focusing only on the lad, she flicked off any hairs or debris that had landed upon his gaping wound, as she steadily eased the folds of his guts back into the body. Allowing her hands to glow, heal with snaking golden light, any perforations or tearing. For they would be fatal, when the skin had been stitched closed. Causing fevers, the shakes. Lockjaw.

And she had not labored so long over this Nord boy, that she would stand to see him die. “There. Done for now.” He had slumped halfway through her ministrations, thankfully comatose. Patting away the sweat that had beaded upon his forehead, she allowed herself a small smile of victory. Her stitches were tidy and even, the skin not nearly so red now that she had applied her hands in a spell of healing one last time.

*One done.* She could mull over the vague betrayal she felt churn within later, when so many were not in need of aid. There were few here, she reasoned with herself, that were old enough to have seen action in the Great War. That would have fought at Markarth. Aside from a smattering of rangy veterans and grandfathers (that she did not give so much as look), most of the so-called warriors here (for they cried and screamed, even over such a thing as a lost hand or limb) were young.

*Too young. Too green. Not even the People required so much. She had not been raised into the priesthood until her first bleeding, thirteen winters old. And children were sae rare, among her kind. Precious. They were nae sent to war.*

And she had not been called upon to kill in ritual sacrifice until her twenty first year. Nemain had murdered before, of course. It had taken all their combined efforts; her and Mother and Galen, with Aunt Petra and the young Bothela, to flee through the streets of Markarth to the dwemer tunnels. To the freedom of the Reach.

She remembered the faceless helmeted Nord who had fallen to her chained lightning; arcing from her hands to shake the man. Shaking him until he fell, the sizzling burn of man’s flesh a foul wind in her nose. *T’was a hard thing, a sacred thing, to kill. To take a life and make it yer own. Never to be taken for granted. You be alive, they be dead. Part of the path of the way, the way of life.*

*What be the strange pull of this rebellion, to call so many to flock to the grey and blue banner? Pah...it should be red. Dipped in blood, for all these lives wasted.*

Opening the tent flap, she bathed her hands in the snow. Scraping chunks of it between her fingers, underneath the nails to rid her of the gore that had caked upon them. So thickly in the past few hours. She was fair grateful the dress they had found her was red.

Nearby, a sudden bloodcurdling scream made her jerk. Nearly falling out of the tent, she spied Galmar and Ulfric, helping hold down a warrior whose face she couldn’t see. Their boots were skidding in the snow as they pushed down, holding tight to what sounded like a woman; whose voice raised and fell in sobbing entreaty. Crying, shamefully sobbing for all to hear.

Rising from the snow, she had a fantastic view of the leg the healer was currently sawing away at. *At least they had sealed off the arteries properly.* The blood flowed slowly, as the bulk of the leg finally tore off with a meaty plunk; to reveal a cross section of bone, marrow and muscle.
Too high up. They didnae save the knee. Did they want that warrior to live, or die? “What be you doing to that leg?”

The woman whimpered as Nemain strode over to have a look. Barely glancing over, Ulfric grunted as he tightened the tourniquet around the severed thigh. “Saving her life. One of your kind - a witch, used a poisoned dagger upon it. The gangrene spread too far, and now…”

Another scream, as Nemain pulled at the lip of skin left. Ragged from being sawed off, there was the barest trace of black rot remaining. Using a handful of snow, she wiped off the raw stump. The Stormcloak gasped, her breathing edging into a sobbing whine as Nemain spoke aloud. “You shouldae saved more skin, healer. This will be difficult to sew.”

The bearded Nord who was draped in linen bandages blinked at her, dazed no doubt from the lack of rest. His hands quivered as they tried repeatedly - failing to thread the sinew through the eye of a bone needle. “I figured we’d sear the wound first, then sew.”

Och, no! “Get away, you. Might as well kill her now from the shock. You took too much leg, y’brute.”

Plucking the needle away, she shoved the healer back as Galmar grumbled. “Reachwoman, I’d think carefully about your next move. Or you’ll be the one on the table, while I hack away.”

“Stay away from me, witch!” Finding her voice amongst her shrill panting, the Nord woman’s bloodshot eyes fixed upon Galmar and Ulfric beseechingly. “Please, my Jarl. Lord Stone-Fist, don’t let her touch me!”

The shaman sniggered, too tired to care as Ulfric shot her a cold glare.

Cor, she was tired. “Milord Stone-Fist, ho ho. That be the newest star of the Lusty Argonian books. I see it now…”

Silence!” The men’s legs slid, slipping in the bloody muck and melting snow, as the woman began to wail anew, flailing her head from side to side. “Healer! Is there another healer about?” Ulfric bellowed, struggling to maintain his grip.

Huffing through her nose, she wiped her forehead. Annoyed, as she realized she had just smearing more blood upon it, for the backs of her hands were wet and red still. The healer’s hands are often the bloodiest.

“Fine. Dinnae ask fer my help. The others have gone, chopping off more legs and arms ‘fer the cause.’ What do I know? I be just a filthy Forsworn hag, after all.” Placing the needle and sinew upon the woman’s crotch, Nemain bowed theatrically.

And made to leave, counting steps in her mind until she heard the Bear speak. “Wait.”

Curling her lips in a victorious grin, she smoothed her face before turning. “Aye?”

As Galmar winced at the rising pitch of the woman’s screams, Ulfric looked upon her with helpless anger. “Heal her the best you can, and...and -fuck. I'll allow you to ride a horse on the morrow, when we make for Windhelm.”

Nemain pretended to think about it. It was a foregone conclusion: she had no desire to be tossed like a sack upon the horse’s hind end. And finding something to hold over the Jarl’s head
was...promising. “Fine. I'll do it.”

Sauntering back, Nemain clasped her hands to the woman's forehead and whispered to her.

...Sleep...

No sooner did she do so, than the Nord passed out. Which was good, Nemain thought, exhausted. She had not the finesse to deal with a patient who would throw a fit while she sewed. “You can let her go, for now.”

Threading the needle, she waved to the two Nords who were looking at her askance. The tail end of the length of sinew whipped up, nearly smacking Ulfric in the face as he ducked. “You want to be of use as well? Here.”

Kicking the detached leg, she sent it to roll over against Galmar's boot. The old bastard sighed as she gave him a nasty grin. “Why doon ye dispose o'that? Since this Forsworn witch doesnae feel peckish, at the mo'. I kannae abide thigh meat.”

“My hatred for the Empire is exceeded only by my hatred for their witch-elf puppet-masters. You’re close enough. Don’t test me, woman.”

Ignoring the old bear’s retort, she waved idly once more. Steadily sewing up the leg, Nemain kept her eyes from drooping by occasionally pricking herself with the needle...taking care that no rot remained. That the wound was clean, thoroughly covered by skin.

Minutes that felt like hours passed this way, her attention solely focused upon her task. Until it was - at last- finished.

Laying her hands upon the sealed leg, she sighed in relief as the light of her healing hands sank into the tortured flesh. “Oh, Nord. You may just live to see another sunrise. Perhaps not walk towards one, though. My regrets to you and your kin, for the burden of your sacrifice.”

Performing the ritual bow, almost by rote, Nemain flicked her fingers in a quick blessing. It was all blurring together now. The similarity between the frigid cold of Deepwood Redoubt to this place...it was meshing her recollections. Making her too damn nostalgic, for all the times she had healed the berserkers of the hills. Set a child’s broken bone, or delivered a baby in her role as priestess. Y’fool twit. What if someone saw?

Stumbling backwards, she yawned...walking towards her tent in a muzzy stupor. Falling asleep almost as soon as her head hit the furs, her gore soaked arms dried out overnight. Leaving cracklings of dried flesh and blood that she rolled over in her restless sleep; wakening her as she irritably brushed them off.

When she opened her eyes to Ralof’s cautious face the following day, she could have kicked herself. *The opportune time to flee wouldae been last night, you dim gob. Now they’ll be packing you off on some smelly beast tae only gods know where next. Dumb-arse.*

******

Nemain lay flat upon the snow, the wind completely knocked out of her as she struggled to breathe.
“She was your idea. So she'll ride with you, on your mare. Have fun.” His horse clopping its heavy shod hooves, Galmar rode past her sprawled form. Taking the lead, as Ulfric stared down at her with ill-concealed vexation.

She had nearly made it. Had almost run away (after distracting Siv and jumping off the horse) to Orphan Rock. Where she knew, from treating the fear thuidh, was not far off the cobbled roads and was home to at least one Hagraven and several witches. Allies. Potential friends or family, depending on which side of the Reach they hailed from. What a far off place they had chosen to settle.

It would have been a good plan, if Ulfric had not walloped her senseless with the flat of his sheathed sword as she ran past him and his horse.

And now he was dismounting. Taking her bound and chained wrists to lift her up as easily as he would a child, to get her up on that great beast she had already had the pleasure of being sick upon. “No! I won’t do it! Don’t hood me!”

The Jarl merely looked at her. “You held up your end of the bargain. You saved many lives last night. I will not subject you to that position again.”

Hesitantly, she watched him for any signs of violence as he opened his hand and reached out to her, wriggling his fingers. Wordlessly asking, she realized, for her boot. To hoist her up over the broad saddle.

The beast seemed much larger, from up here.

And so did he, as he climbed on behind.

Curling in on herself, his arms reached out to take the reins in hand. Doing her best to grab the saddle with her arms, her seat jerked up and down as the horse sprinted into a canter, then a gallop; every bouncing jolt an agony, as she struggled to lean forward and not back.

“You’re going to fall off that way. Hold on to the saddle.”

"I cannæ, ye daft snowback. Bound and chained, remember?” Still bobbing in her seat, she lifted her hands up to her eye level, gritting her teeth. Damn, but her ass was going to be blistered by the end of the day.

He didn’t respond. But she sucked in a breath, nearly biting her tongue when his arm came down around her waist. Holding her tightly against him, as the horse continued its gallumphing, breakneck pace.

Strangely, there was less kickback this way. His body absorbed the bulk of the motion, and she found herself slowly easing against him, the more trees and rocks passed by. Warm as ever, Ulfric’s heat soaked through the metal links of his chainmail cuirass. Radiating fair through her robed back all the way to her chest, causing her to shiver less as the light climbed high.

Closing her eyes, as the sun reached its zenith, she allowed herself to enjoy this, at least. The novelty of being thoroughly, deliciously warm on a cold winter day. It’s nae snowing, either. Just pretend like yer on a pleasure trip, like the fat nobles that ooh and aah at the waterfalls every Midsummer’s
Festival. Except that yer on horseback, all chained up. With the most shitty sonofabitch as your riding partner. Damn.

Not that any such peace would last, with him around. “Do you think your father would cease to order the deaths of Nords if you were to be returned to him? I'm not above blackmail, if it suits better than the sword.”

“This, right here...this be why your grand idea be all bodgy. First off...if Madanach be my father...of which I am not convinced, by the way! Then, he has not given a lick o' care for me. Not once in me entire life. What makes y'think he'd care now that you’ve a'taken hold of me?”

Feeling him shift behind her, she kept her eyes closed. The trees were turning from evergreen to golden aspen, and the light dappling through hit the snow with a blinding force. Too bad I cannae pretend to be asleep.

“He's old. Trapped in Cidna Mine for years, with nothing but thieves and murderers for company. Why wouldn't he want to see his daughter...his heir returned for a pittance? Peace, for the Reach. More autonomy for your kin. I can speak to the Silver-Bloods on the matter.”

She laughed, a shrill disbelieving bark. Opening her eyes to see that the horse had slowed to a canter, the clop-clopping almost musical to her ears. “Hah! Y’think the Forsworn bow beneath one king, and one king alone? Hahah hah!”

His voice was a deep rumble in the shell of her ear. “Madanach was one such king. I hope to unite my people in purpose as well. Tell me why you laugh.”

Was she laughing? Nemain felt more like crying. But those tears had dried long ago. “Not since Faolan Red-Eagle have the tribes united under one true chief. Madanach took Markarth when the Empire became distracted, tis true...but for every Markarth there be ten smaller tribes, warring over land. Fighting amongst themselves, stealing women and beasts for their own use...banding together only tae drive out some other, mutually intolerable fiefdom. We be nae more single minded in purpose than yore nine holds, Bear of Markarth.”

“But it is possible, that your father was the Reachking?”

She sucked at her inner cheek, tonguing the tooth that had gone loose from her fall in thought. “Tis possible. He would be of the right age, in the right place for the Beltane ritual. But it wouldn't matter. The People trace lineage through the mother anyhow. Daughter inheriting rule, if they be worthy, from the ruling mother. Not sons.”

“Why women? Have your people so hen pecked the men that they have granted you control over even themselves?”

Knowing he couldn’t see her, she rolled her eyes. “It only be wisdom. You can always be sure who the mother is, of a child. But the father…” she clicked her tongue, peering back to smile cheekily. “Well. That do be harder to tell, at times.”

Behind her and above, Ulfric looked down with narrowed blue eyes. The long scar upon his left cheek was more visible, this close...along with many other, smaller marks and blemishes. A soldier
since his youth. “Only if the women open their legs to everyone and anyone.”

“Och, doon sneer. I lived among yer people, and let me say...those notions of loyal trust an' monogamy be laughable at best. Never have I seen sae many adulterous liaisons as with married Nord couples, boffing one another in secret. I worked as a messenger, y'ken? I see these things.”

“I'm sure the way of the Forsworn is so much purer than Mara’s mercy. Mindless rutting, producing children such as you. Who have no idea who their fathers are, growing up bereft of paternal guidance...until someone notes a likeness.”

Feeling her good mood wither, she slumped in his hold. “How long until Windhelm? I am fair bored o'this conversation.”

He chuckled; the sound of it reverberating through her rib cage. Almost like an echo, as she shivered involuntarily. “Sooner than you think. We must stop again tonight in the Rift. Then it is but a days journey, if we make good time.”

“Ach, great. Just grand.”

“Please. Rein in your enthusiasm.”

“I'll do my best. Gah, dinnae pull sae glaickety hard! I cannae breathe!”

Chapter End Notes

Friggin hilarious. So, I came across this little gem while researching warfare for the Forsworn, and what kind of berserker stuff I could plausibly use. Get this - woad was probably not blue, but orange. At least for the Celts who lived in the Iberian peninsula.

...and all I could see in my mind was a bunch of Willy Wonka oompa-loompahs, doopity-doing in little kilts and broadswords. OH. MY. GOD. Tell me that is not the most ridonkulous thing ever.

"Caesar emphasises the "barbarian" aspect of the Britons, possibly for political reasons since his expedition there was of necessity brief, describing how they wore animal skins, had wives in common, did not grow crops and dyed their skin blue: although this description does not mention the plant, subsequent commentators have supposed that woad was the source of this blue dye and though later experimentation suggests that woad is not very well suited as a skin dye nor as tattoo ink,[12] this image, conflated with the descriptions of the Gaesatae, has nevertheless helped paint the picture of the woad-daubed ancient Briton charging into battle naked and blue.

Outside Britain, small pots of orange paste have been found in the vicinity of Cerro del Castillo, which has led to the proposition that if the Celtiberians used it in a similar manner to Caesar's description, they would have painted themselves orange rather than blue.”

Source citation: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_warfare
The Giants

Chapter Notes

A song that would fit very well with the giants. Did you know in Elder Scrolls lore that there's actually quite a bit about these gentle souls? So cool. Look it up on Elder Scrolls wikia sometime.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RStnppJfWs&index=1&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She regretted everything.

Ochone, I'll ne'er eat another jazbay grape again! Nemain groaned to herself as her bowels gurgled, threatening to loose once more. Squatting behind the stones, she could hear the Stormcloaks talking, occasionally laughing. Most likely at her, damn them.

How was she to know that the cursed sour fruit could bring such agony? It was food. Food growing in tangles of vines upon the ground all around the hot springs, ripe for the picking. As they had made ready to leave their makeshift camp in the rift, Nemain had stuffed her face (as well as a woman wrapped and bound could) her niggardly sense of self-preservation leaving her unable to say no to freely foraged nourishment.

Having never eaten more than a spare handful of the rare, expensive ingredient at once, the Forsworn shaman had merely shrugged at the shocked laughter...paying no heed to the warnings of Siv and the others as she downed handfuls of the tart tiny berries. And now she sorely hated them all. All the Nords- the Rift, jazbay, unreasonably rough linen cloths and everything else in this wretched waste. Her arsehole ached like a wound.

Swallowing her pride, she used her hands of healing once more...reasoning it wasn't a waste of magicka. The faster I heal, the better off I'll be when I finally escape from these galumphin' giant snowbacks. Then, she washed thoroughly in one of the trickling streams of water flowing down the rocky slopes.

Feeling strangely hollow, the shaman walked stiffly from her partially concealed hiding spot to return to where the Nords were mounting up; preparing to travel once more. Up ahead, Ulfric was deep in conversation with Galmar - both men turning to view her with equally amused expressions.

“...close to the border of Eastmarch. Not long now. Well, well! Look who survived her bloody battle with the mighty jazbay!”

She wanted to punch Galmar’s smug, leathery face...all crinkled and stretched in that sly smile at her expense. They had to untie her hands at some point. Tis a shame I cannae run like this; t’would be a
I wonder if the auld bear’s mug would be improved with third degree burns?

“I be fine. Doon you have some unfinished business somewhere else, brute? A village to terrorize fer Talos? Children tae scare into tears?”

“Hah! You’ve got a fiery temper, little Breton! It’s just a shame it had to leak its way out...the road home to Windhelm is going to hurt like a bitch for you.”

*He was probably right.* Resigned, she allowed Ulfric to haul her up upon the snorting beast of burden once more. Feeling him settle in the saddle behind her, she no longer did anything but wince as his arm pulled her up tightly against him. She’d put up with far worse, if it meant her arse was safe from the rough pace they were undoubtedly about to embark with. Despite the unease she had felt at being so close to her sworn enemy, Nemain reminded herself to be patient. Cautious. *Be like water. It does not fizzle when shaken...it merely settles, calm and serene. Until it rises in a drowning tide. Be like water.*

Gritting her teeth as the horse began racing down the road, she was so mired in the misery of her plight that she nearly didn’t register that Ulfric was speaking to her once more. “...what?”

The hand wrapped around her waist tightened, causing her guts to grumble. “I said, I’m shocked you did not take the opportunity to escape. Losing your edge, Forsworn?”

Feeling his thighs suddenly tense around her hips, Nemain’s stomach beneath his arm practically heaved as the mare broke into a smooth canter upon the cobblestones. Up and down, up and down, *by the Et'Ada, stop...* “I guess the gods favor ye today, nae me.” She managed to gasp out, as the hooves below them ate up the distance in great, galloping strides.

“The gods favor those who don’t consume mountains of very sour grapes.”

Her face wrenched in a bitter grimace, as she managed a rasp of mocking laughter. “Ha, hah. Yer enjoying...this...aren’t ya. Makin' the horse go - ugh, faster than is needful. Doon deny it!”

The hand holding the reins pulled, as the horse eased up on the breakneck pace. Slowed to a trot, her innards gave one last broiling gurgle, then went suspiciously silent.

She *would not* betray her gratitude. Not at all, even if it did hurt much less with the reduced speed. Directing her attentions elsewhere, Nemain turned to take in the spectacular view...curiosity overcoming her resentfulness as she took in the wide vistas of the eastern lands.

The road weaved through hissing steam vented through cracks in the earth, circling geysers that bubbled in clear emerald hues. Trees dotted the area, many dead and dying from exposure to the mineral waters. The plants she beheld tended towards creeping things...thick, red root clusters, the bright golden dragons-tongue plant and the despicable tangling roots of jazbay vines. Heavily crusted limestone deposits frosted the tiered rock formations, reminding her of a sweetroll confection - all white and dripping...a layer cake of glistening stone. The occasional heated gusts of sulphur and wet vegetation hung heavy in the air, stirred into the cold wintry breeze like spice in soup.

As the horse clopped along she realized that those were mammoths in the distance. Herded by tall, lumbering figures she recognized with delighted joy as the legendary earth shakers; the giant folk.

“Look! The Jötnar - giants! I’ve ne'er seen one sae close before!”
His breath stirred her hair, as she leaned out of the saddle to get a better look at them. “I am surprised you know of them. Giants do not frequent the Reach.”

“Not as much, anymore. They prefer tundras, aye? An' evidently rotten egg marshes with foul gut-grapes.”

“Eastmarch is a varied land of many pleasures, from the Sea of Ghosts to the Velothi Mountains. There are many wandering herds of the Jötnar, here and in the Pale. I find no fault with them, as long as they keep to their beasts and leave my people alone.”

Marvelling at the wide strides the giants took...their spiralling blue symbols painted upon mammoth and club bearer alike, Nemain thought about the rich oral tradition her people had passed down over the centuries. Jötnar played a great part in the creation myths, and she remembered the tales of the beginning- of giants eating, dancing and drinking with the first of the manner, the Reachfolk. Stories of talking beasts and supernatural phenomenon, when Nirn was new and gods still walked among men.

It was a giantess who was the mother of the Druadach, she remembered fondly. The she-giant had become one with the Horned God Hircine, after which she had lain upon flat ground, beating it with her great fists in the pains of labor to create valleys and mountains. The blood of birth, rushing from between her open legs formed the great rivers, waterfalls and trickling streams. Her hair was the trailing moss and drooping branch of the juniper tree; her children the leaping salmon, the sabrecat, wolf, bear and goat. It had been one of her favorite stories to hear as a girl...when the world was a simpler place.

“Well, tis a varied land. I'll hold me opinion of yer Hold until I see the north of it.” If I dinnae rid myself of you before then.

Watching as their horses continued upon the trail, she lost sight of the giants and their mammoth as they rounded a massive rocky crater. It was much colder, the further they rode away from the warmth of the geysers and their billowing clouds of steam. She shivered, leaning back against the warm bulk of him. This frigid weather blew straight through her woolen clothing, seeming to freeze her very bones. And tis not even the heart of winter yet. By Dibe and the Raven, I do not look forward to the icy coasts of Windhelm.

Apparently her jailer did not share the same view. The man behind her took a deep breath, sighing in something that might have been satisfaction as her hands began to shake from the chill. “Ah, home. Finally. The air smells fresh once more.”

“Fresh be one word fer it. How d'you stand this cold, Nord? Perhaps it emanates from the lump of ice that serves as your heart?”

She felt him tense around her. Whatever Ulfric had been about to say in rebuttal was interrupted by a harsh growling scream, throaty and far away.

“Sabrecat?” She supplied hopefully, as he wheeled their horse around...whinnying and champing snorts announcing the closeness of the other horses and riders as they formed a protective circle upon the road.

“Unlikely. Galmar, do you see anything?”
The Stone-Fist made a face, scanning the valley bowl for any sign of what had made the scream. “No. But I don't want to wait around to find out. I don't like this, Ulfric. We’re in the open, on horseback.”

“Aye. Like Darkwater Crossing all over again. Still…”

A shadow passed overhead, darkening the ground. Bringing with it gusts of air that smelt like dried snakeskin and the moldering decay of the grave. A dragon! Struggling uselessly against her bonds, her eyes took in the impossible truth that the others were slowly coming to realize.

“Dragon! By Shor, it's a dragon!”

“Another one.” Ulfric’s voice was low growl.

“I thought they be extinct? Was that nae true?” Holding up her manacled wrists, she shoved them up and behind her pointedly, barely keeping her seat as the arm holding her disappeared and the mare shifted fretfully. Pawing at the ground, no more able to look away than she at the sight of the great white dragon...tilting, flapping its great leathery wings as it circled the crater. Coming right back towards them.

Wiggling her fingers, she bit her lip in anxiety as the dragon grew steadily larger in her sight. “Untie me, fear thuaidh.”

Holding her breath, she wasn’t sure he had heard her. Then, large hands lifted her up beneath her armpits. Turning her in her seat, lifting her leg like it weighed nothing until she sat astride his lap...her bound arms falling over his neck. Bringing them uncomfortably close.

She could practically taste his breath; the mead he had swilled during their nooning ghosting across her face in a warm puff of air. Every scar, small and large, mapping his face...even one she hadn’t noticed that bisected his eyebrow over one cold blue eye, everything about this...sudden shift in movement bothered her.

Nemain didn’t like it. Struggled to pull her arms out from behind his head, even as his hands held her still. For he was distracted; gazing out at the approaching dragon and the Stormcloaks sitting astride their horses still. Some of them panicking, sliding off their mounts as the sounds of neighing grew more shrill. *Smart horses.*

She wasn’t sure she would not do the same, should she be freed from her bonds. Another fucking dragon. That last one was sore bad enough...it leveled Helgen. Shifting, pressing against Ulfric, Nemain grabbed his hair and yanked it. Yanked it hard, forcing his attention back to her. “Release me!”

As the horse nearly reared, her forehead hit his nose. Her cheek scraped against the roughness of his beard, as she hissed and leaned back and away. Trying to ignore the helpless feeling of being trapped; trapped on the horse. Chained to him. “What chance is there that you will not simply run?”

“In case you havenae noticed, there be a legendary flying wyrm near above us. I willnae kill ye now, Bear - you be too valuable as shield fodder.” *I hope the beast eats ye first.*
He laughed; a short surprised burst. Lurching forward, she found herself clinging to his neck as he turned; sliding off the horse in one fluid motion. Lifting her arms out from behind his head, Ulfric peered at her for a moment as he held her manacles in one hand, indecision plain upon his face as his other hand quivered. Grasping the pommel of his sword, fingering it as though he would fain draw it upon her. “If I see you cast a spell upon me or any of mine, you’ll be dead before you hit the ground.”

“Fair enough.” Shaking her chains, she couldn’t help but bob her head back and forth, from Ulfric to the dragon and back again, panic fluttering in her chest. “Do it!”

He let her go, unchaining the manacles with a key from his pocket, as she jiggled her foot impatiently. Waiting as he unwrapped the lengths of twine, rope and wrapping around her fingers, making her sigh with relief as she stretched them. Wriggling as fire wreathed her hands once more. “I still say we run...make fer the trees.”

Giving her a look of disdain, Ulfric drew his sword. Arming his left hand with a shield that had hung from the saddlebags, the man adjusted his grip. “And let the dragon roam unchallenged across my lands? Only a coward would allow that. Shields up!”

Wrapping the enchanted hood around her head, she hurried to keep up with the Jarl of Eastmarch, as he took long impatient strides towards the others in their party. Galmar had already dismounted, the great battleaxe already hoisted in his hands. At Ulfric’s order, the faceless helmeted Stormcloaks had formed a shield wall, only a few of them pawing as nervously as the horses. Betraying their fear, the fear she hid as she stood as close to Ulfric as she dared.

The Stormcloak general shook his axe in the air as the dragon opened its jaws; needled teeth bared in a bloodstained parody of a smile. “Here it comes, hahah! Kill the dragon, men! Something to tell your wives and mistresses about, over mead and songs! Kill it dead!”

And then the world exploded in a burst of ice and wind.

Stepping out of the way, barely in time as a gust of sound roared by rife with freezing magic, Nemain held her hood to her head. Keeping it from blowing away even as she marveled at the force...the sheer power of the dragon’s voice. Wingbeats flapped, stirring the eddies of air into a whirlwind gale, as it hung overhead. Its evil eyes looked upon their figures with scorn, as the beast spoke in a thunderous boom of sound. “Joore...mortals! Such puny opponents you make! Krosis, will none of you stand against me?”

Forming a ball of twisting flame in both of her palms, Nemain concentrated upon it. Stoking the heat, even as the dragon’s wings buffeted the air. Climbing higher, folding its wings in a graceful dive.

She released it; released the fireball inferno upon the wyrm as it caught Siv in its mighty jaws, shaking her like a dog shook a skeever, to snap its neck. The fire struck true, causing the dragon to cough-roar as it soared away, a hole in one leathery wing dragging it down on one side, even as Siv disappeared down its maw. Nemain stumbled back, eyes wide as she watched Siv’s feet tremble, even as the dragon bobbed its neck. Swallowing her down, as it cried out. Circling them once more, to attack.
“Bows! Do we have any bows among us?” Ulfric called out, as a few of the guard brought out quivers of arrows and longbows. Knocking them at his command, Nemain stood ready as well. Holding her ground despite her fears, adding electricity to her bolt of fire this time as the dragon screamed something that caused a sharp pain in her head. Something near familiar; like a dream long forgotten that nagged. A tune with a note that skipped, playing out of sync.

_Cor...me head. It hurts!_ “Fire!” Ulfric yelled, as arrows flew into the sky. Clouding the air, most of them reaching their target as the great white drake swooped down. Predator seeking its prey.

And landed, those great claws raking furrows in the earth. The dragon was clumsy upon the ground, heaving to and fro; its wings dragging the earth as it shook its wedge shaped head at the arrows peppering its scales, useless. Her magic seared it, electricity sparking against the dragon’s spiked back as it jerked. Taking mighty, shaking steps towards the huddled group as she prepared her attack once more.

And despite their efforts, those arrowpoints slid off the silver-sheened scales, like butter from a hot knife as those mad eyes turned to her once more. Cold mist, trailing like smoke as those panting jaws lifted in a knowing smile. _“Kif krin. Pruzah!”_

“Swords!” Galmar roared, as the warriors threw down their bows and drew upon the dragon. Playing with the lightning, she spooled it around her fingers. Ready to release a thunderbolt of chain lightning, even as Ulfric charged the dragon, sword held high.

Nemain held back, even as the other Stormcloaks rushed past her. The beast huffed, its whiplike tail slamming against one unlucky soldier, as it made quick work of it; stomping down with a hindlimb the size of a wagoncart until the Stormcloak shuddered. Lay still.

Not daring to cast her spell, lest it spread to the men currently hacking at their opponent, Nemain bounced from foot to foot. Nervous, as Ulfric disappeared beneath the beast; only to show up bloodied. Dragging his sword beneath the joint of the forelimb tipped with claws as it screamed...a high, enraged shriek of fury. Claws snapped shut, nearly snagging the Bear’s fur cloak in it as another soldier distracted the dragon with a shield bash. More tackled the wings, slicing and slashing away, until the one she had burned lay in ribbons.

It would not be flying again any time soon. A small warmth flared within Nemain, as she realized that they might just live out this day outside the belly of the beast. _I didnae like Siv, but no one deserves such an end. Not e’en a Nord._

Gathering her wits once more, she urged her feet to move forward. One step, then another...bringing her closer to the flailing snake-head of the wyrm as it thrashed. Beset on all sides by biting axe and blade, as she summoned fire.

Galmar and Ulfric were now completely soaked in steaming, red blood. She could see the Bear look at her askance, as he continued digging his steel into the dragon’s spine. The beast disregarded him as she drew near, one huge slotted pupil observing as she rose hands cradling flame. “You are brave. _Bahlaan hokoron._ Your defeat brings me honor.”

“Fuck honor, and fuck you.” She ground out, ignoring just how grotesquely mashed the warrior’s
face was, that had been slammed and stomped upon not far from where she stood. She could smell it; smell the carrion-stench of the dragon’s breath as it mingled with ozone. Preparing once more to Shout at her. To catch in her a freezing gale, even as the warmth from her hands was whisked away.

I have not come sae far. Endured sae much, for it all to end here!

As the dragon reared back - speaking those horrid words of power, she threw out her palms. Pressing her wrists together, she forced flame to spiral in a helix towards the open, gaping throat that vibrated with sound.

She could not avoid the Shout entirely. The impact of the cold wind was like breaking through thin ice. It fair took her breath away, even as she fought against it. Fought to keep the fire burning, bursting from her hands as her magicka sapped away in strength.

It was enough. Those huge black eyes blinked, shuddered as the swords tearing away at its back dug deep - striking nerves through the meat and tissue. Hitting home.

“Dovahkiin, no!” It roared, speech stolen with the burn of her searing flame even as it dropped. Falling in jerking bends, twisting in the throes of death as the Stormcloaks pulled out just in time, staggering towards the road. Falling down, some panting even as they kept a wavering guard stance. That be some impressive loyalty, right there.

She whirled around, her hands alight once more with fire and lightning until she registered that it was Ulfric who had approached her. The man looked as though he had bathed in blood. His hair was dark with it; droplets of the stuff still dripping from the fuller of his blade.

“What did it call you?” He queried, eyes still focused upon the sinuous lines of the drake as it seized, finally falling still.

“No idea. Somethin' in dragonish.”

“Dovahzul, actually. Stay here but a moment.” As Ulfric approached the corpse with wary steps, Nemain followed petulantly behind. Unwilling to take any order of his - no matter how sensible - as she swallowed her fear and came close, to take a better look.

As the great limbs gave one last push, then fell inert...a light bloomed within. Scales flaked away, revealing the skeletal form beneath. Bones that glowed, even as a rushing golden wind tore away. Seeking, finding her even as she gasped at it. At the sensation of a hot, pulsing thrill of knowledge. Bitter and beautiful.

She tasted blood. Human blood upon her tongue. Between her teeth, which grew dagger sharp in her mind, as wings stretched against her too-small muscles - aching to take flight from these puny joore. To fly, to fight, to fuck...reigning gloriously rampant over the wide stretches of Nirn once more.

“Gods, what was that?” She stammered, nearly falling upon her knees. She could feel it; feel the beast within her. A calculating, alien intelligence that was so far from her own, Nemain could not have classified it as anything but draconic in origin. What did it do to me?

“Well, I’ll be damned. You’re Dragonborn.” Galmar strode up to her, his eyes creased in thought. Scratching at his beard, the old Nord sniffed. “See if you can Shout, witch. No sense getting our smalls in a twist if you’re not a Tongue.”
Licking her lips, Nemain shrank back as Ulfric stepped closer to Galmar. To her. “He’s right.” The man’s voice was a bass rumble, colored in something that was almost wistful.

“Though Words of Power are learned, not absorbed like the soul of the dragon you just took in you.”

Looking back in disbelief, Nemain noted just how grave they both looked. Even the other surviving Stormcloaks seemed to be taking this seriously. None were actively laughing, at least. “I have nae idea what you be talking about. A spell? Be this some kind of Nord tale you trick travelers with? You’re nae pulling one over on me, are ye Bear?”

His blue eyes rimmed in blood were sharp. Watchful, as he shook his head slowly. “I’m afraid this is much more than a tale, now. Come.”

Tilting his head, Ulfric gestured for her to follow him as she frowned. Galmar gave her a solemn nod, wiping off his battleaxe upon a linen cloth as she skeptically followed Ulfric. Trudging past the other Stormcloaks who stared at her as they went; climbing up past the bones of the dragon and up the steep slope towards the crater.

“That rising tower of rock up there is Bonestrewn Crest. I remember seeing old remnants of the beasts...skeletons with wings about it, when I traveled past as a youth. A ruin of a Word Wall. Doubtless it is where the beast resided, though I can’t imagine how or why dragons should choose to return now.”

Still fighting her senses on the facts of what had just happened, Nemain wrapped her arms around her. “I doona like this. Not at all. Lemme go, and I’ll leave ye alone.” For a while, at least. That damn dragon gave me somethin'...I can feel it, trying to claw its way out o’ me. It mustn’t!

The Nord’s voice was not unkind, even as it brooked no refusal. “We will find you a Word of Power. Then, you will attempt to Shout.”

“And then...we will see what we will see.”

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

“Breathe.”

Sitting across from the Jarl of Windhelm, Nemain did as he bid her and breathed.

Both Breton and Nord were sitting across from one another, far from the campfire the others had built up to ward off the dark of the night. In this silence, broken only by the occasional hoot of an owl or drone of a dragonfly, Nemain kept her suspicious stare fixed upon Ulfric as he sat before her, eyes closed as he breathed. Struggling to clear her mind, to ignore the everpresent chill of the Eastmarch air and ease her breathing into the deep, drugging rhythm that the large man before her had already achieved. Fighting against the doubt that any of this oddness was even necessary.

Fo Krah Diin. Frost Cold Freeze. The slice of the angular words engraved into the Word Wall had seeped into her with blue light; less harsh than the golden dragon soul. Less intense, yet just as odd.
She had been shocked to discover that she, Nemain the Forsworn, could indeed Shout in the tongue of the Nords. It felt like nothing she had ever done before, this upwelling burst of sound that had erupted from her throat; fairly blasting the tree standing in her way with cold. She had touched the brittle bark; white and frozen solid as she wondered at this strangeness. This Thu’um that Ulfric had taken upon himself to teach her, even as she chafed at the presumption. That she would want or need anything from him.

But she did. She was, she had to admit to herself, completely lost at sea with this new knowledge. And if she were to be honest, Nemain thought with alacrity as she sucked in air through her mouth, blowing like a winded horse; she was curious.

Might as well find out all he knew about her newfound powers, before her knife carved out his heart. She just knew he wasnae telling her everything, much less why he bothered.

“You’re not breathing.”

“Of course I am! I be breathing just fine! This be foolish.” Crossing her arms, she shivered. Gooseflesh had popped out upon her arms, lifting the fine hairs beneath her sleeves even as she bore it in quiet. Bore the cold, clenching her jaw against the desire to crawl up next to him. To steal some of the heat radiating from his giant form, and take it for her own. Greedy. And wrong...so very wrong. “This be no way tae learn a spell. Be there no book I can read? No teacher to instruct me? Besides ye, I mean.”

His eyes slowly opened. He was, she thought, the most relaxed she had ever seen the Bear be. Hair still damp from ablutions in the nearby river, it shone a deep reddish gold in the cold light of the stars. She almost shuddered in sympathy, though having a head full of wet hair did not seem to bother him as it would her. That fear thuaidh arsehole...she would nae be jealous. Never be resentful that he bore the cold far better than she could.

“There are teachers of the Voice. Greybeards; men who live in seclusion at the top of the Throat of the World where Kynareth blessed man with the Voice, long ago.” His words were pensive, with that same wistfulness she had noticed earlier.

“You lived there, long ago. Did ye not? Were they helpful, these Greybeards?”

“Aye. When I was very young.” Focusing upon her once more, Ulfric’s mouth twisted in a superior smirk. “You are cold.”

“No!” Her teeth chattered, even as she instinctively rebelled against any sign of weakness. Any chink in her defense against him, the Bear. Butcher! Never forget! “Perhaps a bit. Do you lot carry any potions? Any cold-resistance elixirs I could drink? This do be miserable.”

Ulfric blinked. “We’ve never needed any before. Here.”

Turning his back to her, she stared in tired amusement as he pulled off his furs, then his tunic. The broad expanse of his back, scarred and pale, rippled as his head turned to look at her. “Put your back to mine, and breathe. You seem to have difficulty settling into the pattern of the breath. The calm.”

“I don’t need yer pity, fear thuaidh. Just give me a potion. And I can breathe just fine.”

Still turned away, she could see his ribs expand as he sighed. “Then give up. Go to sleep. Don’t learn to Shout...it will save me time and effort, at that.”
“You’re not getting out o’ this sae easily. Peh, sit on the flat space over here. That area be littered in pebbles, digging intae me seat. There.”

Feeling completely out of her depth, Nemain flexed her hands...then scooted herself towards the Nord who sat so still, back to her as he waited. Spells...whoever heard of a spell that used words, instead of gestures? Stupid Nords. Shuffling her back to his, she drew a deep breath...stopping as his hand plucked at her dress.

“Take it off. Skin to skin, I need to feel you breathe, to see what you’re doing wrong.”

Laughing incredulously, she crawled on hands and knees to look up at him. Up, up where his face was contemplating the waxing face of Secunda, the smaller of the moons. “You be jesting. What makes you think I’d willingly disrobe before ye?”

He stared back unrepentantly. “Nudity doesn’t bother you, Nemain. Don’t be coy. I’ve already seen it all.” Shifting ever so slightly, he raised one of his eyebrows. “What there is to see. Which isn’t much.”

Before she could slam into him with an aggrieved insult of her own (What do he mean, not much to see? That bastard!) he continued blithely on. “Now take off the damn dress and put your back to mine. You want to learn, well...learn as I did. Skin to skin. Su’um ahrk morah.”

Leaning back on her knees, Nemain tugged at the laces of her bodice. The red wool parted easily beneath her fingers, slipping from her shoulders to pool at her waist.

“I didnae know ye knew any dragonspeak. Thought it t’was a dead language?”

Settling against his back again, Nemain shivered once more as she felt every knob of her spine align against the broadness of his back. The contact was strangely intimate. She couldn’t even see him, but she could feel as he inhaled and exhaled. Slow and steady spans of breath, the heat of him against her chilled back. Soaking into her skin, as she shivered a bit less with every breath...mist from her mouth evaporating into the space before her in unsteady puffs.

“It is known as Dovahzul. And I’ve forgotten much. Master Arngeir would be displeased, should he ever find out just how my studies have slipped over the years.”

“What does it mean? Soom argh morrow?”

“Su’um ahrk morah.” Ulfric spoke carefully, enunciating each syllable. The words rumbled nearly through her, making her skin tingle. “Breath and focus. Now, breathe. Concentrate on nothing but the breath. The wind in your chest. The life in you.”

“And relax.” He pushed against her, nearly folding her forward as she jabbed him with her elbow in response.

“None of that. You’re stiff as a board. Relax, and breathe. Try to match my inhale with yours. Make it slow, and steady.”

“Breathe.”

It took her a few minutes, but she finally attained some semblance of an even cadence. A regular
rhythm that grew as familiar as her own pulse, beating steadily as she breathed against him. Every inward drawn breath, held for the space of thirty seconds or more, then released into a steady stream of air...she matched him. Until Nemain loosened into a sort of trance. An easy peace, a calm that washed through her. Bringing an ease to the effort, until she realized that her back was now fully flush against his. Her legs were parted, slack upon the ground...her head leaned back against his upper shoulders.

She could see the stars. The constellations of the sky, familiar as a lullaby. She could fall asleep, right then and there.

He shifted against her. “Well done.”

Reluctantly, she pulled up her sleeves over her arms. Not quite willing to relinquish the serenity she had felt. “I felt it. The breath and focus, I mean.”

“Yes.” He had replaced his shirt while she was lacing her bodice up tight, his face still turned up to the sky in solemn contemplation. Standing shakily, her legs felt weak as a newborn calf as she balanced. Trying not to yawn, as the giant Nord turned to face her, his face closing in on itself once more.

“We’ll try again tomorrow. See if you can Shout further, pushing the frost to an even greater distance. Good practice.”

Giving in to a yawn, Nemain gave voice to the thought that had rattled in her head ever since that afternoon. When the dragon had fallen to sword and spell, and her world had been irrevocably altered by the queer, foreign feeling of a dragon soul. Staining her deep inside, where she hadn’t been sure anything remained that was unblemished. “Why d’ye care, Nord?”

Ulfric shook his head, some of his hair sliding over his shoulder with the movement. His eyes were back to their calculating, cold mien. None of the warmth, the vulnerability that had existed before lingered in them now. “You are the benefit. I have the Dragonborn herself in my hands. I hope to persuade you to join my cause. There is much we could offer one another, with an alliance of powers.”

Of all the… “Bear, you be as fool-stupid as they come. There's nothing ye can say to dissuade me from my purpose.”

He actually smiled at that. A flash of white, brief enough that she hardly believed she had seen it. “Then, go your way. I cannot gag you all the time - you’d be bound to Shout your way out of captivity sooner or later. Stay and try to kill me...for you will fail. Or go home. Return to your precious Reach, and see if a briarheart can teach you to Shout the way I can.”
A flash of longing struck, as the image of Galan smiling scorched through her mind. *Oh Galan...you’d be busting yer gut a'laughing if ye could see me now.*

As though he could sense her indecision, Ulfric continued to speak. Walking towards her, confident and self assured. “I’ve studied under the Greybeards for over a decade at High Hrothgar. I know their methods, their ways of teaching. I could help you.”

“But you must help me in return.”

“You kept your word in Helgen.” He mused aloud, even as she stared at him in a kind of stunned amazement at his forwardness. His assumption of her willingness to go along with this farce. *Who does he think he is?* “I trust you would keep your word, to cease the attempts on my life and do no harm to others if I brought you to Windhelm, to teach you there. What say you?”

Unwilling to tear her eyes away from his, she craned her neck back. The better to look up at him, at his great height above her. *Gods, he was ridiculously tall.* “And so t’would be but my word, keeping you hale and whole while I be in Windhelm?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes. And my word in return, for your safety. You would be an honored guest. No longer a prisoner, but under guesting rights in my Hold. Consider it.”

She longed to refuse him. Just to see his face fall, even the slightest bit. To bring him down from that high horse, that natural arrogance that must have been bred from birth, like mother’s milk. Weaned in nobility; teethed on the sword, to command.

*Oh aye, I’ll learn. I’ll learn everything you know, you old bastard. And then, I’ll use this voice, this power against you. I’ll carve your heart out for Madanach and eat yer pretty eyes, Ulfric Stormcloak, see if I don’t. What of your precious rebellion...your Talos, then?*

“That be acceptable. I give you my word - I will do no harm, to you or yours in Windhelm while you teach me.”

The man huffed a breath. Almost a chuckle. “Good. Let’s be off...I can see Galmar clucking like a hen from here, wondering if you’ve done me in at last.”

“Hah!” Taking three steps to every one of his, Nemain scuffed her shoes against the rocks, nearly tripping until his hand righted her, supporting her elbow. “Trust me, if I’d kilt you, everyone would know it. You’d be screaming like a stuck boar, flailing and rolling about. Sae embarrassing, a grown man shrieking like a babe.”

“Now that, I doubt. I’d never scream.”

“Ye say that like ye know.”

As they neared the fire, she could almost see his lips curl in acknowledgement. “Oh, I do. Now go to sleep, Nemain. We lost a lot of ground today, thanks to that dragon and the hike up to Bonestrewn Crest. And I have a god damned mountain of work to attend to, once we reach Windhelm.”

Watching him, she thought she might never puzzle him out. So strange was this Nord, who was all monk-like patience one moment, then snapping in temper the next. “Nothing changes, y’ken. I blame ya fer everything; all the pain you have brought upon my people. I be a patient hunter. One way or
another, Ulfric, I will seek yer life. This truce willnae last forever.”

She actually jerked in surprise as he patted her on the shoulder, nearly knocking her over with the force of the gesture. His voice was resolute. “You seek my life, Nemain? You should stand in line. Tomorrow.”

Pausing to watch him go, she pressed her lips together in determined stubbornness. *Whatever he meant by that. By the Horned One’s consort, I havenae time for mind games!*

*I will learn what I must learn. Sneak around this bastion of Nord pride and prejudice, seeking out ways to know my enemy.*

*Then, his death will be mine. I willnae allow anyone to steal that from me.*

*Damn his bodging line.*

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Vocabulary:

Krif krin. Pruzah - Fight courageously, good
Krosis - sorrow
Bahlaan hokoron - Worthy enemies
Dovahkiin - Dragonborn

Gaelic translation:

Fear thuaidh - Northman. Funny, that the word ‘fear’ is used in this term. Very like the Vikings, to instill fear even with their name.
The City

Chapter Notes

A lovely Scandinavian ballad by Kati Ran. Contemplative and oh-so pretty

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCJhZ4poZkQ&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&index=2

Gaelic Dictionary

Go fuck yourself - Téigh trasna focáil ort féin (Tay-g tras-nah fuc-al urt fay-n)
Northman - fear thuaidh (far hoo-ig)
Cúl Tóna - arsehole

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Half a truth is often a great lie.”

-Benjamin Franklin

“...Aye, Ulfric. Human sacrifice. But only on special occasions. Like namedays, or solstice celebrations and such.”

Riding upon the horse of the unfortunate Siv, Nemain could see the Jarl glance at her as he rode along beside her, his features taking on thinly veiled revulsion. “So, your people eat the dead? Like the followers of Namira? What foul thing would you hope to gain by such an act?”

“Namira worshippers value the unclean, the despoiled. We be far different. The eating of the dead is just another way to show devotion, and some take to it more than others. It be sacred - an act of love.”

“Really. Love. I find that hard to believe.”

“Aye, love. What better way to keep the one you love alive than by eating their flesh? Taking them in ye, making their bravery, their holiness a part of yer body, yer ever-growin’ life?”

Pulling at the reins to slow her stallion to a slow trot, she sucked at the inside of her cheek. There was a bridge up ahead, and beyond a wall. A smell of salt in the freezing, lip chapping air. The sea!

“Not all partake. And I wouldnae eat just anyone.”

“So...you are a selective cannibal.”
“Aha! Now you be getting it.”

Shaking his head at her, she thought she almost saw him smile. Just the barest flash...she must have imagined it, for suddenly the Jarl was all business. Following suit, she bonelessly slid down the side of the horse as Ulfric dismounted. Feeling her thighs quiver, Nemain furtively rubbed her arse. *Days of riding astride...*cor, give me the power of my own two legs any time.

“Whoa there. Hrengen, take the horses to the stablemaster and help rub them down. Edval, the missives. Galmar. And you as well, come.”

Realizing he was speaking to her, Nemain wrapped her newly cleaned mage robes more tightly around her frame and hurried behind as he took the steps up the bridge two at a time. Crossing what look to be a massive stone platform, wide enough to support two teams of horses and have room to spare.

Gaping at the vast spread of land about them, Nemain was startled to find that Windhelm - strategically built against the mountain, forded by a natural river in front and an ocean bay beside, was beautiful. Covered in snow, it looked pristine in the cold light of late-morning, a rose-pink tinting the clouds that scudded along behind the mountains. Making the whiteness of the expanse glow.

And it looked old. So very ancient, the tall walls rubbed almost smooth from endless years of weathering by wind and snow. “What style be this? It does not look Nordic.”

“It is Atmoran, Reach-witch. It pre-dates the Nords by a few ages. Welcome to the home of all mankind. The first seat of Ysgramor; Harbinger of All.” Galmar strode past her, hailing the guards at the gate with a gruff call to open up.

She realized Ulfric was watching her, his face a studied mask of blankness as she gazed upon the strange stonework with appreciation. *Are those dragon heads? No...eagles. They be eagles!* “It was built to be an impenetrable fortress. A monument to the enduring strength of mankind. After the slaughter at Saarthal, Ysgramor escaped with his sons...bringing war upon the elves for the massacre they had brought in turn. He settled here, the Bringer of Words commanding that a bridge should be built over the White River, so no elf could attempt to sneak over and avenge his kin. A great palace was built that served as a seat of kings for many generations after Ysgramor himself passed on.”

He gave her an arch look, the first real expression since that earlier ghost of a smile. “Your new lodgings, Dragonborn.”

She stared back with an upthrust lip, refusing to seem in any way generous or thankful. “I be here only to learn your Thu’um. Doon be getting any ideas.”

As the gates parted for them with a groaning creak, she found herself being bumped and jostled by the many villagers intent upon reaching the market. Hauling everything from caged chickens to wrapped fur pelts and bundled sheaves of wheat, she stood dumbly in silent surprise.

Only moving when Ulfric nudged her along, her grey eyes flitting about to take it all in as he tugged on her sleeve. Urging her forward, up the stone corridor to the left, narrowly avoiding a woodcutter hauling armfuls of chopped firewood. Tripping against the finery of a sour-faced Imperial woman
who sneered at Nemain...shifting her expression to obsequiously bow when she caught sight of Ulfric. Not that he noticed, as he stormed right past the Imperial. Intent upon his destination.

Strange. For though there were Nords, there were also dark skinned Dunmer. Tending market stalls, calling out in cries to entice buyers to their wares. Milling around the animal holding pens, milking goats and examining shaggy coated cattle with eerie ruby-red eyes. Cooking upon open-air charcoal pits that smoked, sending delicious smells up into the frigid air. Making her mouth water pathetically as she swallowed.

The jazbay incident had hollowed her stomach out, until she feared no amount of food could refill it. She had eaten just about everything the Stormcloaks had handed her with gusto, longingly gazing upon the snowberry bushes they passed on the snow strewn roads north. Yet she had resisted temptation; not daring a repeat of what had occurred in the Rift. *There be not enough linen wraps in the world for another such embarrassment. I’d sooner bend my knee to the Bear than be teased like that again.*

A merchant spilled a barrel of fresh fish into a trough, the briny sea scent intoxicating as she imagined them roasted. No, fried in butter...with frost mirriam and pinches of salt to garnish. Oh, and an entire sweetroll, all to herself. With Black-Briar mead to sup as she dined.

*Hard waybread and dried meat be damned. I be absolutely starving!* Nemain was not sure which she craved more...a warm bath or a freshly cooked meal, as she rolled her shoulder. Trying to relieve the itch from the dirt that had ended up there, somehow, from her long journey. Yet she could almost put the thought of such luxuries as cleanliness and a full stomach from her mind, merely by soaking in the sights.

The People of the Reach lived simply; in hide tents propped up by bone poles that were easily taken down and moved upon a whim. Forsworn preferred to live in nature; in the caves and overhanging arches of hollowed rock that the Et’Ada had already provided for their use. What permanent residences they dwelt in that had not been draugr barrows or old forts were the tall brochs; high stone walled towers claimed by the hagravens and briarhearts when there were no caves to be had.

Nemain remembered being awed by the sight of her first broch, climbing the winding steps and touching the masonry built by Bretons of old with amazement. Peering out the windows of the two storied building with glee, imagining herself soaring upon wings, to glide upon the air currents in free flight.

Seeing Markarth as a youth had opened her eyes to the wideness of the world. Making her aware of how small her existence truly was... how short the lives of men were, as waterfalls carved through the dwarven stonework and immeasurably old bronze pipes steamed and clanked. Still functioning, though the dwemer who had crafted them were long gone; a mystery not even Calcemo had the answer to. Markarth was impressive.

Windhelm...the City of Ysgramor took her breath away.

For the heart of the Stormcloak resistance held far more diversity than she could have imagined. Not
even Markarth could boast such a wide cast of skin tones and commerce, brought in no doubt by the
brisk shipping trade and safe harbor. There were Imperials, with strangely accented voices that rose
and fell as they bartered for better prices, hands waving in frustration. A High Elf, looking bored,
toying with a soul gem at a stall that bore an enchanter’s table... around which other various Mer of
assorted races flocked. Speaking in hushed whispers that betrayed the fluid language she had not
thought to hear in such a place as this. Even an alchemy shop existed here, large and well stocked by
the frequency of the door’s tinkling bell as it opened and shut.

Oh, how she itched to peruse the place! To see if it stood up to the quality of Bothela’s goods at the
Hag’s Cure. And perhaps, she thought as she tightened her hood with a scowl, they would stock a
goodly assortment of cold-resistance potions. Fresh and clean though the air was, scented with salt-
rime and smoke...it was intensely chilling. And she grew tired of the feeling of numbness in her
hands and toes. Of craving heat and warmth that was not her own.

Close by, she could hear the ringing of a hammer upon an anvil. The hissing of a hot blade being
quenched. Familiar sounds. She had heard many of the same kind back in Markarth, scurrying past
the waterfall smithy. The metallic jangling din soothed her, even as she shrunk in on herself at the
overwhelming strangeness. The foreign oddity that was this Windhelm.

“Don’t dawdle. We must drop this by the blacksmith, then I will show you to your rooms.”

*Like I were a fine lady, out for a pleasure stroll at the behest of the Jarl of Windhelm. Oh wait…*
Standing to the side, she flattened against a stone wall as a black haired she-Nord rushed past. Arms
full of leather hides, which she promptly dropped upon spying Ulfric, Galmar and Nemain. “Oh! Oh
my, you’re here! Oengul, he’s here!” Giving the woman a vexed huff, Nemain kicked one of the
rolled leathers out of her way, as Ulfric sighed almost imperceptibly.

“Who, lass? Be out in a second, customer. Just finishing the edge on this blade.”

“Take your time, master smith.” Nemain could tell Ulfric wished anything but that, as he fidgeted
with the cuirass and sword he held, tapping his feet in edgy agitation.

“My Lord! Jarl Ulfric! It’s an honor to see you here, at our humble smithy! Is there anything I can do
for you? Anything at all?” The Nord woman batted her eyes; lips parted slightly as she gazed
adoringly up at the older man.

Mentally snickering at the look of long suffering upon the Bear’s face, Nemain shifted her feet to
stay warm. *Sharpen your spear, milord? Rub your loaf, and make it rise?* Rather than endearing, the
desperate display made her wince in sympathy. Even Galmar cast Nemain a flippant eye-roll, as they
both watched the awkward conversation between Ulfric and the hastily introduced Hermir Strong-
Heart, newest blacksmith apprentice and over-enthusiastic Stormcloak fan, proceed all the way to its
stilted, unsatisfactory end.

“My Jarl. What can I do for you?” Rubbing his soot-stained hands upon the heavy hide of his apron,
the blacksmith Oengul bobbed his head in a no-nonsense greeting. Cutting off Hermir, as she tried to
begin the conversation anew...her face falling in disappointment as Ulfric hurriedly began speaking
with her trainer. Avoiding all eye contact with anyone but the smith, much to Nemain’s bemusement.

*Finally, a weakness I can exploit. This noble bastard was brought up to be polite. Wonder if I can
invite this Hermir to dine at the palace. Get her to probe him with questions about his lack of
companionship. She could tumble him into bed, then be made to spread gossip about his finger-
penis, alleged or no. Now, that would be a worthy use of my time and Illusion spells.*

She only heard the tail-end of the conversation as the Jarl handed over the armor and weapons.
Something-something about loyal family...blah blah...Siv and Gjalund, glorious Sovngarde...blah and honor in death. Foolish Nord sentiment. Holding back a yawn, she stumbled after him as Galmar split from their side with an errant wave. “Wheurgh. Big fan, that woman. I’d bet she would shine your sword for you, ‘Milord Ulfric’...anytime.”

“Don’t be crass, Nemain. The young woman is a loyal vassal. Certainly contributing more to the cause than you, at the moment.”

She would choose to ignore the inference that Nemain was here to be an ally to his precious cause. “No, really. Tis a shame you be refusing to take her up on her offer tae tup yer brains out...unspoken or no. It might dislodge that right massive stick you’ve got shoved up yo-”

He bumped her, not-unintentionally as she swallowed the words she had been about to speak. For they had been ushered through the doors of the Palace of Kings.

And she was suddenly surrounded by blue. Blue curtains flapping in drafts against the stone flagged walls. Horn sconces alight with flickering fire, revealing even more blue carpets that softened the harsh appearance of the dim hall. The stylized bear head of Eastmarch rippled upon banners that hung, placed at even intervals between paintings and woven tapestries.

Art that depicted battle, as she walked past viewing them with fascination. Wars between man and mer, Ysgramor with his mighty axe accompanied by his sons Yngol and Ylgar. Fighting giants, slaying snow elves. Saarthal depicted during the Night of Tears. What might have been Atmora - giants and kings and ships, all stretching on in a wealth of artwork she had never before seen the equal to.

The throne itself seemed hewn from one massive block of granite, almost oversized in its sprawling splendor. If it weren’t so obviously ancient, she would have jested about the corresponding ego that now filled the royal seat. Was this not Ysgramor’s throne, then? Were the Atmorans truly descended from giants, like in the stories and tales?

Somewhere behind her, Ulfric clapped his hands twice. Two elderly Nord women appeared from the hall, their faces withered like dried apples as they looked over Nemain with unblinking stares of hospitality.

Ulfric addressed them in a kindly, if offhanded tone as she bristled at the judgemental stare he levied her way. Starting with her muddy, snow coated boots and rising over the stains in her robes...all the way to the skeever-nest her hair had become, from fighting and riding for days.

“This is Nemain. She is to be treated as a guest, here, for how long is not known yet. Please offer every amenity and comfort within your power. Particularly soap.”

“Mayhap I’ll grow a league’s worth o’ taters in me filthy skirts, just tae cross ye ‘Milord’!” She called out as he strode down the hall, turning left into a room that passed out of her view. Her stomach growled insistently, making one of the elderly women cough.

Fearing the censure their Jarl bore for her would be reflected in the eyes of his serving women, Nemain prepared for belittlement and insults. Yet she was startled to find only merriment. “Well, look at you. Been on the road long, then? Bet you ’ave some tales to tell.”

“Come on uppa the stairs, lass.” The taller, thinner Nord spoke. Peeling off her wrapped hood as Nemain stood helpless, unsure of whether she was being ushered to a stockade or a sauna. “A hot
bath and summat to eat will cheer you right up.”

She moaned at the thought, gladly relinquishing her robe as she scratched at the red woolen dress; nearly stiff with sweat and darker, more vile things.

“Och, that sounds right delightful. Please. Lead the way.”

**********

It had been barely a few weeks. Not even a month, and here she was. Already bored out of her mind.

Lifting her feet from the tub, she took in her wrinkled toes, pruned from their long soak in the hot water. The scented oil Skjora, the tall thin maidservant, had chosen for today’s bath was juniper. Astringent and sour, it gave her a pang of longing for the Reach. For home.

Look a’ you, already accustomed to daily bathing and hot meals like some podgy noblebitch. Soon you’ll be carrying around a wee yapping dog, complaining about your joints and huffing skooma. So sad.

Rising in the bathing tub of dwemer metal, she squeezed out the water from the length of her hair in practiced, sure strokes. Taking a handful of oil, she smoothed down the mass of it...stepping onto the worn hearthrug in front of the fire to grasp her new comb.

Standing naked, she idly dragged the comb through her mane, untangling the locks as she chewed her lower lip. Thinking about needs and wants.

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That first day of arriving, Nemain had done little but bathe, eat and sleep. The serving women had toweled her off, hauling her by the hands to collapse upon the guestroom bed. She had nearly been asleep the moment her head hit the furs, deliciously full from the stew she had wolfed down in the bath while being scrubbed by the older women.

She was entirely unused to being waited on hand and foot. Yet the Nord women stubbornly refused all offers of aid when she asked if there was anything she could do to help. To try to dress herself, or walk down the double staircase to the kitchen for a refill of soup. To ease their burdens as well as her own conscience. Someone else was washing her smalls and shining her shoes! Mending her robes and...and darning socks.

“Oh, no lass! You, an honored guest of the Jarl? You mustn’t lift a finger! Now sit ye here and eat some o’ this fine roast and potatoes I’ve made ye. An there’s more if ye want it - I swear by Mother Kyne, I could snap your collarbone like a chicken, you’re sae scrawny.”
She bore it uncomfortably, plucking at the new gown she wore - the first of many, for she had been ordered a full set of everything from smalls to winter garb - feeling useless as a doll, while the women had combed and braided her hair for her. Winding silver ribbons in, to match the Stormcloak blue-grey of the gown as she looked in the tall, expensive mirror at herself in dismay.

There had been a general outcry among the maids when she had adamantly refused to dine in court wearing the colors of the Hold that night. She would not, could not betray her convictions in such a fashion. Writing, nearly stabbing with a quill that tore holes in the parchment relating her response; Nemain informed Ulfric that she would wear what gowns and colors she wished, or she would come down to dine stark naked. Ulfric, his guests...all the Thanes, housecarls and noble dignitaries...well. They could kiss her nonexistent Forsworn ass.

She had been sent a covered tray of dinner that night, with a gift from Jarl Ulfric. Hesitantly she opened the package that revealed…

-Just a book. A newly copied and bound edition of Hallgerd’s Tale. Along with a note that had one line scribbled upon it. A casually elegant scrawl that bespoke years of exacting tutelage.

>“Perhaps you might find this tale of one whose skill surpassed his wisdom a familiar reflection, witch.”

She read it that night, laughing despite herself as she clutched a bottle of Honningbrew mead. The ludicrous, slightly raunchy tale of the Dunmer who was better at ‘all’ things while wearing cumbersome armor was…unexpected. And charmingly on point.

Well, well. The Bear actually has a sense of humor. Though disappointingly I cannae find much fault in that.

Nemain favored dark, muted tones…and soon, all her dresses bore such elegant colors as blackened sapphire, dusky forest green and charcoal brown. One of the few…aye, many perks of living in a grand palace, you fusty nob. Live it up while you can. You’ll be back to eating crusts and handouts soon enough.

Needs had been satisfied to painful excess by the third day after her arrival. There was only so much decadent food one could eat at once…so many times she could bathe, wash her hair or sleep upon the thick, layered furs of her bed. She had been discouraged from leaving the palace despite her increasingly frequent (and strident) pleas for an audience with the Jarl, to explore the city in the freedom he had promised.

To top it off, Nemain had not been given training of any sort in the Voice. Nothing but a very dog-eared book she had been ordered to study, writing and rewriting the strangely slashed script of the dragons in Nordic text upon a spare length of rolled parchment. Then, when she presented her finished parchment to Ulfric as he stood speaking with his steward, he gave it barely a nod. And ordered her, almost as an afterthought, to do it once more. Backwards...translating the Nordic into Dovahzul.

The bastard. Her fingers ached at the thought of all those lines, recopied painstakingly in ink again.
It hadn’t been until she discovered the court mage’s rooms on the fifth day that any feeling of true interest in her surroundings had been rekindled inside her.

Wuunferth the Unliving was an old, crotchety boor, whose room smelt of alchemy ingredients fair and foul. He wore only black, dragging robes and greeted her in rough dismissal. Not even looking her way, continuing to grind potions as she opened his door with a quick tapping knock.

“Yes, I’m a powerful wizard. No, I won’t put on a magic show for you. Whoever you are. Now begone.”

She liked him immediately. “Good mage, I be but a humble Breton in need of some new reading material. Have you anything on the mighty Schools of Destruction and Illusion, friend?”

“Hmph.” Ceasing his work, the old Nord had turned to her. Scanning her slight frame with the barest pretense of civility, his frowning face deepened as he began to grill her with questions. “Have you read Liminal Bridges? Horrors of Castle Xyr? A Hypothetical Treachery?”

She nodded. “I do be a fan of Master Zurin Arctus, most especially.”

“The Art of War Magic, eh. Well. Seems you do fit in with Ulfric’s court, despite the rumors I’ve heard wagging from loose tongues.”

Easing into the room to get a better eye at the old man’s potions, Nemain graced him with a raised eyebrow. “Where I hail from, such actively flagging tongues get chopped off.” Flicking a finger, she knocked over a soul gem. “And eaten.”

A creaky, coughing laugh greeted her statement, as Wuunferth’s gnarled hand gestured carelessly to his bookshelf, near groaning with volumes. “Fine, fine. Take what you wish, little Breton. Return it, and I won’t be forced to hunt you down and feed your remains to my imps.”

“I do hear they be under the protection of Grelod the Kind down in Riften, now. I feel safer already.”

Soon, Nemain counted daily visits with the court mage as part of her daily routine. Before sunrise, she would wake up. Dress herself (without Skjora or Hatti’s help, thank you very much) and dine either alone in her rooms or at the kitchen. Finish transcribing more of the dreaded Dovahzul dictionary until lunch, in which she would fruitlessly try to hunt down Ulfric to badger him about her training. Her time until dinner was spent in much of the same fashion, writing...always writing, until her hands cramped and she could stand the tedium of memorization no longer.

This often led to Nemain hovering around Wuunferth’s shoulder as he mixed, enchanted and (rarely) spoke to his new shadow. After which she would dine in the main hall. Sometimes in company, when Galmar or Jorlief were present. But most of the time, Nemain was left alone.

And she liked it that way. Never had she been privileged to so much free time devoted to doing nothing. And so many pleasant ways to spend it…
Her days ended by lavishly indulging in a lengthy soak by the fire. A book with some wine or mead, then the blissful relief of slumber in an insect-free bed that did not squeak or creak. To do it all once more the following day.

Occasionally, Wuunferth was prodded from ornery silence to a begrudging speech that paid off powerful dividends for Nemain. For the old mage delighted in dispelling rumors about Windhelm and Eastmarch, much to her fascination. And horror.

“So, you be stating that there be actual laws keeping Argonians from coming through the city gates?”

“Isn’t that what I just said, woman?” The mage hnnmphed, rheumy eyes fixed upon the dagger he was currently enchanting. “Old Hoag was a more tolerant sort. But then, he never had Shadowscale assassins after him as Ulfric has. Two just in the past few months. That and the Dunmer problem have created quite the scandal. I wouldn’t be surprised if next Ulfric bans magic itself, though how he would enforce that law, I’d very much like to see.”

Nemain sucked upon her inner cheek, biting down with her molars until she tasted blood. The Dunmer problem, indeed. She had not set a foot in the city proper, and yet all the staff...or anyone else, really, the guards gossiped readily enough...could whisper about was the issue of what to do about the Grey Quarter of Windhelm.

It had once been known as the Snow Quarter. With the gradual influx of Dunmer refugees fleeing Morrowind since the eruption of the Red Mountain, Windhelm had opened its gates. And now was famous for slamming its doors shut, ever since.

Nemain rather wondered if that wasn’t why the general Nord opinion was either pitying or reproachful towards the Dark Elf population. Their struggles, their inequality seemed real enough. “So, why are Jorleif and the other Thanes not doing something about the troubles these people face? Seems they’d be invested in improving their lot. They be not beastfolk, or troublemakers. Though either seems a stupid reason to promote a ban.”

“Heh. Not outwardly are they bothersome, no. But mark me...not for nothing do the guards of Windhelm refuse to patrol the corridor at night, little Breton.”

“Why shouldnae be they incensed? They live in a ghetto! The Dunmer I’ve spoken to, who’ve come tae plead their cases...like Malthyr Elenil, from the New Gnisis Cornerclub? They say that Ulfric takes nae action tae renovate their streets, or protect their people from bandits an’ cutthroats. Where be the justice in that, old one?”

“Says the Forsworn witch, whose people are legendary for terrorizing the Reach.” Wuunferth rested the newly enchanted dagger upon his cupboard with a sigh. “Nemain. You have not walked the streets. Spoken with the people too occupied in actually working to complain. All your whinging is based upon hearsay. Just gossip.”

“Hold your judgements - and your tongue, until you’ve seen with your own two eyes what there is to see.”

Oh, she planned to. Repeatedly over that first week that merged into two, then three...the elderly maids had returned with no new message. No summons to train in the Thu’um, or allowance to leave the palace. Just the same tidings; that Nemain was to wait at the Jarl’s behest.
He would attend to what she wanted done, the women reassured Nemain. Eventually.

It made her restless. Ill tempered, as she wandered the aged halls of the Palace of Kings, seeking for something to do that didn't bring to mind the slovenly excesses of a fat, pampered bint. Something, anything that would relieve her despair at being bone-idle but for the eternal writing.

And so, she told herself that night as she dressed in her darkest clothing, casting invisibility like a shroud...she wouldn't wait anymore. Who dared to say she needed a man’s permission (like a child, what had she been a’tinking?) to scud about the streets? See what there was to see.

It was the work of but a moment, to slip out of an opened door as the guards changed places during their rounds. Easier still to walk about the marketplace in secrecy. To sample the sights and sounds of the Valunstrad, the Grey Quarter and the Stone Quarter, and draw her own judgements as Wuunferth recommended.

It couldn’t be that unsafe.

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“Are all the people in this city very addled by skooma?” The Forsworn witch demanded as she broke into his quarters unannounced.

Quelling the urge to Shout the intruder into the wall, Ulfric counted to ten. Then calmly responded, as he continued removing his tunic. “That depends on whom you speak of.”

He had been prepared to lie down in his bed, and like every other night stare at the ceiling until his wretched insomnia forced him out once more. Dreams were darker than ever, of late. And the Jarl of Windhelm did not hold favor with inactivity and waste. Not even when struggling to sleep.

Turning, he stepped down the tiered stairs of his bed to watch the tiny woman prattle on, disguising his amusement behind the oft-useful blank mask he wore in court. Contrary and spiteful to the end. This one would reap the consequences of her decision to not follow his orders.

“...and then they tried to mug me! Och, and after all I had heard about the Gray Quarter, listening with a bottle of sujamma to their gammy plight...that Revyn Sadri slipped his eejit fingers into my robes. I nearly snapped them off.”

“You don’t say.”

She fixed him with a furious, grey eyed glare. “Oh no. You get to hear all of it. Don’t even think of trying to make an’ escape now!”

“Just reassuring Yrsarald that you aren’t an assassin, Reachwoman.” Opening the door, he noted the red-bearded man’s frustrated look with a tired nod. “It’s nothing. The witch was introduced to the
finer citizens of Windhelm tonight. Go back to sleep.”

“*Finer* citizens, aye. Like the ones outside in their Assemblage. I struck up conversation with Shahvee, and she be all sweetness and light! But then the old-lizard hit me over the head and - argh! Went through my robes and my person with his scaly digits. Gods take him and eat him raw.”

Pouring some wine for them both, Ulfric rubbed his eyes. “Tell me you didn’t kill him.”

“T’would be no less than he deserved. They were speaking of ‘feeding me to the fish.’ Rotty bastards. Not my business if he cannae handle being zapped.” The woman’s rolling brogue, while softened and clipped with the flatter accent of Markarth, had become more fully pronounced when she was upset.

*Shor’s bones. I have no time for this.* “Nemain. Go to bed. I have work to do in the morning."

“No!” He nearly stepped backwards as she poked his chest with a finger. “You be awake, and gods know I can’t get ahold of you during the day. So you listen now, and you listen good.”

Her fingers crackled with electricity. Watching her warily, as she pushed him closer to his desk, Ulfric mentally tallied all the weapons he had stashed around his rooms. Deciding in a matter of seconds which would be closest to hand, should she break their strange truce and attack. “I’m all ears.”

She actually hissed at him. The folds of her green dress swirled around her legs, as the Reach-witch gestured frantically to the air. “Oh, grand! *Now* you be all ears! I have copied that cursed book front to back two times now, Ulfric! You sorely test my patience. Where be the lessons in the Voice you had promised? The training that only *you*…” the woman sneered, causing him to lean back as she wrapped a slight hand around his throat “…can provide to me?”

*A fair point.* He had been busy. “Let. Go. Now.”

She popped out her hip. “Doona think so. Tell me, Bear. When were you going to let me down soft? Reveal your ineptitude?”

He gritted his teeth even as her face became sly. The hand that was still hot from handling ozone squeezed, just the slightest bit. “Be that why you don’t give that smith-girl, that Hermir the time of day? Because you’re too scairt to give it a lash?”

*No.* He would *not* pull the dagger he had eased out from his boot and stab the bitch. She was too useful. *Dragonborn*, he thought with an unexpected twinge of envy. A feeling he promptly buried, as he focused all his attentions to the woman currently digging her fingers into his beard.

“Afraid of the grand folk of Windhelm finding out you’ve nothing in your pants but hot air an’ honor? You’ve completely banjaxed this place with...with your bans and racist-arse handling! No one in this city be happy, fear thuaidh. Not Nord, or Dunmer...or even I’d wager the fecking fish. And it be all on your head!”

Meeting her challenging gaze with a cold stare of his own, Ulfric carefully reached out and slid a volume on his desk closer to Nemain. *More a pamphlet, really.* He had read it so many times he
nearly had the damn thing memorized.

She wouldn’t listen. She wouldn’t let him talk. And if he tried to rip her hand off his throat, he wasn’t entirely sure he wouldn’t throw her against the wall.

“Here. Read this, and tell me what you think.”

The hand that smelt oddly of juniper oil wavered, as she slowly leaned over to look at his copy of ‘Dunmer of Skyrim.’

Looking down, her head jerked back to face him. Those sharp gray eyes were glazed, bloodshot. “Fine.”

She pushed him suddenly. Nearly causing him to fall over in his chair, as the wooden legs screeched against the stone. Her fingers fairly flew as she flipped through the seminal work of Athal Sarys. He rubbed his throat, massaging it with his fingers as she spoke.

“...let all who read it know that Nords are not the only race to reside in this cold and inhospitable realm. For we dark elves have come, and little by little, shall claim Skyrim as our own…”

Allowing himself only the smallest of movements so as not to provoke the madwoman, Ulfric took a sip of his wine. And took the opportunity while she read to observe the changes wrought in her, since she had become a guest in the Palace of Kings these past few weeks.

Her skin fairly glowed. The dark hair swinging against the dusk-green skirt of her gown was shining and free of knots and tangles. There were roses in her cheeks, where before had been nothing but hollow hunger.

And that damn dress left nothing to the imagination, outlining every curve. Regular meals and sleep had filled in what he had previously deemed a rather boyish figure. And her breasts...those swollen, newly plumped breasts fully recovered from starvation were practically falling out of that drab black bodice.

That damned heat of the blood. Fucking useless. He felt himself growing hard. Looking away from the woman, Ulfric focused his gaze upon the light of the stars that streamed through his windows. Taking deep, steady breaths while he ignored her as best he could.

Continuing to read, she leaned over the desk, allowing what cleavage she possessed to come front and center. Resting the book against the flat surface, her mouth turned down in a perplexed frown.

“...‘You may call this province home, but you can no sooner claim to own it than a cow can claim to own its master's field. You are just another breed of domestic animal, grazing stupidly while higher beings plot your slaughter.’ What, Bear? Just because one ungrateful fetcher wrote a book doesn’t mean you can piss on all the rest.”

Choosing not to answer at that precise moment, the Jarl realized that she was fairly weaving on her
feet, as he pulled the book from her hands. Her breath washed over him; a reek of spice and vomit.

“How much did you have to drink at the cornerclub Nemain?”

Like an owl caught in daylight, she blinked. Stumbling over her own boots. “Erm...two, maybe three sujamma? Think I’m fair fluttered.”

“Right. Well, this conversation can wait until the morrow. Go to bed, Nemain.”

She made a sound. More like a squeak, really. “You’ll jus’ hide in your war room, like you always do.”

Gripping her arm, he propelled her towards the door. Opened it, waiting for one of the palace servants to come as he knocked upon the door. “I give you my word that I will begin training you tomorrow night.”

“You had better. Else, all bets be off.” She fell against him, her mouth opening and closing as she made a face.

“Graw. Think I need...I need…”

Damn it, no no no... No sooner than he had picked up her slight form than she began to throw up, vomiting over and over. Spattering his feet with a foul mixture of sujamma, stew and other substances he could not even begin to identify.

Straining to pull his head back, he tried not to breathe in the stench. Gods. What a night. As he wrapped her long coil of hair around his wrist, to keep it from dipping into the sick, Ulfric called out. “Anyone? Is there anyone awake who has full use of a bucket and mop?”

“Here, milord. Ah, there she is.” Hatti, her crinkled face awash in worry, showed up from the gloom. Taking the edge of her apron, she began patting Nemain’s face as the Forsworn moaned piteously. “Oh, no you dearie. What have you done. Tch tch. I’ll get her to bed, my Jarl, with nary a fuss. Come along.”

“I’m glad I puked on your boots, you butcher! Bear of Markarth! You cast nothing but rot and ruin on all you touch!” The woman managed to stammer out, even as Hatti gently but firmly pulled her along. “You deserve it! You deserve it all! Téigh trasna focáil ort féin, an’ leave that Hermir out o’ it, you rat-bastard!”

Standing there with her vomit oozing down the legs of his pants, Ulfric watched her in silence as she was dragged away by the indefatigable Hatti.

No excuse. No retort he could make, that would not stick in his craw, painful and proud even now that he had decades to consider all the alternate courses of action. All the ways that Ulfric could have prevented what was now known as ‘the Incident.’

Such a simple, benign name for a complex problem.
He remembered, unwillingly, the bloody events of the incident at Markarth. The aftermath, as the rage of Jarl Hrolfdir tore through the city that had been retaken from the Reachmen. Casting a pall of dissatisfaction over what should have been a glorious victory.

There was little glory to be had in war...a harsh truth he had found out too late. Ulfric had joined the legion as a stripling youth; abandoning study of the Thu’um with a fire in his heart; to free his people from the rule of elves. Like in the stories and songs. Like Ysgramor, who had attained a near godlike status to the young Greybeard as he voraciously read all there was to be had upon the Atmoran leader.

To win the praise of men in battle, to earn valor by deed. To carve out a place for himself that did not exist in the cold, empty reaches of High Hrothgar; where the only voice that spoke often was his and his alone.

Kyne’s mercy, he had been so young. Young and naive, to think that the ragtag militia he had raised would liberate Markarth, and take no thought of looting, or raping the populace they had conquered. Foolish, to think that the old Jarl’s anger would be eased by the deaths of Madanach’s council. By the death of the Witch King of the Reach himself. Though it rubbed raw, still, to know he had been lied to. That the execution had never truly happened.

Idly he wondered if the Ragged One had received his missive in Cidna Mine yet. The distance was not so far that a courier on horse would be unable to deliver it and return by now, barring attack on the road or some disaster born of weather or chance. He could only wait. Wait and pray for his gamble to pay off, or not. To receive confirmation from the ReachKing that the spiky, obstreperous woman he had provided guesting rights to was, in fact, his long lost daughter.

It could change everything...if the Reachfolk treat hostages in their family clans as we Nords do. I do not care to think about the other alternative. Not yet.

They had killed the Reachmen cleanly, he remembered, in that first wave of attack. His Thu’um had battered down the walls surrounding the gate. He had Shouted until his throat was sore; the old rocks crumbling like twigs of dry tinder at last, as his men had poured into the city. Flooding like a poisoned tide over the defenders who stood ready within the walls.

Unlike some of the more ridiculous tales passed along, Ulfric knew he had not breached the city alone. He had been aided by the battering rams hoisted high by Nord warriors...the walls had been weakened, fairly blasted by the incendiary devices of the Hammerfell Alik’r who had thrown in their lot with his.

Not for Talos, he thought sourly as he selected a new pair of trousers. But for gold.

Gold and blood, sex and death. What had come after that first victory was anything but honorable.

Citizens sentenced to immediate slaughter, for no crime other than they had lived during the occupation of Markarth beneath Madanach’s fair rule. Women and children, herded into stone keeps to be interrogated under guard. Questioned, by Hrolfdir’s men, as Ulfric celebrated with the other Nords the great triumph in Talos’s name.

So unaware. Blithely happy in the knowledge that he had secured at least one city free from the
White-Gold Concordat. It had been only later, when he had seen. Had gazed in horror upon the small bodies, the bare breasted women young and old, their thighs leaking...nakedly strung up in trees and stuck upon pikes, that he knew just how far his ally had gone to secure satisfaction. The images bracketed his nights in horrors, still. Waking him in a cold sweat as those women pulled themselves off the hanging tree, their decomposing flesh sliding from putrid limbs as they reached for him. All with Nemain’s ghost grey eyes, judging. Finding Ulfric utterly wanting, as they pierced his very soul.

_I chose not to think upon it_, he reflected as he pulled off his pants. _For my own mental soundness, as well as for Eastmarch_. Still recovering from his injuries sustained beneath the Thalmor in the Imperial City, Ulfric had shuttered the wrongness of it out from his mind. Had made the decision to focus upon the victory, and not the deadfall of a coup gone so dark. Leaving him now only with a bitter sense of irony, as the Empire defaulted upon their word not a year later.

The Imperials had thrown him back into prison. Praying the Thalmor would look the other way, only to be routed...taking away what free worship had been enabled by that day. That battle that had so altered his life; causing Markarth’s formerly silver waters to flow darkly.

Cleaning himself up with a pitcher of water and a rag, his memories continued to flash. Like lightning, abrupt. Shocking; gracing his mind’s eye with the mingling blood of Bretons and Nords alike, _both so red_. The stench of death the same, no matter what colors the bodies burned wore as they were heaped upon the pyres. _A child’s doll, black feathered hair ground grey dun in the dirt, pounded underfoot by armored boots. The young owner bereft_. Most likely moldering in the mass graves he had helped to dig, the sight (and smell) forever carried with him still.

All those garbled invectives the small woman cursed him with. Every insult, every ounce of blame rested upon his shoulders, a heavy weight. Not his alone to bear, but not sparing him either.

His actions had fueled the creation of the Forsworn. Unleashing in a steady stream of retaliation...attacks of terror that continued to this day. Twenty five long years of it.

_Your own fucking fault, for not staying in High Hrothgar where you belonged._

He would make it right. He had to.

Forcing himself to calm down, to breathe - Ulfric laid himself down upon his bed. And stared sightlessly up at the stars, winking through the glass paned windows from above.

_Cúl Tóna! Fear thuaidh!_

_You murderous bastard! I’ll be carving out your heart with my bare hands!_
Sleep, when it came, haunted him. A sneer on her lip, and cruel vengeance in her eye.

Chapter End Notes

Here is the full story Ulfric sent Nemain. Friggin hilarious.
http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Hallgerd%27s_Tale

Peanut Brittle's Abridged Version of Ulfric's Angst:

The issues surrounding the civil war are not at all easy to tease out. My last fic dealt with a more Imperial point of view. Figured I'd give the Stormcloaks equal treatment in this story.

So, Ulfric has been imprisoned twice at this point. Not counting Helgen, which was barely a blip. It is hinted that he was tortured by the Thalmor, his noble status as a Jarls son keeping him alive. Elenwen led him to believe that information he gave up during said torture was crucial to the downfall of the Imperial City - even though the Empire's capital had already fallen before he was put to the test.

Basically, that Thalmor bitch tormented him with wrongful guilt, as well as spells and whatever shit she could come up with...for no reason other than it probably made her little sadist heart sing. So, so sad. Ulfric was then allowed to escape (and mind you, this is all Elder Scroll lore, not anything dreamed up by yours truly) to flee back to Skyrim.

The Great War ends, with the White-Gold Concordat brokering an uneasy peace between the Aldmeri Dominion and everyone else (except for Hammerfell, who is doing its own thing and hates everyone else for giving in).

Jarl Hrolfdir asks for help, since Markarth was snatched from him by Madanach and the Reachmen. It is implied that the Empire is also behind the Jarl's offer to allow free worship of Talos in the Reach, if it is won back. Much good it does Ulfric later on, when they renege their agreement and toss him in jail.

The Incident of Markarth happens. Depending on which side you read, it was either a glorious victory or a horrible slaughter. Probably somewhere in between. It is unknown whether Hrolfdir or Ulfric commanded the slaughter of everyone who supported Madanach and fought against the Nords. One books says no, it was all Hrolfdir. Another says it was Ulfric. Pshh. I don't know. Ulfric was damn young then...he probably wasn't quite that bloodthirsty. Yet.

Then, the Thalmor find out. Naughty Nords - I get the feeling that Jarl Hrolfdir and the Empire kind of hoped the elves wouldn't find out. But they did - causing the Empire to toss Ulfric in the clink once more. His daddy Hoag dies while he is in prison; forcing him to deliver a eulogy by letter.

Ulfric heads home, bitterly disillusioned by this whole experience. Finding everyone feeling similarly cranked in Windhelm, as he takes on the responsibility of Jarl of Eastmarch (something, mind you, he was never fully prepared to take on since it is also implied Ulfric was meant for the Greybeards of High Hrothgar.)
Whammo! Stormcloak Rebellion. He challenges Torygg to a duel, using the Thu'um (though he mentions it was his sword that killed the King) because principles, and now the Bear has been fighting an uphill battle against everyone ever since.

Damn, but he's got some serious determination. I probably would have drowned myself in mead and pussy, if I were him. Licking my wounds and hating the elves from afar.

But I'm not. So yay for the Stormcloaks.

Also, more in future chapters as to the clusterfuck that is Windhelm's rule of law. It's kind of squirrely, and I have some ideas that address it coming up.

As always, read and review. If I have any bloopers involving the time line, let me know. If you don't like the way I write Ulfie-poo, let me know.

Comment away!
The Words

The slashed letters in Dovahzul and Norse mocked her. *Fo Krahn Diin*. The letters that he had drawn by finger in the snowdrift were softening...the depressions filling in with in the freshly falling snow. Blurring the lines. Obscuring the meaning.

“Clearly, you are capable of wielding the Voice. Now...make me believe it.”

His voice rumbled, shaking right through her. Like she was hardly flesh at all. “...*FUS!*”

Picking herself up from where she had fallen, Nemain stood upon trembling legs. The roof balcony where they had been practicing for weeks was frozen over; her boots scrabbling on the slick surface as she retreated; Ulfric advancing upon her with quick, pounding strides.

His eyes were twin burning coals of blue. “Stand your ground. Stop me, Nemain.”

“*Speak.*”

***********

The butcher had kept his word.

Every night since her drunken escapade that had led to her vomiting all over the Jarl of Eastmarch, Nemain had been brought up to the roof above his quarters, to train in the Way of the Voice.

She was a Priestess of the Coven of Deepwood Redoubt. Or she had been. A shaman of the People of the Reach. Her schooling in the oral traditions of the folk had been grueling. Years of rote memorization; tending the sacred groves and picking and grinding plants into potions and poisons. Learning all there was to learn at the feet of Máthair. All the histories and tales...stories of the Gods, the Et’Ada.

Nemain had learned to scry into bowls of water, to dance naked around the withy tree and bonfire flame. How to cast the sacred bones, to foretell portents. How to pray for storms; the exact incantation to release rain from pregnant clouds. Before she had been banished, the shaman had been studying the exacting art of divining the future through the entrails of the sacrificed.

A gory, thankless task, as often the hagravens would descend messily upon the corpse once she had finished. Gobbling, cawing and devouring the victim (often still alive) in a frenzy of greed, as she was forced to stay crouched low. Bowing before the handmaids of Hircine, even as they splattered her with blood. Praying they would not focus their cruel attentions upon her. *Such grievous errors had happened before.*

But she had been proud. Honored to be keeper of the knowledge. Shaman, wisewoman, healer. Hard as it had been, Nemain had derived a sense of satisfaction from her place. Had felt valued; important. Beloved by Galan, by her mother and aunt and the Reachfolk of Deepwood Redoubt that
depended on her craft.

The sudden ending of that life had cast her off, adrift like a leaf in the current. Floating aimlessly until she ended up here, at the frozen end of the world. Trapped with the Nord whose heart she had been directed to carve out, yet could not. Not yet.

Words were binding - even common, everyday words. A shaman was the bridge between the spirits and man, and so her vows...her words spoken in trust were absolute.

She would not bow. She would not break under this truce she had foolishly made...this tutelage that was a ruthless undertaking. Sharp and hard and cold, just like him.

All that time studying the shaman’s path...there had never been anything like this! Nemain panicked as she dodged one of Ulfric’s swiping punches on the roof. The stars were a mute canopy above, the only witness to her will as she weaved behind him; sliding nearly to the roof’s edge, as she Shouted. Hoarsely screamed the Thu’um that would freeze him in his tracks, Fo Krah Diin, as a howling blast of blizzard force wind erupted from her. Successfully freezing those tree-trunk legs.

The Bear turned, pinwheeling his arms to prevent himself from falling over. He was stuck tight, his lower half encased by a river of ice.

“Hah!” An exultant shout ripped from her throat, as she danced as nimbly as one could on a frozen roof. “Got you, Bear! Aye, got you fair and square you great lump! Drinks for me!”

Frost crackled and snapped, as the ice holding Ulfric’s legs broke. Causing the man to crash face down, as he caught himself just in time; hands keeping his head from bashing against the stone. His scarred face twitched, in that almost-smile she was drawing out of him more often.

“Aye, drinks for you.” Ulfric sighed, his head falling flat as she tapped him on the arse with her foot, a bit harder than was necessary. Muffled by the snow, his voice rose up in a cautionary tone.

“Budh noo Shryodlic bryndee. Ay’eed it furr Gahmaar.”

“Damn.” She stopped dancing and turned to sit on him, causing the man to grunt once more. “I love Cyrodiilic brandy.”

Lifting his head out of the snow, Ulfric spat out a mouthful. Swatting at her, as she began to drop handfuls of snow in trickling piles upon his back. “So does my second in command. Now, get off.”

“You’d think there’d be enough spirits in your great hall for the two of us, fear thuaidh. Perhaps this once, Galmar might go dry, hmm?”

“For someone so small, you manage to be vastly irritating. Move.”

***********

By day, the Forsworn studied books and scrolls, developing an easy camaraderie with the maids Hatti and Skjora, even reaching a point with Wuunferth in which the Nord Mage would deign to speak a few sentences upon seeing her passing in the halls or at meals. The hours when weak sunlight streamed through the windows wound into a steady, predictable pattern of study...reading Dovahzul and spellbooks, occasionally venturing into the Stone Quarter for some fresh air.
Despite her rocky introduction, Nemain gradually grew comfortable enough to chat with the wary denizens of Windhelm. She brewed potions at the White Phial, ventured to the New Gnisis Cornerclub for more of that addictively mind-bending sujamma when Candlehearth Hall was overcrowded with sweaty, rough Nords…

She even spent a memorable weekend learning to thresh winter wheat and pick snowberries at Belyn Hlaalu’s farm. While the Dunmer owner was a dismissive, heavy handed sort, Adisla his farmhand bore her no ill will. The elderly Nord woman was more than happy to teach the Forsworn the ins and outs of tilling the permafrost. How to harvest the roots of mountain flowers in an untorn bundle; to dry and chop for tea that once steeped eased pain and brought restful sleep. The right way to milk a cow, which though simple was far harder than Nemain had imagined; earning her a few kicks from the otherwise placid beast.

She returned to the Palace of Kings afterwards, hands chapped and blistered, but feeling strangely lighter than she had in the days previously spent mewed up indoors.

***********

The days were idyllic. Restful. But by night, as she tapped upon the Jarl’s bedroom door and was ushered in silence to the roof, she waged war.

The simple breathing patterns they had focused on so long ago near the Rift had been mere child’s play. As the nights wound onward, her instructor advanced the simple meditations into far more strenuous practices.

She began to long for the simplicity of breathing back to back, for the other positions that taught the Breath required face to face contact. Sitting cross-legged upon the Bear’s huge bed, she had watched in unease as he lit a candle in the sconce between them, then reached for her hands. Placing his fingertips against hers, scolding her as she held her breath. Apparently unaware of just how damn uncomfortable she was at this contact...any contact, really with him.

Feeling the calluses of his hands press against hers, Nemain fought down her instinctive reaction to shy away, and struggled to concentrate. To blow upon the flame in one long, steady stream...inhaling for the same, gaspingly long period as Ulfric took his turn, to show her how it was done.

Pull, push... like the tides that followed the moon, Nemain thought. Though her People had little in the way of sea-knowledge, they bore a deep respect for the moons. For the far-reaching influence of the Trickster Lorkhaj was felt everywhere.

And Ulfric had actually smiled to hear her voice such belief, one night as she broke the silence they worked in. Giving in to the longing to speak, to give utterance to things she wasn’t sure anyone else here would quite understand...feeling a trickle of scorn for herself, even as she spoke. You utter nitwit. Seeking fellowship...understanding with one whom she could never bear any kin-feeling with. That was poppycock. And she didn’t understand it; any more than he seemed to grasp her motivations.

Pushing, pulling. He was the unstoppable force; she the immovable wall. It did not help that he was so damn unflappable about the situation.

As though they weren’t mortal enemies, kept from bloodshed by the thin thread of civility and a
promise.

There was a curl of traitorous heat that flashed, lightning quick in her belly when she told him about the Et’Ada Lorkhaj, God of Moons. Pooling, unwanted desire, rising at the flash of white teeth; bared in a grin that for once held no disdain or fury, as he in turn told her that the Nords knew of Lorkhaj as well. Knew him as the Allfather, Shor the Blessed.

Staring back at him in surprise, at herself as much as him...she forced her lips into a snarl and pushed him with her breath. Blowing hard with the power of the Thu’um in her voice until he fell over, and the battle that had paused - just for the slightest of moments - began anew.

Finding they had common ground was troubling. It was another week and a half before she chose to speak about anything besides training again. Seeing her nemesis bear some trace of humanity, of emotion that she could relate to was a disturbing thought. So she repressed it.

And continued to learn. Seeking to know her enemy, as day and night brought winter. Weeks turning into months... the sky lit auroras dancing over the glacier studded seas as time tread onwards.

*We be nothing alike, fear thuaidh. I will never give up. Show me everything you know, and I will turn it against you. Feed you my pain, as I find yours.*

*Your weakness. Show me your failings, fear thuaidh, and I will show you your fears come to life.*

*No. We be nothing alike at all.*

*********

After control of the inhale and exhale came breathholding exercises. The most memorable of which involved them both submerging themselves in the icy waters of the bay.

The first plunge had felt like dying. A shattering jolt to the system; the light of moons and stars their only guide as they sank deep into the sea. Opening her eyes as wide as they could go, stinging from the saltwater, Nemain could dimly see his pale hair float above him. Trailing like spider silk or seaweed as he held her gaze underwater. Challenging her with those icy eyes that set her to task.

*Arrogant fool. I’ll show you!* Stiffening her resolve to remain under as long as possible, Nemain pressed her lips tightly together. Continuing to hold her breath, as her heartbeat beat a rapid tattoo in her ears. Seconds ticked by, as they stared at one another, both clinging to slick algae covered rocks at the bottom. Curious salmon swam around her, the current of their passage swirling her hair in the waters until she could see nothing.

Oh, it burned ... her chest ached, nearly caving in from the lack of air. A full two minutes now, of no breath but what was held in her lungs.

*Not that he seemed affected.* Glaring at him as he smiled at her in superiority, small bubbles escaping from his lips, Nemain felt her head spin. *Air. Need air. To breathe. Gods!* Defiantly, she blew a large bubble at him, which he swatted away; their movements slow and dreamlike from the weight of the
The cold had invaded her very bones by then. She could feel nothing; the velvety plant life her toes had scrunched themselves in no longer registering as real, in the numbness that had taken over.

She bit her lip and tasted salt. The muck of briny plantlife. *Cold. Dark. Trapped! Can’t breathe, can’t feel...nonono*

-And could stand it no longer. With a wail of fury at losing to him, she pushed with her feet; shooting out of the sea like a bat from a cave.

It had taken a fire that could roast an ox, with several bowls of hot soup and a promise from him to find some other means to train her lung capacity, before she would stop shivering in combined fear and frostbite.

Reluctantly grateful that she would not be forced to endure the cold of the sea again, Nemain still glared as the man put forth her choices in uncompromising terms. “Do not become complacent. This is the way I learned. And this is how I will train you. If you do not seek the Way, then you might as well give up now, witch.”

Nemain had flicked her fingers at him; sending the slightest tingle of electricity to stand the Nord’s blonde hair on end. And had smiled proudly as he cursed, patting his head and getting zapped in the process.

“As ye say, ‘Milord’.”

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

The Bear was capable of kindness in his own way...though she was loath to admit it. Polite, distant and exacting he was, as he taught her the Greybeard’s teachings. Patient, even as she failed...over and over again at the tests, the somnolent stretches of meditations that her teacher rigorously required. For a skill that involved such intense verbal jousting, Nemain was often fluxed by how how little speech was often involved in lessons. And the way he sneered upon redirecting a failed Shout, or adjusted her position during meditation...

That, more than anything, spurred her on. She refused - would never give him the satisfaction of besting her. Even in something as simple as blowing a feather into the air, straining to control its path through the twists and turns of the playful winds. Controlling the sky with her Thu’um held in her breath alone, such as it was. That had been almost...fun. Not that she would tell the bastard that.

And every night that passed prompted more familiarity with one another, lessening the silence. Building the power that came from the will.

The Thu’um was the Voice, he often stressed; the union of the teeth and the tongue to create the impact upon Kynareth’s domain. Slowly, diligently she learned how to channel the raw energy of it...finding she was actually looked forward to her nights spent in the strange silence of breathing. Broken only by spare words and chiding instruction...the thrice-damned thrill of anticipation, as every random touch and brush of her against him stood her hairs on end.

It had been months since she had left Moth gro-Bagol’s bed, random as those encounters had been. So long since she had touched anyone, or been touched but for the motherly caresses of Hatti and
Skjora, when they insisted upon scrubbing her back. And her body knew it, vexing her with unwanted feelings...dreams that caused her to awaken in hot sweats. A torment that she was forced to channel in less-than-mature ways, for a grown woman.

She began picking fights. Nemain was a poor hand at fisticuffs; leaving taverns with black eyes that she snarled at Ulfric for, when he casually remarked upon her bruises.

And the friction that had defined the first few weeks evolved into more convoluted banter, as she trapped Ulfric into arguments that nearly threw visible sparks as often as she could. The Dunmer problem, Imperial tax laws, the rising costs of produce...they discussed it all, to the amusement of Wuunferth and the dismay of Galmar.

After an explosive showdown that had nearly ended up with healing potions and stitches for both of them, Nemain and Ulfric entered into an unspoken agreement that the topic of the Markarth Incident was off the table. But all else seemed to be fair game.

Bored with rereading the same books, over and over...and unwilling to batter her face in the name of pugilism, Nemain would wait to catch Ulfric in between cloistered meetings with his generals. Sitting in on the man’s training sessions with his Thanes and warriors as she waited impatiently, bobbing her foot as she sat, to continue their debate of the day.

She’d had to remind herself that she certainly was not impressed by the barbaric display of a roomful of Nords sparring. No matter how impressive most of them were, all stolid muscle and mass...wielding rune-carved axes and blades near as heavy as she was. Nemain had seen similar bravado on her visits to Mor Khazgur with Moth gro-Bagol. And the orcs at that stronghold had been just as stacked with strength, if not quite so hairy. Pssh. Cock-brained idjits.

She merely rolled her eyes as the weeks went on, and the men began hailing her as their good luck charm. One thing was certain….the fighters were spurred to greater heights of idiotic machismo due to the presence of a female among them. She’d been called upon to heal small slices and cuts often earned directly after boasting. Whether she was hindering or improving the Stormcloak warrior’s forms, Nemain couldn’t say. Nord warfare did not involve much spellcasting.

Only their Jarl seemed to care little that she bided her time in the training hall. For he was single minded in this, as in all else; laying about with his sword and shield during practice until he stood alone. Surrounded by the breathless, beaten down opponents who yielded as he raised his sword in open threat.

Only then would the canny bastard spare her a joyless grin, acknowledging her presence there. Another challenge laid down and conquered. A non verbal show of force meant to cow her into submission.

Like that would work. I have eaten men like you for breakfast. Though usually they be scrawnier specimens.

But as winter wended on, Ulfric was rarely seen outside of his war room. There he spent most of the daylight hours closeted with Galmar and that red-bearded giant of a commander whose name she could never pronounce. Couriers raced from the enclosed space, back and forth several times a day. Often she spied other bearpelt clad commanders that entered the palace, smelling of snow and sweat as they reported in. Always in a rush, brushing past her without so much as a glance.

The sight of the Forsworn witch in the palace and walking the streets had become near
commonplace, thank the Gods, as no one stared at her like she had a foot growing from her forehead anymore. Though she still overheard whispers of conversation that were quite telling.

“-‘ve heard she’s a Forsworn, from far west. Where the bonemen kill children an’ feed em’ to the witches. Do you think Reachfolk actually eat other men?”

“Stuff and nonsense. Those are mere fireside tales. Stop dawdling!”

“What’s she doing at the palace? A new advisor in the war? Stormcloaks need all the help we can get, even from her sort.”

“Shor’s bones. Another mage. Divines take her and the court mage both, straight to Oblivion.”

Fuck ‘em. Nemain thought viciously as she walked the streets, head held high. Fuck Viola, Tova, Niranya and anyone else who had shite to say about her stay at the palace.

She felt more real; more alive upon the roof than she did during the day in the relative safety and boredom of the court. Wandering amongst the streets of Windhelm, speaking to sardonic Dunmer and gruff Nord alike was now more like a dream state. A passage of time spent as if she were in a womb; warm and enclosed.

The roof where he trained her was not safe. She had nearly been blown off, more times than she could count, as Ulfric had thrown Fus Ro Dah, the Shout of Unrelenting Force at her. As many times as she could stand it, to see if she could feel the words. Aye, she felt them...her own howling cries held a strength of their own that once had even staggered the man backwards as she Spoke in condemnation.

Nemain was often taken to task by Ulfric for various mistakes. Indeed she had come to expect his censure. To depend on it, for the man continued to push her. To press the same kind of power in her Breath, her Shout without words as many times as could be managed, for the precursor to a Word was the inhale of breath propelled by motivation.

Which must have been why her throat went dry, and her tongue clammed up when she was rewarded with one his rare smiles. Not at all because she was, in the words of that busybody Viola Giordano ‘riding below the crupper, fanoolding, or hauling the Jarl’s ashes,’ whatever that meant.

It did prompt her to sneak into the old biddy’s home and scatter skeever droppings in her smalls drawer. Just to assuage her own injured feelings.

Truly, Viola? ‘Horizontal refreshment?’ Tis as if the elderly have nothing better to do...

Though if the townsfolk delighted in gossip based liberally around fact or fiction, surely the steward would bear the brunt of their ire. Jorleif handled the majority of the court’s day to day tasks, and frankly so far she had been unimpressed. For the Nord seemed to take his responsibilities in stride; carelessly handling petitioners to the court with lackadaisical boredom.

It made Nemain ponder the potential benefits of raising a Dunmer to replace the dullard, as she watched another Mer stomp away...swearing beneath his breath as Jorleif dismissed his case summarily after the space of a minute. Standing in the shadows, she made a face as Jorleif returned
with vigor to his mead and roast. Uncaring of the soul he had shunned without a thought.

*Did Ulfric know? Or even care? Tis all gravy to him, I suppose. Too busy waging war to see if his steward is attending to his tasks.*

She savored the idea of jawing off about it later, lying on the hearthrug in her room before the fire. Holding conversations in her head with her reticent instructor about the laundry maid, who was indulging in a blossoming romance with the guard who took rotations at the throne room door. Sharing that new snatch of gossip overheard about some child, praying to the Night Mother or some such nonsense. Imagining what his judgement would have been in some of the cases she had eavesdropped upon.

And how bizarre was it, she mused, that she actually *desired* to talk to the man? *Och, I must be far more bored than I fancied. Getting such an idea. It be all the rich food, surely. Can't be good for the digestion.*

Shrugging, she reached for the dreaded Dovahzul dictionary. Biting her cheek, Nemain blew off the crumbs from the sweetroll she had just finished, viewing the fresh sheet of parchment with critical appraisal. This would be the third copy of the damnable Dovahzul literature. Slowly, steadily, the alien words of the dragonkind were imprinting themselves into her memory. *And likely five more copies to go, before he’ll let you lapse in writing.*

Dipping her quill into the inkpot, she set herself to copy the next set of words.

“*Zu’u piraak bahlok. I...am...hungry. Zu’u bahlok - I ‘am’ hunger. Emphasis on the second phrase being stronger than the first. Hmm…”*

Briefly, her mind treated her to a flash of Ulfric earlier that day, trying not to laugh as she imitated Galmar behind the Stone-Fist’s back. The giant had looked almost human, then.

Handsome, his scars stretched across his cheeks as his lips strove to maintain their usual grimace...waver ing into a sheepish smile. An honest look, that impassive mask he so often wore peeled back but for a moment.

Shaking her head at herself, Nemain blew a strand of hair out of her eye and attended to her writing.

“*Vonmindoraan. Incomprehension.”*
Cool witch singing and chant-music. I dig it for Nemain and her peeps.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lTN1YbiOSmI&index=6&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w

And if you happen to NOT read the tags put on this fic, yes there is mention of sex and rape in this story. Specifically this chapter. Read at will. Or not. I don't care.

Actually...Yes I do. Read and comment, phfthhb.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There’s never been a true war that wasn’t fought between two sets of people who were certain they were in the right. The really dangerous people believe that they are doing whatever they are doing solely and only because it is without question the right thing to do. And that is what makes them dangerous.

-Neil Gaiman, American Gods

“A dragon has attacked Kynesgrove.”

“Oh?” Nemain looked up from reading. Bookmarking the page with her finger, she raised an eyebrow as Ulfric sagged onto the bench beside her. “Another one. They be breeding like flies, lately. And what do ye intend to do about it?”

Drawing a plate of roast horker and grilled leeks towards him, the Jarl ignored her and began shoveling food into his mouth. Mechanically, as though he were refueling a fire rather than enjoying nourishment.

Shrugging, the witch returned to her book. Unsatisfactory as it was.

The sound of thick parchment pages turning mingled with footsteps from couriers. Sounds of mouths chewing; gulping and belching that the witch vainly tried to ignore, her fingers clawing the spine of the book as others joined the great hall table and helped themselves to sustenance.

Nemain managed to block it all out, until a callused, overly large hand appeared. Prodding her book. “How accurate is that volume?”
Smiling mirthlessly, she opened it to the title page. ‘Herbane’s Bestiary: Hagravens’ was spelt out in elaborately ornate script, with a depiction of a hideous hag with wings emblazoned beneath the words. “Nae s’accurate at all. I cannae think why the adventurer felt the need tae boast aboot conquering the poor auld one. She was no harming anyone, up there in her mountain perch.”

Ulfric blinked. Pushing her hand out of the way, his index finger traced the lines of script, finally tapping upon one line. His voice was dry as he recited the words aloud. “...I first saw the thatch and bone, the human skulls, the dead goat head mounted on pikes, filthy animals pelts, loose entrails, and leathers matted in blood. What vile creature would live where all things are dead?”

His hand brushed hers in passing. Forcing herself to remain still - to not flinch at his touch, Nemain closed the book and turned more fully to the Nord. “So?”

“So, the hagraven was in fact ‘harming’ folk. Hence why the adventurer felt the need to follow the rumors, and slay the foul thing. Before it killed again.”

*Another one of these arguments. Grand.* “Perhaps from a Nord’s point o’ view. Hagravens rely upon others, most often their witches in training to bring them their meals. Be it beast or man. It is rare tae find one of the crones far from their dwellings. That brave, foolhardy author stormed the Blessed One’s home, intruding upon a sacred grove. Defiling years o’ work; slaying her and her students with nary a warning or need. An’ calling her evil?”

Nemain chuffed, closing the book with a quick snap as she shook her head at the idea. “What be unthinkable evil tae one group be mere religion to another. The hagravens be Hircine’s handmaidens. Seers of great power and might. Me own mother be one.”

The Jarl’s mouth opened, then closed with a nearly audible click of teeth. “No...you are serious.”

“As the grave, Milord.”

Leaning back, she tapped the volume’s cover. Her long nails scraping over the vellum as she watched a myriad of expressions pass over the taciturn man. “That be the Forsworn view of things, at the least. No doubt Nords would see it differently...such as this one who wrote the book.”

“A true Nord would not hesitate to strike down such a creature who surrounded herself with the death of innocents.”

“And who does say that th' victims be innocent, hmm?”

*No more than I expected, truly.* Examining the Jarl, Nemain realized he looked haggard. Deep shadows beneath his eyes hovered over lines bracketing his mouth, betraying an unusual level of stress for the man. “What happened in Kynesgrove, Bear?”

The Jarl sighed. Reached for a bottle of mead, and uncapped it. Toying with the cork, turning it over and over in his roughened fingers, as the man stared at nothing. “No one has been seen leaving Kynesgrove to make for the road. No word, no survivors. Just smoke. A traveller happened to be passing by on his way north, and saw what he termed ‘a mighty flying lizard’ breathing flame, igniting the forest. He made it to the gates...told a guard, who managed to wrest the entire story from him this morning.”

He sighed. “I hold little hope for the survival of Kynesgrove’s people.”

Recorking the mead, Ulfric tilted his head. Those sharp blue eyes scanned her, taking in the thin woolen gown she wore. Seeming to linger upon her hair which she had kept braided for the ease of managing it, following where it slid across her shoulder. “I want you to go kill the dragon, Nemain.”
She scoffed. “Seems as though it be too late to save your villagers, Jarl. Why kill it now?”

His face grew serious. “Other than that it will kill again?”

The witch turned away. _What do I care for the plight of the Nords?_ “Aye. Why else would I journey south and go out of me way to take on such a beastly foe? Doon y’have warriors for such things?”

“I do. But you are Dragonborn.” He shifted in the seat before her, mouth puckering beneath his beard. As though he had just sipped a mouthful of wine well gone; soured to vinegar. “Barring decades of meditation and practice such as we have been doing, you need to claim more dragon souls. Souls will fuel your ability to Shout, to speak the Words of Power.”

The next few words were dragged reluctantly from him, as she stood a bit straighter.

“And there is little more I can teach you, now. Not without more Words. Or knowledge from taking the soul of a dovah. You know as much as I do...the Words of Unrelenting Force, the Shout to Disarm. But without the knowledge...it may take you just as long to Speak them with power as it took me.”

“You admit it freely.”

She craned her neck to look up at him, as he steadfastly evaded her gaze. His hair had grown long, loosely falling to his shoulders now. More ruddy in the light of the torchfire than gold, as it shrouded his face from her view. And at just the right height to grab, to annoy him. Reaching over, she tugged upon a hank of it. Enjoying the way he glared, as she pulled even harder.

Damn, but the man was easy to tease.

“You admit that I no longer need your training, Bear? That I have, at long last, bested ye at yer game?”

“I didn’t say that.” Pulling his head away, she let the hair slide from her fingers. Huffing, the man entreated her with a mix of exasperation and caution plain on his face.

“You need more power. Souls, that only a Dovahkiin can take from a dragon, to advance your skill. That was my meaning.”

He narrowed his eyes, a knowing smirk playing about his lips. “You could leave at any time. Whenever you want, never to return. I certainly would not halt your departure.”

Feeling her own mouth turn down, she treated him to a withering look as Ulfric continued to speak. “And yet, you stay. Not to pick my mind for what I know of the Thu’um...that dictionary must have four copies for posterity made by now. And you have not threatened to take my heart for at least, oh, a score of days.”

His hand drew itself into a fist, the knuckles white with pressure. “So. Tell me why you remain.”

They stared at one another. Nemain could feel her heart beating faster, an insistent rhythm that was so loud, _could he no hear it?_

And blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “Didja know that mora tapinella and nightshade make a deadly poison? Windhelm’s graveyard be overrun with it.”
He remained silent. Merely watching, waiting for her to continue. So she did. “And the mold that grows in th’ brewer’s vats? The gray kind veined in black? It causes paralysis.” She felt a smile, unbidden, stretch her lips into something more gruesome than gladdened.

A baring of teeth. “I could have killed ye ten times over already, Bear.”

“I could have poisoned yer mead. Rubbed oil upon yer opponents blade handle, to make it slip from their hands during practice, to impale ye. Burned a bundle of imp stool and sweetgrass beneath yer bed, to still yer breath in yer sleep...ne’er to awaken.”

Continuing to speak, she watched as he slowly tensed up the longer she waxed on. “Plenty o’ gut string, wire or sinew from the kitchens to use as a garotte. And that be not even delving into what I could do to ye, with magic.”

Contemplating Ulfric as his face turned a stark white at that statement, Nemain slowly shook her head. “But I have not, for the same reason you havenae simply pushed me from your roof come nightfall. Or drowned me in your damnable ice-bedecked bay. Or chopped off my head with that slab o’ steel you call a sword.”

“Our truce still stands.”

His pupils dilated in the flickering light of the candle-lit chandeliers overhead. “No other reason you choose to stay, then?”

“No.”

Ulfric studied her, seeming to rest his gaze upon the thickened scar enclosing her neck. “We are not so dissimilar as you may think, Reachwoman. We both fight for what we know to be right. Freedom for our people. The right to worship as we please. The liberty of law to rule ourselves, rather than be ruled from afar. How you cannot see that -”

The witch cut him off. “No. Nay, Ulfric, we be no the same at all.”

Sliding away from him down the bench, she looked down at the book. “I care nothing for yer political aspirations, Nord. Do what ye will. Take o’er the Empire while you be at it! I only want to return home.”

“How you cannot see that -”

Blowing out her breath, Nemain felt suddenly exhausted. “And my word I willnae break. No matter how sorely you test me.”

“Well then. You know what you must do.”

She hissed under her breath. Leaned her forehead into her hands. “It be not that simple! Dragons, Imperials, pah! I have not even accomplished the task I had first set out to do, before bodging Helgen happened. And now, I be bound by my word.”

Blowing out her breath, Nemain felt suddenly exhausted. “And my word I willnae break. No matter how sorely you test me.”

“Well then. You know what you must do.”

He stood, Nemain keeping her eyes fastened upon the knotty grain of the table. Focusing on a spill of mead forming a golden puddle, inching ever closer to the bestiary tome. Seeing the way the light cast shadows upon the dishes and platters of victuals.

What did she care for his grand plans? She was only here to take advantage of his hospitality. To eat, drink and study at his leisure...until she killed him for his pains. It mattered not that she was Dragonborn - a Nord legend, nothing to her, certainly, but another means to an end. Another avenue
of power made available by studying this Thu’um.

And just because she had developed a grudging respect for this man, this butcher... It didn’t mean she could not do what she had been tasked to do. For she would, she told herself. *Cor, you be getting soft, witch.*

His hand rested upon her shoulder. She shrugged it off. “Go to Kynesgrove. Return with the soul.” A laugh, short and cut off. “Or do not.”

“Just remember, Nemain…” For once, his face was unguarded. Solemn and still, blotting out the light with sheer size, as she looked up at him. “What you think may be right...it is not the same as knowing. Perhaps only the gods know what is truly just. But there is no honor in cruelty. If you will not go to Kynesgrove, let me know by daybreak tomorrow. I will arrange for further care of the matter then.”

_Honor. Valor. Trust. Shit... “By tomorrow’s morn, then. I will let ye know.”_

The Jarl of Eastmarch bowed. A slight movement, but a bow nonetheless. “I will expect your answer. There will be no practice tonight. *Lok, Thu’um.*”

She stared at her hands long after he left her alone. Pulling at her braid, giving it a savage jerk as she bit her lip until the rust-salt of blood flooded her tongue.

_You daft fool. That stupid berk. Both of ye dancing around the truce, as if it be changing anything. As if you be friends! Chatting o'er tea. Sharing an egg or saucer of milk over the latest gossip!_

Mulling over her choices, Nemain wavered. Yes...she could go off and kill a dragon. She had done far stupider things and gotten away with them. She was even of a mind to do it, now...for her ire had truly reached its peak, what with the interminable winter keeping her indoors. Tucked away in warmth and sweaty muscle-bound Nord company and...and mead!

Weeks. Months, wasted! She could barely recall the scent of windborn mist that floated around the crags of the Reach. The sound of the keening chant, boldas scraping against hollow gourds and drums. *Home.*

Once she knew what Shouts the man could teach, his use would come to an end. And the truce...the peace they had brokered would be null and void.

Leaving him susceptible. Trusting.

_Prey._

And she could head home, at last. Home to Markarth, and then to Deepwood Redoubt. To Galan and Máthair and the People. Heart in hand.
Year 176 of the Fourth Era.

They had eaten the last of the horses.

Not that there was much flesh to be had, for the animals they had stolen were scrawny and thin. Nags, really. Not to be missed...for the best horseflesh had been more carefully guarded.

It mattered little, now. The younglings were still crying from want of food. Two more dead today, from the hunger and the frostbite. They had buried them hastily, digging shallow graves in the permafrost and covering the frail bodies with flat stones stacked precariously. They knew...the wolves were howling not far off. The rocks would not hold the following pack off for long.

Nemain shook with the cold; feeling it slice through her as she huddled against Galan and the other surviving children. Their passage north to one of the redoubts of the Reach had been barricaded by an early blizzard; catching them completely unawares. Trapping the group of women and children in this shallow lip of rock, barely more than an indent in the mountainside. Leaving them exposed; vulnerable. There were no caves, no trees but the stunted juniper.

Only the blizzard and the hunger, to keep them company as Máthair and the other priestesses wailed and wept and prayed. Howling to the skies to have mercy upon them, pleading to the Gods for deliverance.

They had used up what food they managed to gather on their flight out of Markarth days ago. If the Et’Ada were so all knowing, Nemain thought crossly, then why hadn’t they led their People to a more safe haven than this slow death? They had shared the last of the bread piece by piece...doled out sparingly until there was no more to be had. She had kept her bit of crust for hours, nibbling at it now and then. Tearing off half of it and handing the crust to Galan when she heard his stomach growl forcefully.

And he had taken it, silently. Eating it with his face turned away. Not thanking her, of course. Boys and their stupid pride.

But he had held her hand tightly, afterward. Had exclaimed with loud gasps of joy, just the same as her when Máthair arrived bearing an armful of dripping, red raw meat. She fell upon it gladly, stuffing her face with her generous portion as the other children did the same. Faces red and bright with happiness. Food!

And oh, it was tender and soft! Filling the hollowness of her belly. Making her dull with heaviness. Chewing the last bit of gristly tendon like she would have a ball of wax, for pleasure alone... Nemain cuddled near Galan and the other, drowsing children. Watching Máthair who bowed low over her own piece, still as yet uneaten.

Standing up, wobbling in the snow, Nemain was grateful that the blizzard has ceased for the time being. Only angry, grey clouds marred the sky. It would snow again, no doubt. But they would hopefully be long gone - safely secure in Deepwood Redoubt by then.

Moving off aways to relieve herself, she squatted near a collection of boulders. Shifting her weight as she urinated, she looked about. Feeling a crack of something; a twig perhaps beneath her boots, she looked down-
-and froze. Unbelieving, as she lifted her foot away from what was undeniably the arm bone of a child. Torn - no, sliced off by something manmade. A knife.

Nemain lowered her skirts. Feeling around with the toes of her boots, she sucked at her inner cheek, as she felt more solid pieces hitting her feet buried beneath the snow. Her mouth filled with blood - fresh blood! Blood that tasted just like the meat had, rich and red and oh, Gods no...the meat offered freely from Máthair’s hands, as the priestesses clustered in grim silence, watching-

"No, child. Mo stór, do not look. She died to save us all. It was holy - the God’s will. Dinna fash yourself.”

Burying her face in Máthair’s stained robes, Nemain cried. Wept for what had been surely Fiona. Little Fiona who had died of the cold, her body rimed in frost with her lovely dark eyes wide open and unseeing. Ochone, ochone, the sorrow…! They had eaten Fiona! Was she next?

-Jerking awake, Nemain gasped. Swallowed blood, bringing a shaky hand to her mouth as she lifted her hand. She had bitten her tongue in her sleep.

Flopping back upon the furs, she shut her eyes tightly. And with a decisive sweep of leg, leapt up from her bed to arise. To push away the dream that was not a dream from her mind. Ochone, if only I could use Unrelenting Force against me own thoughts. What a happier woman I’d be.

Padding to her door, Nemain looked both ways up and down the low stone hallway. Not even the guards made their rounds this early in the morning. They would be half asleep, nodding off at the doors until the dawn.

Slinking down the stairs, she crept to the kitchen to make some tea. To rid herself of the taste of blood, old and new...staining her mouth with the taste of death.

-Only to find, blinking away the grit of unrestful sleep from her eyes, that the kitchen was already occupied.

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Year 174 of the Fourth Era.

The rope was tight around his neck.

Waiting, watching, Ulfric tested his bonds for the thousandth time as they steadfastly held firm. The knots may as well have been metal for all the progress his efforts had made. His arms were shaking from the strain of trying, over and over to break the ropes holding his wrists tied tight, to free himself and the other unfortunates captured here. At the so-called mercy of the High Elves of the Third
Aldmeri Dominion.

But he could not stop himself. Not after the last woman they had killed - an older Nord, her belly sagging with stretchmarks, her windburned face lined with pain as they hung her upside down. Bare naked, subject to the leering laughter and uncouth jests of their elven captors, as they approached with green-gold blades drawn.

The ropes around her neck, wrists and ankles had been cinched tightly. Forcing her in a spread eagled position, opening her wide for the swing, as the captain had with a great evil grin swung down. One great, hacking swipe; parting her down the middle from her womanly cleft to her chin.

She had been alive as they continued hacking. He had seen; they forced them to watch, to see...blades and hands of flame tickling their chins as the men and women of the Imperial Legion strove to look elsewhere. Anywhere but the woman choking on her own liquids, guts dangling down in her face as the guards laughed and laughed. As though it were the quaintest lark...

No.

The ropes would not break. It nearly drove all thought of thirst - damnable thirst! From his mind. Of hunger, for the meals they spread out among the prisoners were sparse and often rotten. Once, he had refused his share, for it had smelled of a privy more than any gruel it was supposed to resemble. Three men had died after supping that meal, the emissions of their bowels gruesomely speckled with blood and thicker things, as the guards dragged them away.

The watchful elderly one had noticed - Elenwen, was that her name? Those piss-yellow faces had blurred into the same, taunting merge of sharpened features after the first few weeks, but this one - he remembered.

For she had seen him refuse to eat. Watched upon her raised platform, stiff and stern as they whipped him for his insolence, the metal-tipped strips of the leather tearing new stripes across old scars. Reopening partially healed wounds, as he grit his teeth against the pain. They needed little cause to inflict such censure, after all. A wayward glance, or a huffed breath brought much of the same.

He was a true Nord. A son of Skyrim. He would never cower; would not break into the weak willed submission others of his squadron had broken with. Never to her.

He could see her boots step into his view now, staring at the floor as he was. Pointed and black and hard...cruel to the tips of her blighted toes.

Ulfric’s fingers had gone nearly numb from the tightness of his bonds. Moving them slightly, one finger at a time, he told himself it was not for nothing. It ensured that blood flowed to his extremities, at the very least. He would latch onto anything that offered even the slightest hint of hope, at this point.

“Hmm. Ulfric Stormcloak. Son of Jarl Hoag, the Bear of Eastmarch. How fortunate for you. Release him from the gangline and bring him with me!”

Nearly falling over from the sudden release of tension, he staggered after the Altmer guard who led
him like a dog, following Elenwen along the cell corridor. Casting his eyes to the side, he could see
the broad face of Galmar, tipping his head in a nod and a brief smile as Ulfric passed by.

-Earning his friend a slam to the gut, as the ever-observant guards brought swift punishment for
daring to break form. For showing any emotion at all that was not requested by an Altmer. The
superior race, as they were told. Over and over, until his ears wanted to bleed.

‘Filthy Nords! In time, your entire race will be eradicated.’

‘Do you think they could be improved by breeding, like our distant cousins in High Rock?’

‘Hah! Never. Their humanity sickens me.’

‘Behold the future, you worthless dogs! Behold the Thalmor!’

A heavy door slammed shut. Lurching as his neck rope was pulled taut and yanked, Ulfric nearly
ran to the wall; where two Thalmor untied his wrists from the ropes with deft, long practiced
movements.

He could have cried at the feeling of freedom, of flexing his fists and fingers...until they lifted him up
to the wall. Clamping metal manacles around his wrists that were just high enough that he was
forced to stand upon the balls of his bare grime-embedded feet, to breathe properly.

The door slammed shut. Blinking his eyes against the sudden brightness like the sun, emanating
from the magelight hovering above his head; Ulfric managed to focus his vision. Only to see that he
had been left alone with her. Elenwen.

Elenwen, who walked closer in tight, short strides...that superior smile barely softening the hard line
of her nearly lipless mouth. Elenwen, who lifted a long fingered golden hand to rest upon his cheek;
fuzzed in the bare beginnings of his teenaged beard.

“Well, well. Quite a prize I have been given, it seems. I wonder...will a Jarl’s son break as easily as
your more common countrymen have, hmm? For a flank of venison? A taste of water, perhaps?”

He saw red. “Fucking bitch! Shor take you to Oblivion to rot, for all I care!” Ulfric spat, lank dirty
hair falling into his mouth as he panted in rage.

“Hmm.” The she-elf kept her eyes upon him, something stirring behind that amber gaze as she
rapped upon the door. “Prepare him for me.”

Like an animal, he is stripped and scrubbed and washed...the roughness of their handling nearly
scouring the skin from his flesh. On any other occasion he would have welcomed the soapy water;
the pain of encrusted sores ripping off from ablutions of cleanliness.

But when even his loincloth had been stripped away and he was left alone with the Thalmor woman,
Ulfric could not hold back a shudder of fear. Recoiling from her, even as he mentally bid himself to
stand straight and strong, as those greedy hands clutched him. Stroking, maddeningly soft and
steady, until against his will his cock throbbed; fully erect.
"Shall I show you what broke your fellows, yes? Only the strongest withstood me for very long, you know. And you are so very young for a man, aren't you. Untried. Your blood running hot, what with all your youth wasted with those doddering fools upon their mountaintop."

Red washed into white across his vision, as electricity crackled. Sparking a nearly painful spike of pleasure, as she gripped him in both hands...her face alight with the first true happiness he had seen on any of her kind.

"Now, son of Jarls...scream for me!"

-And as she covered his mouth with her own, he told himself later that he had done his all, to fight back. To struggle against the overwhelmingly hot burn of hate; sheer guilt-ridden lust that nearly bowled him over - gods NO! He shouted, straining to use his Thu'um that eluded him - silent after weeks of being gagged. Despising how weakly his voice rang out, Ulfric rasped out his rejection of her. Of Elenwen, for any and all to hear, hoarse and choked. Over and over. Nononogodsnono-

For it was not long until she brought him...screaming into her mouth. Coming in her hand; hips jerking fruitlessly as she smiled in satisfaction; the first seeds of self hatred planted and watered, as pride...honor...trust, all was brought down low to shame and ruin at the long, slender hands of the she-witch, the elf...

It was not long until the skin of his cock chafed and blistered beneath her attentions. Nearly making him cry with pain and helpless, blinding fury, as she slathered ointments of some foul craft upon him. Bringing him hard and ready, to come again and again until he would have fain torn his own eyes from their sockets, to make her stop, fuck please, just stop it and let him rest...gods...

For she liked it when he screamed.

"Like that. More...scream like that again, dear fool thing, yes. Your fault, you know...that the White-Gold Tower fell to us. To your superiors. All your doing, my dear..."

"....NO!"

Nearly falling off his bed, Ulfric realized he had tangled himself in his sheets. The fine cloth had mired his legs in a hopeless knot, and as he shakily released himself and stood...

No. Never again. It has been years, and (don’t think her name) is on the other side of Skyrim. Damn her, her and all her kin!

He would get no further sleep now, he knew. The nightmares that were once memory had not come on so strong for many months. But this troubling news from Kynesgrove had sparked a flash; a remembrance of fire, searing his skin as he had struggled away from Thalmor torment. Singing his skin, scars he bore still as mere weals of pinkish gray. No longer painful, but for the recollection they brought.
Shuffling out of his quarters and down the stairs, he made his way as a man drugged to the kitchens.

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He was putting together the makings of a cheese plate, to eat while reading when he heard a sound.

A scrape of soft slipper against stone. Ulfric tensed as he reached for the wickedly sharp knife the cook kept in good repair. Preparing to mount a defense…

-Only to relax, heaving a sigh in self recrimination as Nemain appeared. Those astonishing grey eyes heavy with sleep, as she rubbed them idly while yawning. Just like a child, stumbling from her bed for a cup of water and a story, to keep the draugr away.

Her nightgown was a sheer billow of white cloth. Long dark hair left loose, crackling with static as it brushed against her back...spilling around her waist as she stopped stock still, upon noticing him there.

Lifting the knife in an awkward salute, Ulfric wet his lips. In the fire burned down to nearly coals behind her, he could practically see the outline of her legs against the thinness of the cloth. The shape of her apparent. Not a child. A woman.

_You lustful churl._

Breaking his gaze away with effort, he turned back to the cheese wheel he had been slicing. Managing to speak at last, he was proud of the steady tone of his voice. Holding no inflection...betraying no hint of the unwanted desire he felt, seeing those legs. _That hair._

“Can’t sleep either, then? Help yourself to some cheese...I’m nearly done here.”

Turning to briskly slice bread and apples, he heard her draw closer. Nearly silent upon her small feet, he listened without turning as she riffled through the pots and ceramic jars near the spices.

-Only to nearly seize as she appeared at his shoulder, bearing two mugs and an ewer of hot water from the kettle. Daring to look just a bit further to the left, he spied her face scrunching up, as she poured what looked like fine, hairlike white roots into both mugs and began to stir; spoon clinking against the pottery of the cups.

“Here. Blue mountain flowers...I’ve been a'using them recently tae help me sleep, when - bah, ne'ermind. Just drink it.”

He accepted a mug, balancing it upon the plate as he sniffed the darkening liquid. She smiled upon noticing him do so; white teeth slightly crooked as her mouth seemed to laugh at him even now...half
asleep as they both were.

Trudging to the main hall, Ulfric sat heavily down at the table with his plate and mug. He was mildly surprised to find Nemain plopping herself beside him, bearing her own tray of apple slices and cheese. She slapped his hand as he lifted the mug to drink, him nearly spilling it as he looked at her askance.

“What?” His voice was crosser than he would have liked. It didn’t do to antagonize a witch, after all. “Is it poison? Have you just now decided you would miss your comfortable room at my expense? Is that it?”

She laughed, a raspy chuckle that lifted her chin; bearing the wide rope burn scar upon her throat to his view. “No, fear thuaidh, what a ridiculous notion! Ye need to allow the tea to steep, is all. Like I’d stoop tae such a hands-off method after all the shite you be bringing upon me. No, ‘tis the knife or flaming balls of magic for you, you stook. Fair warning.”

He took a sip and made a face. Ugh, bitter. “Or I could just drink this tea. I can feel it dissolve my innards already.”

“Pah. Just drink it. ‘Twill do you a word of good, to get some rest. You looked fair knackered today...mustn’t let slip to the commonfolk that Jarls eat, shit and sleep like the rest of us do. It doesnae inspire confidence to know ye bear mortal frailty.”

“Right.” His voice was a lazy burl, nearly hoarse from exhaustion. Gods, he could hardly keep his eyelids up. “So, why are you awake? Not enough furs to pad your bony arse?”

“I’ll have ye know it be far plumper after months of hearty Nord meals,” She retorted around a mouthful of cheese, managing to swallow only under duress. Coughing, her face turned nearly beet red as he felt a foolish grin arise; at both the conversation and her reaction. “Well, it couldn’t have been any flatter.”

“Och, now! Be that any way to speak to a lady?” She sniffed, nose turned up.

“Well. If you are a lady, then I must be a Priestess of Dibella. Let me just find my sash and robe.”

“You bastard! And to think you got into their order, looking sae manly!”

Snickering as he handed her a bottle of ale, Nemain nodded in thanks. Tipping her bottle at him, she raised it in a toast; as though it had just occurred to her to do so...a great silly smile breaking like the sun upon her normally staid fox-face.

“Sláinte, Milord Ulfric! May the wenches be a’falling all over themselves for ye, when you choose some poor mucket for a wife! Ha haha!”

Not to be outdone, Ulfric raised an eyebrow as well as his ale. “Skål. May your pants forever stay hoisted up, and your skirts plentifully full, to cover your gravelly undernourished nether regions.”

“Hmph. Alot of big words, boyo. But hey, I’ll drink to that. And eat, too...mustn’t stop plumping my featherbed just coz it be soft to the touch.”
They both drank in unison, Nemain somehow finishing the bottle of ale before he did, as she slammed the empty vessel to the table with a sharp clink. “Woo! Tis a good thing I’m eating along with that. I’d be fair flustered, drinking with nothing in me but air.” She started in upon the apple slices, chewing with obvious pleasure as he turned to attend to his own meal.

Feeling pleasantly muzzy from the warm burn of the ale and - dare he even think it - the company, Ulfric picked apart a slice of bread with his hands. And dared to ask the question that had hovered in his mind, ever since he had first met her. “So, how did you escape the hanging rope that placed its mark upon your neck?”

She stills, mouth still crunching a piece of fruit. Swallowing, she leans back to bare her throat, tracing it with a finger. He cannot help but to track her hand, as it wraps around her throat.

“This auld thing? I’ve had it for years. Ever since I was daft enough to try hanging myself, once.”

Staring at her in astonishment, he felt himself grow undeniably angry. “Why?”

Her grey eyes were distant, as she carelessly tapped her throat. “Once was a time, that I thought I had nothing left tae lose. Nothing tae live for. I tried - and failed, mind you...t’end it then.”

“I never took you for a coward, Nemain.”

Turning suddenly to face him, a familiar fire lit up her face. Ulfric almost smiled sadly to see it upon her now. Almost.

“And what would ye ken of shame, ‘My Lord’ Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak? I deserved death! I did!” Her voice slurred as her pitch rose steadily, to an almost shriek. “You doon know what ah’ve done!”

Forcing himself to stay calm, Ulfric matched her. Glare for glare. “What could you have possibly done that would have been worth giving up your life in such a way?”

Ploughing ahead, he cut her off before she could respond. Feeling more rage grow within himself, as he contemplated her words. I deserved death. “You think your gods can only be pleased by bloody offerings? Self sacrifice?”

He watched as her grey eyes filled with tears. She swiped at them furiously. “Och. You’d never understand. Damnable tears! They’ve ruined it all! All of it! And now I kannae…” she sniffled, turning away... was the witch actually crying?... can’t nae return.”

Shaking her head, as if to dislodge a horrid thought, Nemain turned back to him, eyes red and puffy. “...blitherin’ bampots! I can ne'er go home, ye ken?!”

Silence, as they both watched each other warily. Unsure, in this painful, tremulous moment of how to proceed...the jovial nature of their earlier discourse ruined entirely. It would risk their shaky near-friendship, their truce to inquire any further.

He would take that risk. She’s a brass bound bitch. Whatever hurt her...it must have been substantial. Ensuring his tone of voice was kind but firm, he spoke. “Mara weeps. Kyne grieves. Even Shor himself flooded the land with his tears when Ysgramor died. How can you be at fault,
when you speak ever in such reverence of your people?”

She watched him, like a hawk scrutinizes a skeever as he continued on.

“All life has value. Every man, woman and child...every deer, fish and creeping thing.” Shrugging, Ulfric smiled slightly. “I may not favor or fret about the lives of elves as much as my own kind, but to kill them is still a cause of mourning.”

“You’ve been a good student. I would mourn you, should you take your own life.”

“But I have nae value!’ she cried, beating her fists against the table. Making him jump. “I’m not Madanach’s daughter, or Míthair’s or Galan’s...not anything now! Any worth I took pride in was lost...LOST you idjit, the night I profaned a ritual with my tears! It was selfish, Ulfric, to distract the Gods with such a childish display o’ emotion! And I lost everything fer it!”

Slumping against the table, he heard her forehead smack against the wood as she sighed. “Everything.”

He scoffed despite himself. Valiantly ignoring the urge to request further insight into what ‘ritual’ had made a Forsworn village cast one such as Nemain out to dry. *Galan? Surely there was a story there.*

“Not everything. Is not firewood still wood, when it has been charred and blackened?”

Nemain made a noise. A small groan. “’Tis useless wood, you fob.”

*Well. An eye for an eye. It’s not like she respects you, anyhow.* “I have been taken captive, Nemain. Back during the Great War, along with Galmar among many others. I have suffered at the hands of mages who thought they knew best...just like you.”

“Like me?” She squeaked, her hair flaring around her face as she lifted up, to look at him with wide eyes.

A curl of unpleasant poison bore itself up from where he usually stowed it away. “Aye, like you. You said it yourself before...pain is a prayer to the gods, begging their attention with suffering. I have suffered, and Talos knows, I wonder at times if the horror of war is the only way to make the Divines see our plight.”

Locking his vengeance away yet once again, Ulfric mentally shuttered away his ire. It was useless in this instance.

“We are not so different, you and I.”

“You? Like me? Hah! You with yer fine clothes…” she gestured gracelessly, taking the entirety of him in with one sweep of her arm... “-and, and extra flesh from plentiful meals! You and yer housecarls and loyal generals, to fetch ye mead, when ye will it?!”

Practically snarling at that point, she leaned towards him. Her breath smelled like apples and ale. “We be nothing alike, fear thuaidh. Not at all.”

Standing upon her knees on the bench, he gripped her elbow as she wavered; placing her hand upon
his chest as she drew in a deep breath. To speak.

“I have eaten men; cracked their bones to get at th’ marrow when the land forsook us and we starved! I have lain awake at nights unable to sleep from the bitter cold, for fire was not always my friend, ‘Milord’ to warm me when there was no dry wood! No elk spoor or grass tae burn, much less fine potions and furs!”

“No, my Jarl Ulfric. I’m afeared we be quite different.”

It must have been the ale. Yes, he thought, he would blame the ale for what happened next. Or the dreams. Because he moved as one in a dream; when he tugged her to him, slanting his mouth against hers as she squeaked in surprise. To kiss her.

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Nemain had just finished laying into him; all insulting and such about everything from his stupidly large Nord frame to his wellborn privilege...when the man did the least expected thing ever, and kissed her solid on the mouth.

His arms held her tightly, not allowing for any movement as her heart beat a rapid pitter-patter somewhere up in her throat. Eyes wide open, fearful of this new development, she could see the blue feather-like veins of his eyelids as he moved his lips against hers.

Tasting of apples. Of cheese, and ale - and something else. Dark and warm and wonderful.

Nearly against her will, her sense of reason - her damnable body responded. Curling inwards against the heat of him, she fairly wrapped her arms around his neck and plunged her tongue down his throat; drinking down the shocked surprise, the noise he made as she did so.

The gentle embrace he held her in suddenly became crushing. $\textit{Tighttightight}$...as she could scarcely breathe, sharing his breath as his hands clutched her nonexistent arse. Riding her higher up, as she folded her legs around his trim waist with a tight squeeze of her own.

Earning her another sharp gasp, as she ground against the hardness she found there, boldly. $\textit{What by Hircine’s horns was in that ale?}$

His fingers wound themselves in her hair, pulling her head back as he laved his tongue against the scar at her throat. Making her whimper, as she clutched his hair in turn. That golden, sun bright hair that shone almost red, $\textit{red-like-blood}$-

NO.
Awareness roared back into the hazy, near drunken lust that had scuppered away her senses. Feeling a traitorous pulse of pleasure between her thighs, she gritted her teeth and lowered her hands. Gripping his throat between them as she *squeezed*.

Hearing him choke, as she pushed insistently until he looked up at her from where his face had rested, somewhere down between her breasts all delightfully chafed from his beard.

The Bear’s face was an absolute *wreck*. Hair all askew and blue eyes strangely bright, as they both struggled to control their breathing. *Some ‘Masters of the Thu’um’ we be; a pox on the Greybeards and their muckety-muck teachings. Bet those old bastards never had to deal with...this.*

She spoke slowly. Defining each word, though she couldn’t quite bring herself to sharpen them with anger that she strangely did not feel. “Let. Me. Go.”

He let her go. Let her slide down from him, her sensitive flesh brushing against his thigh and knee. Nearly making her combust on the spot, then and there, *gods it has been an eternity and he is there and oh sae ready, nonofuckno* - “Er, I will go tae Kynesgrove in the mornin’. Nae need tae detain yer fighters from their tasks.”

Ulfric shuddered; his eyes clearing with her words to crystallize...diamond sharp as she crawled back and away from him. It took him some time, but the man managed to speak in a reasonably calm tone. “I will await your return.”

Nodding, she managed to stuff one last apple slice in her mouth as she fled the scene. Flying up the stairs and back to her room, to bury herself in her furs; mind a-jumble with a swirling cauldron of censure and shock, as it took her *hours* to drift off to sleep.

She did not see Ulfric stagger out back to the kitchens, to stick his head into a bucketful of cold water.

Repeatedly.

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

Dawn broke, light and pearly-scent with wintry grey skies promising fresh snow and more of that glorious, Skyrim cold.

She hated it.

Hated Skyrim, the sky. The snow, Nords, Ulfric, her own damned bloody self for being so damned
libidinous. And what the fuck were ye thinking, yeah? She chided herself, over and over as she slunk out from the Palace of Kings.

Wanking yerself off against the fecking Butcher of Markarth, eh? Why don’t ye just piss upon the Holy Tree while you be at it? Shit upon the Altar of Sacrifice and throw sweetrolls and pretty blooms about, as though all life was some grand, majestic festival? You TWIT. You utter NINCOMPOOP!

Hefting her travel pack against her shoulder, the Stormcloak standing guard at Windhelm’s gates came alert as her hooded and cloaked figure slipped past him. “Hey. You.”

Halting, she waited politely, if not patiently for him to spew forth whatever announcement the guards were bid to do. Make it quick, lad. Dragons to kill, Jarls to de-heart.

“Be careful, traveller. Rumor has it that witches have made their home in Darklight Tower, south near the Rift. I’d stay far away from those foul hags if I were you.”

Nemain turned, her face cowled. Only her lips remained visible, turning up in an ecstatic smile.

“Darklight Tower, y’say? Where be that on my map, lad?” Lifting her face from its cover, she fluttered her eyelashes at the blank helmeted head of the guard. Held out the tidy roll of parchment, opening it so that the guard could point out the location.

“...So I may avoid it, o’ course.”

“Ah, here. And...here, miss - in Witchmist Grove there have been other sightings. A hagraven’s nest, from the amount of bodies strung up on pikes. Steer clear, Breton, and you’ll be safe.”

Casting back a lazy wave, Nemain’s grey eyes glinted in triumph. “Oh yes. Quite safe. Thank ye, friend.”

Adjusting her course, the Breton allowed a smile to gloss over her lips as she mentally calculated how far off Witchmist Grove would take her after Kynesgrove.

Wonder if Moira be still keeping up shop down near the Eldergleam. The old besom probably had offed herself by now, but it couldnae hurt to check up on her. Ah, but Darklight Tower...that be a solid lead.

Oh well. Dragons to slay, and such. Anything to keep my mind off of the aptly named ‘Table Incident.’

Pfwoar.
Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

Uhm....*looks around meekly* I tried to keep the smut far off enough that it wouldn't hinder character development. I got, er, sidetracked.

Damn you, husband and your manipulative lecherous ways.

STUPID SEXY COUPLE. Get over your issues so I can make you lurve each other.
There was nothing left of Kynesgrove.

Nothing but half burned timbers, lying in pieces around the stacked stone base of what must have been an inn. Tangled tent hides, mashed vegetation ground into furrows that betrayed what had once been a garden left to ruin...all wrecked and gone.

The charred bodies bore missing pieces. Too few bodies for such a sizeable village.

Nemain stepped lightly over one such corpse. The body lay prone on the ground, the teeth startlingly white against the blackened crispy skin of the face. More white bone peeked through portions of the skin that had been singed away. It was missing both legs.

*This dragon ate well.* Holding her hand up to brush her hair from her forehead, Nemain bit her lip. She could see nothing of the beast. No visible signs other than what it had destroyed. And night was now upon her, for it had taken the entire day to travel down the southern roads. *Damn. I’ll have to circle aboot the ruins. See if the dragon be still nearby. Else this has all been for naught.*

A small, timid voice broke her search. “Excuse me? Lady, can you help me find my mama?”

Turning, the witch frowned. She had not heard any movements disturbing the brush of the forest. But there she was; a little girl. Twisting her hands in her skirt, scuffing her shoes as she looked shyly up at Nemain.

A feeling prickled at the back of Nemain’s skull. A primitive awareness, warning her not to make any sudden moves. “Child, what be ye doing here?”
“Mama hid me when the dragon came. I came out of the root cellar, and…” the girl sniffed, looking down as her hair shrouded the rounded face. “-and everyone was like this. I don’t know what to do.” Looking up through her hair, the girl pouted. “Can you help me?”

“I don’t know what you be expecting me tae do. I be no nursemaid.”

The little one made a helpless noise. “Can I travel with you? At least until you find a city, or a caravan? I’m so scared.”

Nemain stood there, breathing in and out. Focusing her mind into a pattern that spread her awareness like ripples in a pool, searching outward. The forest was silent. Not a bird or insect made any sound. The wind in the evergreen boughs, sighing through skeletal branches. Whistling around the fallen timbers of Kynesgrove...that was all she could hear.

The breath is the life. “So scared, are ye? Yet y’ dinnae breathe as though ye be in a panic, child.”

Lighting her hands aflame, Nemain exhaled long and slow. Calm. Immoveable...like a rock in the storm.

“In fact - you dinnae breathe at all.”

A high giggle was her only response. The child disappeared, faster than Nemain could spy as she twisted her head round about, to catch a glimpse. To prepare, to defend her life as the Frost Thu’um burned inside her throat; a numbing force she would bring out to bear if necessary.

No sign of her.

"Clever mage. What gave it away?"

Looking up, she saw the girl dangling like a Bosmer from a high bare branch of a tree. The girl’s lips revealed sharp white teeth. Her eyes burned like embers, twin to the smoking collapse of the inn behind them.

Nemain smiled in return, watchful. She allowed fire to bloom in high peaks upon both palms. “D’you like to play with yer food, girl? For I warn ye - I will nae make yer meal an easy one, vampire.”

The unchild - for what else could it be? Swung merrily from the tree branch. Her glowing eyes, no longer muted by any attempt to appear human, never blinked. “Fine. Don’t play. I wasn’t that hungry anyhow.”

Before the blurring figure could disappear into the blackness of the woods, Nemain called out to her. “Wait. Have ye seen the dragon that did this?”

The coal-bright eyes reappeared. “Sure. He’s sleeping right behind the inn.”

A loud, coughing roar erupted behind her. Making Nemain wince, as the child bequeathed her another fang studded grin. “Have fun. I’ll be sure to check back later, to see if you survived.”
A dewclaw-tipped wing pounded into the ground, bringing the rest of the dragon into sight. Smoke curled from the beast’s nostrils, as it stalked forward over the ruin of the inn. Right towards Nemain.

Releasing her grip upon the flames, Nemain summoned fire and calm. *Equal measures of both couldnae hurt;* it was too soon to tell what type of Shout this dragon preferred yet.

The narrow, snake-like neck reared back, the shining throat quivering as she dodged a blasting column of burning flame.

*Fire, then.*

Thinking quickly, Nemain ran behind the trees. Snow crunched beneath her boots, as she cast a muffling spell with a swipe of her hand; making herself silent as a shadow. The foliage hid the lines of of her form, causing the dragon to whip its head back and forth as she ran in a dizzying pattern. Forcing the beast to crash clumsily into the thicket of brush, to follow her.

Cold rose in her throat; chilling her voice as she sucked in a whistling breath. Turning, her grey eyes shot open, a challenge, as she screamed the Shout. “*Fo Krah Diin!*”

A hiss, which reverberated through her bones, came from the menacing snout. Frost crackled; breaking free of its eyebrow ridges as the beast shook its head vigorously. A veritable snowdrift of cold blew away, melting as a violent heat arose from the scalding scales. The wide mouth panted, long whiplike tongue flaring in and out. Tasting the air, for her.

“*Bo nah gut,* little *joore.* I am too full to consume you now. Come back *mu grind.* Later.”

The ponderous bulk of the dragon heaved, the wedge shaped head seeking. Finding her as she flung herself up upon the curve of neck. Using the spikes dotting its back as hand and footholds, Nemain climbed the beast. Mentally thanking Galan for all the years he had competed with her; to climb up the rocky crags in search of birds nests and the eggs therein, as she kept her place.

“*Faaz nah,* female! My teeth to your neck *joore!*”

“Hah! Not this neck, wyrm.”

Reaching the head, she located the auricular holes of the dragon. Ears, mere spots of blackness amidst the heated armor of the fingernail-like scales that tore at her robes. Grasping the head by its horns, Nemain lunged forward. Pulled back her lips far from her teeth, and *screamed.*

She had discovered this particular use for the Thu’um when the Bear, during one of their many training bouts, had forced her to the ground. Straddling her with his greater weight and muscle mass, he had begun to slap her repeatedly. Small, insulting slaps as he bellowed at her to fight him off; to Shout. Not a Word of Power, but a shockwave of sound as she had nearly frozen beneath him, the position eerily reminiscent of - well, something else, that she delayed to fight back. Until the slapping became nigh unbearable.

And she had screamed, as she did now. It worked much the same as it had upon the unfortunate Ulfric; fairly stunning the dragon as the head snapped forward. Arching away from the horrid sound being forced into its eardrums, as Nemain opened her mouth as wide as it would go. Wailing that high pitched cry still, as the beast bashed its head against the ground, struggling to be rid of her.
Feeling it hiss, then chuckle, Nemain gripped the head more tightly as the dovah veered up into the air. Trees became mere matchsticks...the mountains spreading out like a snow covered crinkled canopy of silk as the dragon roared.

Deafening her, nearly causing her to release her hold upon him. Certain death! Falling to a paste be a horrid way to go, so dinnae do it! Keeping in mind the smashed bodies she had seen, falling from the high staircases of Markarth every year or so; she clung still...the world growing dark and the remainder of her breath bursting from her lungs in a groan as the dragon dived downwards.

-And ploughed into the earth, its wings catching against the trunks of trees. Fairly shredding the forest in the wake of its furrow, as she fell upon it full bore...stunned.

Bringing numbing frost to bear within her hands, as the beast stirred beneath her, Nemain gathered her wits and cast twin ice spikes at the dovah’s wings.

She missed. It was so unexpected that she lost her rhythm; thrown off guard, as she dodged a snapping toothy mouth just a second too late. She felt the finer edge of serrated teeth snag upon her robes; pulling her unstoppably to the ground where a massive foreclaw raised above her like a mighty claw trap, already sprung.

Curling up her legs beneath her, Nemain kicked out. Pushing; saving her own life by a handsbreath, as the claws dug deeply into the snow impacted earth below her feet. Her breath coming faster and faster, Nemain grew an ice spike the length of her arm. Felt the power of the Thu’um arise in her throat once more, as she held it in. Waiting, her hand growing numb as the furious creature hissed and opened its mouth once more; all the warm of a burning inferno glowing within the sandpapered throat as it prepared to end her.

“Fo Krah Diin!”

The Shout fairly propelled the ice spike she threw into the gaping maw and onwards; brain matter splattering as cold made into a weapon hit - sledging with all the force of a swinging mace.

Rolling away, she evaded the tumbling, limp body as the dragon dropped. Her hair covered her face in a blanketing nest as she cried out, telling herself to be calm, calm, it be dead...you did it, ye grand fool, it be dead!

Feeling more than seeing the light of the soul, piercing her with a drilling awareness...Nemain sobbed. Clawed her fingers into the ground...fingers turned to talons. Her head aching, as the death memory of the dovah showed her just how clearly that damn Frost Breath Shout hurt; freezing her scale-skin as it did.

Slowly, her breathing slowed. Her heart regained its normal, steady throbbing beat.

She had done it.

A slow hand clap caused Nemain to cautiously turn her head.
The unchild, the vampire stood atop one of the broken trees. Bent nearly horizontal, the great roots framed her like a painting as the little one jumped down. Quick as a thought.

She appeared right beside Nemain in the blink of an eye. “Well done! You’re something else, aren’t you. Not the run of the mill sorceress. What’s your name?”

Tonguing a cut on her lip, Nemain drew herself up to a standing position. Smiled in a predatory way, to match the undead one. To show her no fear, for creatures of the night preyed upon the fearful. “I be called Nemain. What’s yer name, unchild?”

The tiny rosebud lips pursed, then spread in a slaughterfish smile. “I am Babette. I have some rabbit here, left over from the last bandit I dined upon. Care for some? You look...hungry.”

Nemain’s fingers slowly trailed over her belly, where the memory-echo of wriggling, squealing joore stilling in death within her belly finally sieved away from her mind.

Eeurgh. She heaved a satisfied sigh at the sudden absence of the dovah’s thoughts. Her mind was now her own, once again.

“Ahh, I be famished. Please. Allow me tae cast a fire...the snows will be coming soon. There be plenty of timber tae burn.”

“So polite. You know, I can’t remember the last time I supped with a stranger without my teeth ending up in their neck. You are the first in a good long while, Nemain.”

Searching for the driest pieces of wood, Nemain cast an amused glance behind her, as the child hovered nearby. How broadly ye threaten me, dead thing. “Let’s just be keepin’ it that way, Babette. I’m sure you have some fine tales tae tell. I’ll even add me bottle of well aged Argonian bloodwine here, so as tae loosen yer tongue.”

“Bloodwine! Mmm. I do like the way you think, my fellow Breton. Tell me...how do you feel about murder for profit? My family happens to be involved in a...well, a business of such sorts. Though some take to it more like a religion. I’d be delighted to offer you - a dragonslayer - my personal introduction.”

“Perhaps, little one. Fire and food, first. This chill, cor, it seeps straight into me bones this time o’ year. Let's talk o'er that rabbit ye promised.”

*********

Days later, and sorely desiring one of Windhelm’s gloriously hot palace baths, Nemain trudged along the southern roads to the wilds woods, where Witchmist Grove lay.

Tugging at the Vigilante of Stendarr she had captured, the witch clucked at the horse bearing a brace of freshly killed hares and the other Vigilante’s body. She was grateful for the cold, for once...it had been a full day and the body had not yet come to stink. And the horse one of Stendarr’s priests had been riding was an unexpected bonus.

“Come on, then. We’re nae far off, y'lazy thing. Come come, and I’ll let ye crop all the fresh grass
the Rift can offer.”

“You foul witch! May Stendarr take you and cast you into the light, to rot!” The Redguard spat, stumbling as she yanked once more on the rope binding his neck.

“Now that’s nae verrah kind, priest. But doona worry...I will release ye as soon as we arrive at my family’s settlement. Which be soon, by the looks of it.”

Witchmist Grove arose from the fog in a sea of spiked palisades. Surrounded by the gloom of evergreens near buried in snow, the tumble-down cabin looked nearly like an afterthought...what with all the goat’s heads, freshly skinned hides and skulls littering the ground and mounted upon pikes. Almost as though the wooden timbers had been hastily assembled as a backdrop to all the death and dismemberment.

Cocking her head, Nemain listened. The birds and insects had quieted, for they had entered the clearing surrounding the grove as if it were a bubble of silence. Nothing moved, nor breathed but them. Her, the horse, and the fitful priest who had tried - and failed - to slay her along with his companion upon the road.

“Oh no! Stendarr preserve me, let me go free! I beg you!” He tugged at his bonds, pulling against her in stark terror.

She smiled nastily. “As ye wish.”

Gripping the halter of the horse, to keep it steady...Nemain released the knot, loosening it just enough for the man to tear off and lope away at a breakneck pace.

Watching avidly, the witch counted her breaths. Counting, keeping her heart steady and her stance secure, as Moira the Hagraven burst like a cloud of pure night from somewhere in the trees. Falling upon the man like a shadow crossing the moon.

Cawing and flapping, a crackling boom of magic discharging resounded in the clearing. Followed by a wretched cry; a gurgling snap.

Then, sounds of feeding. Wet and sloppy, a fine mist of blood spray rising as Moira devoured the unfortunate soul.

For one who sae prized his personal freedoms, he was surely keen tae take away her own. Nemain felt little pity for such pesks as the Vigilantes who wandered Skyrim, imposing their doctrine upon others. Fingering her knife from where she had drawn it out of her boot, Nemain watched in wary respect as the hagraven lifted her head from her kill.

Black shining eyes topped the crookedly bent nose, shadowing an elongated mouth crammed with curving, sharp teeth. The chin jutted out like a beak, bobbing as Moira spoke; a harsh whisper.

“Who be there? Another morsel for dear auld Moira to nibble upon? Hchkaw!”

Bowing ever so slightly, Nemain stepped forward exactly one pace. “Fáilte, Wise One. Tis me...Nemain. Remember? I be one of the People from the Western Reach. Come to seek your
guidance in my time of need.”

The hag-bird beckoned, one long-taloned hand curling at Nemain in a simulacrum of welcome. “Come closer, my child.”

Gripping three of the dead hares behind her back, Nemain did as she was bid. Walking forward, she showed no fear.

-And nimbly tossed one of the rabbits as Moira blurred into an attacking fury; stepping away from the gnashing teeth and swipe of claws as the birdwoman turned. Nearly flopping in the leaf loam upon her avian feet, scrabbling for the rabbit as she ripped and tore. Completely absorbed by the feast offered, the treat. Black eyes in their mop of greyish tangled hair shot to where Nemain stood, nearly feral. There was no recognition there...not for anything save the feeding.

Nemain tried once more. Damn ye, Moira, you've gone too long without company yet again. “Now be that any way tae treat with a distant relative, Moira of the Grove? Greet me as a daughter, Wise One. Allow me tae enter yer home, tae be blessed with yer guestin' rights and remain unharmed.”

Flicking her fingers in a spell of calm at the nearsighted hag, Nemain kept a close eye upon her as she quieted.

The head stretched upon the thin neck, hovering as she searched. The black eyes grew bright, a sliver of white appearing around what had previously appeared to be all pupil.

“...Nemain? Be that you, girl?”

Her shoulders sagged in relief, as the witch relaxed her guard. “Aye, it be me Dear Aunt. Why have you been sae long alone? Last I heard, ye had a fair coven of witches tae teach, tae attend to yer needs. What happened?”

Kicking the rabbit’s half-eaten corpse away with a clawed foot, Moira picked it up with one claw and lovingly stretched it upon two wooden spikes. Patting it gently, as one would a keepsake upon a doily, the hagraven turned a frightful smile upon Nemain. “Och, I had a coven darling. A fair number of acolytes, all devoted to me slightest whim. But they left me, they did. Went to study at Darklight Tower. I be sure my sister Anise will be joining them soon.”

“Then…” The hagraven’s voice went dark. Hissing in an ominously choked caw, as the beaked mouth champed and spit. “Then, I be having words. And perhaps liver, with boiled beans and a lovely auld bottle of wine. Fhtfhtfhtfht! Did you bring wine, dearest? You know how I adore a good Skingrad red.”

“I did, Wise One. Allow me tae pour you a glass. And I will tell ye why I have come.”

Tying up her new horse (leaving the body, for Moira would need a snack to distract her from Nemain’s departure) the witch walked at a decent pace behind the hagraven. Crawling, hooked
hands heaving her frail form up the stairs, Moira opened the door to the hovel with a grating creak. “Fáilte, daughter of the People. Be welcomed into my home.”

Nemain stepped inside, forcefully keeping her face blank. Unfeeling, even as she inwardly recoiled at the stench; the buzzing flies that swarmed her as they left the rotting carcasses of men and animal to dart around her ears and sit upon her nose.

Blowing to dislodge the flitty things, Nemain sat where she was bid by Moira. Black feathers had been shed all over the stripped floor. A bed, along with the crooked table and chairs remained the only decorations aside from the typical skulls and beaded hides that a hagraven would use in her practice.

Moira sucked at the wine poured for her in loud, appreciative gulps. Smacking her wrinkled lips, the balding head emerged from the bony shoulders even further. Taking in the sight of Nemain’s tattered robes and muddy boots. “So, darlin’ dear. Why have ye brought auld Moira yer fine company, as well as this delightful vintage? Not just interested in jawing aboot gossip be we, hmmm?”

“I be fair interested in what the word tis amongst the covens, at present.” Nemain took a quiet sip of her own wine. “But perhaps you can lay tae rest a rumor fer me, Old Aunt.”

“Certainly, Nemain, certainly. Ah’ve known ye since y’were but a wee little sprog. Running amuck with that boy - Galan? Halan? Och, I cannae remember much since the turning.”

“His name be Galan. He be a Briarheart, now.”

“Aaaggh!” The hagraven squealed in delight. Long talons prodded Nemain as she bit her lip against an invective, feeling the claws slash against her skin. “I’ll have tae treat that, later. With the salve I always keep on hand. Bless my paranoia, look at how it has come in handy now. “Be that right? Did auld Melka do the honors? Cor, what a tasty treat she be privy tae! And you bein’ sae proud, no doubt, with your man-friend an honorable and right Blessed One. He’ll stand up for ye, I be certain.”

What with the hagraven’s changeable moods, Nemain was not about to enlighten her to the current state of affairs. If Moira had not yet discovered the change that had altered Nemain’s status among the Reachfolk in the past sixteen years, then she could wait a bit longer.

“Aye. Quite. But Moira, do you not remember anything aboot...well. Aboot Madanach?”

“Hooomm.” The hagraven made a soft cawing sigh. Nearly a gentle coo. “Sae handsome and braw, he was. Our mighty WitchKing. I know he be still alive, dear one...dinnae fash yourself over that. We’ll regain what was ours, certain enough. For the Reachfolk will outlast all those blighty giants, those Nords. We’ll stand soon enough with the tusked ones and fight! Orcs and giants will come to our call, werewolves and creeping beasts and spirits. Then the good auld mitherland - the Reach...ahh, the Reach will be ours once more.”

“Moira. This be important. Think back...what do ye recall of my parentage?”

Nemain swallowed, feeling for another dead rabbit as Moira’s eyes turned hungry, fastening upon her bared throat once more. Casting a stronger calming spell, Nemain slit open the furry stomach. Spilling the entrails upon the table in glistening coils of red and pink. The smell hit her; hot and fuggy. A gamey scent that steamed in the cool of the winter air.

She could tell with the way the hagraven trembled that she wished to fall upon the offering like a ravening beast. To snatch it the way she had the Redguard and the other rabbit. To Moira’s credit, she did not - merely picking up with a dainty claw a long loop of intestine which disappeared -
slithering into those blackened lips like some long, savory noodle, the way Moira’s lips spread in a
grin.

“Mmm. A fine morsel, that. Now what you be wanting to know about yer parentage, girl? Do
y’doubt that Melka be yer mam?”

“No. I dinnae doubt that.”

Pouring more wine, the better to distract the old thing, Nemain redirected the conversation. For even
with the Illusion spells, she could see the hagraven begin to stiffen and jerk; the feral power that the
woman Moira had sold her humanity for reasserting itself in fits and starts. Time was short, now.

“I have been told I be the daughter of Melka and...and Madanach, Old One. Thanks to my face, and
my face alone. I always knew I never took after Màthair - her being sae beautiful, and all...but I ne’er
saw the WitchKing’s face. What say ye?”

Warmth softened the hagraven’s mien, as Moira released a quietly mournful cry. The white
expanded around the black pupils, just a bit more. “Och, Nemain. Mo stór, you be his exact image.
Why have I no noticed it before? Hmm.”

Tapping her foot against the floor, Nemain breathed through her mouth against the rot-smell of
mildewed timber and rabbit guts. Waiting impatiently for Moira to collect her thoughts; her
memories.

“Ah, yes...I recall now. T’was the Beltane fires that brought yer Mam and Madanach, then the High
Priest of Hircine together. Och, they did lie together that night, to create ye. And she lay with no one
else for the space of a week.”

“It did nae last, child. The attraction, cor, the flitter-flutter of enthralment. For a priest and priestess
have very different duties, y’ken? Nae love...but something close to it made ye, it seems. Aye. I do
say...ye must be Madanach’s and Melka’s child born o’ power. Conceived by the midsummer flame.
Lucky, lucky wee morsel, hmm.”

Feeling her heart sink within her, Nemain brought out the last rabbit and placed it upon the table.
Daringly, she stretched forth her hand, to carefully pat Moira upon her roughened claws. “Thank ye,
Wise One. Dear Auntie...I could ha’ discovered this truth from no one else. Please...do me the grand
favor of telling Melka - and anyone else who cares to wonder, where I ’ave been. I be staying in
Windhelm, for the time being.”

The hagraven waved her away with a flippant gesture, her fully blackened eyes already fixed upon
the last rabbit. “Think naught of it, dear. Witches see me now and anon. I'll tell yer Mam. Och...and
visit me again, if ye can spare the time. I do sae love our visits.”

Bowing her way out, Nemain kept a steady pace down the stake-lined path to the horse. Forcing
herself to move at a steady, nearly lazed pace...for she could nearly feel the forest watching her,
sending a prickle up the short hairs of her back as she tightened up the saddlebags. The horse snorted
irritably as she heaved off the Vigilante’s body from the beast, dropping it just in the nick of time as
Moira burst from the shack in a yowling scream of flying feathers and mindless hunger.

Jumping upon the horse, Nemain dug her heels in. Not daring to look back, she left Witchmist Grove
at a full gallop, as she heard the liquid gulps and crack of bones. The ringing sound of cawing
laughter, as the hagraven began to feed once more.
The punch, when it came, landed squarely upon her right cheekbone.

Feeling the skin swell, tender like the mush beneath the bruise of an apple, Nemain summoned an evil smile.

“Now y'see, by doing that ye’ve really pissed me off. I be fair knackered, Rolf. But you be about to learn that ye dinnae have me surrounded. Och no. You ’ave merely granted me a new target to practice upon. Many thanks, Stone-Fist the Lesser.”

“Get out of my city, witchborn! You elf-loving filth! Yaaugh!”

They circled one another in the bar room of Candlehearth Hall, waiting for an opening. A clear shot, of any kind, as Nemain ducked and weaved...her smaller form enabling faster movement than the sot could handle. He stumbled beneath one of her swings, a foul mead-soured belch breezing past her nose, making her moue in disgust.

“Bleurgh. Ye be as foul in yer guts as inside yer booze broiled mind, Rolf! Time tae go t’sleep!”

It was hardly any work at all, to echo the lessons in hand-to-hand Ulfric had forcefully drummed into her. Unleashing a force of quick rabbit-punches to the man’s sternum and gut, she grabbed his shoulder and stormed him against the bar to a chorus of resounding cheers and shouts.

Gripping the man’s filthy hair, she smashed his cheek against the table top; hearing Elda cry out as glasses were broken beneath his bulk. “Give in, Nord scum!”

“Alright, alright! You’ve won, you Breton bitch! Get out of my face!”

Preening beneath the applause of the tavern-goers who had gathered to watch the fight, Nemain ignored her busted cheek and hollered herself...pumping her fists into the air. Making the crowd go wild with approval.

“You’ve got some nerve, woman. I like that.” A tall curve of breast brushed past Nemain’s nose, as the svelte figure of a blonde Nord lowered. Coming into view as she shuffled backwards.

“Aye. I like your style. Maybe we could, you know…” The tall Nord winked saucily at her.

Feeling her cheeks heat up (near painfully beneath the injured one) Nemain clapped a hand chilled with frost magic to stave off the swelling.

“I, er, dinnae think so. Um. Thank you for your...interest.”

“Oh, my bold beauty,” The woman laughed, tippling the witch’s hair with her fingers in an affectionate way. “Just call out for Susanna, if you feel a need for warmth tonight. I’ll be waiting.”

Bloody buggering Oblivion. Almost, I wish I swung that way. It would save me from what tis likely going tae be the most awkward reunion of the Fourth Era with the Bear.

In a dazed stupor, Nemain watched as this Susanna sauntered off to serve someone else, shaking her
generous hips in that bit-of-nothing dress. Ignoring the very slight temptation to take the pretty woman up on her offer, Nemain sighed in resignation...itching her neck where a blend of dirt and grease encrusted the skin. *Disgusting.*

Unbidden, an image of Ulfric came to mind as she had last seen him; those clear blue eyes fairly smoldering with want, as she tightened her legs around his waist.

Mmm, but in this fantasy, she did not shy away from him. There was nothing to fear, to cause her worry.

Instead, she pushed him down upon the bench...the Nord falling back willingly. Grasping her with those warm hands that brought her mouth to his; hot heat filling her mouth as his tongue glided against hers. A hand pulled her knee up, pressing the core where she ached so fiercely against the hardness of him, moving in one long, grinding thrust. She fairly gasped, his mouth capturing her very breath, as-

“Well, dearie. Seems you owe me summat for the damage you’ve inflicted upon my poor inn.”

Coming back to reality, Nemain winced as her cheek began throbbing anew. Glancing at the proprietor, she saw the woman with her arms folded. Staring pointedly at her as she woolgathered in public.

“Um...Elda? Elda Early-Dawn? Be your inn capable of a hot, freshly drawn bath and some victuals? I’ve been on th’ road fer quite some time.”

The elderly woman frowned, until Nemain rolled her eyes and plopped twenty septims upon the glass-scattered wood of the bar counter. Gathering the coins up, the innkeeper treated Nemain to a sunny grin. She was missing several teeth. “Of course, my dear. Let me show you to your room. I’ll have a bath and our special of the day delivered to you straight away.”

“Grand.” Limping along after Elda as the woman briskly strode along, Nemain stopped her with a hesitant touch, as the innkeeper opened her door and made to leave. “And...if it’s not too much tae ask, can ye bring me the meal yerself? Susanna be...kindness itself. But I find myself wishing tae be alone, tonight.”

Elda’s eyebrows raised nearly to her hairline. “Whatever suits your fancy, Breton. I understand completely.” Giving her an exaggerated wink, Elda pranced off down the hall.

*Whatever that be about.* Nemain stared longingly at the bed, all open and invitingly laid out with a selection of furs and blankets. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth.

She almost didn’t want to wait for food, or the bath to be brought to her, bucket by bucket to fill the dwarven tub, resting in the corner. What she *really* wanted was to sneak under the cast of invisibility up to the Jarl’s quarters, and inform him that he had been right.

So very, unfortunately right. She was indeed the daughter of Madanach and Melka. And she was a right stubborn fool, for leaving it- whatever it had been, that night - the way she had. All unfinished and horrifically open ended and- and *damn.*
I can see nae way out of it.

Feeling fairly torn, Nemain pressed her hand to her cheek and thought hard upon healing; summoning the flesh to bind and the swelling to flatten. Removing her hand, she pressed her tongue against her inner cheek, feeling victory as she sensed no pain.

-But groaning in abject misery, as another flash of him seared through her skull; the memory of his tongue tracing the seam of her closed lips, darting into her open mouth as she pulled his hair, dragging him even closer to her. Till all she could see, taste or feel was him.

Do I break me trust with Bear, and kill him? Take his heart, in triumph and welcome back to Markarth; returning to Deepwood Redoubt?

Feeling as though a dam were breaking inside, Nemain shut her eyes tightly. Allowing the thought that had hovered - ever present in the back of her mind, to come fully into the light.

...Or shall I stay, and keep me word intact? Continue to train - gods, under him? And see just how far he be willing tae go...

Cutting off that dangerous thought, Nemain set down her travel bag. Sitting herself upon the end of her bed rental, the witch calmly selected the thickest bundle of furs and screamed into it.

Elda popped her head into the room at that exact moment. “Is...everything all right, dearie?”

“Everything be fine.” She managed to utter intelligibly, as Elda and Susanna rushed in with pails of steaming water.

As they filled the bath, Susanna lingered behind as the innkeep shot her a knowing look.

“So...need some help scrubbing your back there?”

Not unless you happen tae be near seventeen stone in brawn, with a smug sadistic grin and aspirations tae the crown. “I be all right. Truly. Please let me be.”

Eating in lazy bites as she bathed, Nemain towelled off and fell into bed. Almost as if there had been some sort of skooma the stew had been laced with; so deeply did she sleep that Nemain did not even dream.

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

A rough boot kick to the bed frame awakened her from Oblivion; her hands cast alight with fire and lightning as she sat up from the furs, ready for anything. “What? Huh? Whuzzat?”

Two Windhelm guards stood before her. Whatever expressions they bore had been masked by the full coverage of helmet, their weapons brandished threateningly as she extinguished her spells.

“Nemain the Forsworn, you are being arrested on suspicion of murder. We are to escort you to the
dungeon cells anon. Come along quietly, now.”

Allowing them to pull her out of bed, her head spun dizzily as iron manacles were snapped around her wrists. *Fool guards...they didnae. even bother to bind her fingers. She could throw all sorts of spells this way.*

“I be uncertain of what exactly yer referring tae. Who is it that I’m supposed to have murdered? I’ve been here all night! Sleeping!”

The guard on her right yanked upon her arm, nearly shoving her over. His voice, muffled by the metallic armor, spoke firmly in condemnation. “Only one Susanna the Wicked, who served you last night here in the inn. She’s been found in the graveyard, all torn apart by what appears to be some sort of foul necromancy. And every citizen in Windhelm knows you traffic in such dark arts. Witch.”

“You’ve been seen in her presence. You were the last individual who spoke with Susanna.” The other guard informed her, as she was frogmarched along, blinking in the sudden blast of snowflake-driven cold, as they walked out from Candlehearth Hall up the steps to the Palace of Kings.

“You may remain silent, or confess now, witch. Whatever you do...may Shor have mercy on your soul.”

Descending the steps took no time at all. She could see barely anything in the dim torchlight that did not hold back the dark.

They threw in a cell that had fresh straw heaped upon it recently; the sharp bedding poking her skin as she tried not to fall over upon her face. Hearing the cell door clang shut, Nemain spit out the hay that had pasted itself upon her mouth and tried again to speak. To reason with the guards.

“You’ve got it all wrong! This be a mistake! I havenae kilt anyone here! Argh, you clowderheads, hearken to me!”

-too late, for they had already departed and gone. Nothing but the cell and a single torch guttering in the draft, to keep her company.

Allowing herself to fall over in the straw, Nemain shivered. Looking up, she felt a drip of water fall upon her face. Touching it, she growled to see it was riddled with dirt and the reddish taint of rust. *Gods damn it all, I just had me bath!*

*Shit. Shit, gods damn my luck...by the Et’Ada and the darkness that eats all things, I be innocent of any murders!*

*Well. At least here. In Windhelm, that is. I'm sure the Silver-Bloods be thinking differently.*

*Gah. Fuck it all to Oblivion. And fuck me too.*

*Shit on a stick.*
My resource for Hagravens, other than actually playing Skyrim, comes from this handy website.

http://en.uesp.net/wiki/Skyrim:Hagraven

"The Forsworn revere hagravens as their matriarchs and leaders. Few creatures match the cunning, depravity and the repulsiveness of the hagravens. They will take through savagery what they cannot win through guile.

Hagravens were once witches that have undergone a ritual, as seen in the quest Repentance. According to Herbalist's Guide to Skyrim, these creatures have traded in their humanity for access to powerful magics, and the transformations they undergo infuse their entire beings with some element of that power."

**Author's Note** So, my thinking is that the hagravens seen in the game usually end up as the big boss of whatever Forsworn camp the player runs through, along with briarhearts, dragons, etc. The more social hagravens usually are surrounded by witches (like at Hag's end, or Orphan Rock) with the more solitary encounters being much rarer.

My headcanon for Hagravens goes like this. So, they've sacrificed a good part of their humanity for the dark powers of Hircine (advanced magical powers, monstrous appearance, etc) so it follows that their personalities are also less human. More animal, I'd say. In a coven, they could probably be kept in check with the witches and briarhearts who serve them...but a solitary hagraven like Moira? Eek. She would go completely feral. Attacking anything, anyone...kind of like the berserker Forsworn who jump you the minute you go remotely close to their camps.

As always, please read and review - and for peaches' sake, let me know if I have any typos or missing words or spelling errors. Sometimes when I copy things, my computer eats my stuff. Thnx.
The Dream

Chapter Notes

A thought bunny created this chapter from a line of dialogue:

"This Sanctuary has been my entire life since I was a young woman. That's when I first discovered my, shall we call it "aptitude," for elimination. I had an uncle, you see. He made certain... unwanted advances. So I killed him. And liked it. Then I killed again. And liked it even more. And so on. I was recruited by the Dark Brotherhood, and have been here ever since. I met my husband Arnbjorn, rose to leadership. And now here we are."

Astrid, Leader of the Dark Brotherhood. Though the only thing she kills in this chapter is my reluctance to make her the star of her own fic. I do love the Dark Brotherhood questline so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ulfric Stormcloak dreamed.

He knew it was a dream, because the face that stared back at him from the reflection of the window glass of the well-to-do farmer’s hut was that of a young man.

The scars that he barely noticed in his waking moments were once again raw and ugly; the lines nearly slashing his left cheek, chin and throat into slices. Hair cropped short, the tidy beard he wore as a youth barely covered the lines worn by fatigue. A rank bitterness that marred his face more deeply than any battle mark ever could.

And in the dream, he knocked briskly upon the iron-bound door.

A slim, pale hand whose loveliness could not be concealed by smears of ash and dirt slowly dragged the door open. Wide forget-me-not eyes of liquid blue stared up at him; the face of such memorable, very human beauty that…

He jerked himself from the hungering daze he had slipped into, nearly forgetting his purpose. “Yes?” The Nord girl inquired meekly, fear apparent in her stance as she kept the door open a mere crack.

“I’m here to deliver a notice of death to the household of Ingvar Highbrow. Is he in residence?”

She opened the door an inch wider. “My uncle is not here right now. May I ask what this is all
The young Ulfric sighed. How he despised this task. Yet he was honor-bound to deliver this - the last of the notices of death, giving peace to the families of men who had formed his squadron in the Imperial Legion. Men long dead and gone, years in the grave. But if he could provide some closure for their loved ones, perhaps... there was just the slightest chance the hole in his heart from the passing of his father might mend.

A father he had barely known (a jolly chuckle, big belly covered in furs as he hugged him goodbye). Having seen him only twice in his life, before and after his time with the Greybeards, Ulfric knew he had been given more time than some with his father, Hoag the Bear of Eastmarch. Could clearly empathize with the sting of receiving word of a loved one’s passing from a mere piece of paper. A funeral with no family in attendance, memory the only reminder of a life lived and lost. It was a small comfort, this notice, but one he could still relay.

“I’m sorry, miss. Your uncle’s brother, Afhren Highbrow, has been officially declared deceased after years of being listed as missing in action. The Empire…” his mouth twitched, the words sour upon his tongue… “thanks his kindred for his exemplary service in life, and wishes his surviving family to find comfort in in the honors to which he will surely be accorded in Sovngarde.”

The girl laughed, opening the door fully. She wore a threadbare blue kirtle with a clean apron wrapped about her slender waist. Older than he had initially thought; for her small but well formed breasts dimpled the cheap fabric of her dress as she ushered him in. The tail of her blonde braid swirled mesmerizingly as she turned, almost like a dance, to put a kettle upon the hearth. “Well, good riddance to him. My bastard father, I mean. I hope you didn’t know him personally enough to take offense, since he dumped me here with Ingvar and his toadstool of a son when I could barely stand.”

Unsure of what to say to that, Ulfric ducked beneath the low lintel of the door as she made an irritated ‘come in’ sign. Looking around, he scanned his surroundings. One door, no other entrances or exits unless one counted the two windows of thick, wavy glass. No one else home. Wealthy enough to purchase glass for windows, but poor enough to only have one cow and a smattering of chickens. Casting a critical eye upon the holes in the young woman’s shoes, he amended his thought. Not wealthy, perhaps, but proud. This Ingvar takes care of his home, but leaves his relatives unshod.

He nearly drew his sword then and there, when the girl surprised him by lightly touching his shoulder. Allowing the few inches of steel he had pulled to slide back in his sheath, Ulfric silently censured himself as the girl retracted her hand, seeming to think better of what she had been about to do. “Ah...sorry. You’re young to be a veteran. Much good it did us all here in Skyrim - not that I blame you, of course, stranger.”

“Here, let me have that notice…” Plucking the parchment out of his hands, she scanned it impartially as her blue eyes narrowed. “Hmph.” Tossing it onto the table she waved her hand towards a seat, beckoning him to sit with a polite smile. Which he did, nerves still jangling at just how easily he had nearly pulled a weapon upon this innocent. A fellow Nord - one of his own Hold, no less. Still too Shor-damned twitchy. Still shying at every shadow and sound, when there’s nothing out there but dust.

“And you can have something to drink, to wash away the taste of those words you were choking upon. My name is Astrid, by the way. What’s yours?”

Hesitating, his title nearly upon the tip of his tongue, Ulfric decided against telling her who he really was. Just one year had passed since the Jarldom had fallen to him, yet he still remained unused to the
stares, the obeisance and gawking that often happened upon being announced by name. If you had just remained with Master Arngeir, none of this would have happened. You’d be chanting upon some mountaintop...not flummoxing some poor maiden with your fucking awkwardness. I wish Galmar was here. He always knows just what to say to the women...

“-My name is Galmar, uh, Leadfoot. I hope my opinion of the War...er, my service in the Legion was not quite that obvious.”

“It was. And you are, by the way. Obvious, I mean. I can see you undressing me in your mind even when my back is turned, sir.” Her voice was mocking.

Feeling himself heat beneath the scars, Ulfric turned away. A pottery cup clinked upon the table before him as Astrid sat down on the chair she drew up, scraping the seat against the timbered floor to sit uncomfortably close.

Years. Years had passed, and every damn fucking time, this happened. Every cockstand he got, even upon waking, that face - Elenwen! Rose in his thoughts unbidden, tearing through the tremblings of lust like a knife through parchment. With only shredded remnants of boyhood fantasy remaining, sodden and bereft.

Leaving Ulfric almost perpetually aroused and yet dissatisfied. He had tried, after the war’s end, to move on. To forget. Had attempted to be intimate with the women who were fascinated by his title or titillated by the promise of gold and status... allowing these females to come join him in his bed. The bed of a young Jarl who hadn’t a fucking clue what he was doing. Especially after the shitstorm that had been Markarth, where he had tried - and failed, to do what he had seen as right. And only the dead, to see what you’ve accomplished with all your words and deeds. How will Tsun greet you now, butcher of the Reach?

It never lasted long. When things progressed to mutual nakedness, he would see their eyes widen at the scars. Jarring him from losing himself to the moment, as vividly he would see the torture chambers in stark relief instead of the girl he was trying to bed. See an elven overlord, pinched face gloating in sadistic mastery, as his damn head replayed the memory of the unfortunate Nord Ulfric had been tied up next to scream upon being snipped; his sac and phallus joining countless others in a macabre display. Labeled and pickled in a jar that Elenwen kept upon her desk with an unopened bottle of brandywine and fresh quills. Unmanned, fear stifling his breath that he, Ulfric would be next in line to donate to the jar, gods no, death first...

Unable to finish, the women would be summarily tossed from his bedchamber...confused and offended in their smallclothes, as Ulfric ground the heels of his hands into his eyes over and over. Striving to banish the sight of her, the god-damned bitch who had stolen his libido...his manhood in every way but the literal. Taking away the pleasures of the flesh that every other hot-blooded man in his company enjoyed. Leaving him cold, growing ever numb...every subsequent attempt to try devolving only into fear.

All this flitted through Ulfric’s head as he pulled the tea closer and forced himself to think only of tactics. The farmhouse - more like a cabin - had one door, the sole exit in and out. Two windows that could suffice in a pinch, though he’d probably become stuck tight in the attempt. He saw no weapons save a worn, overly sharpened knife over by the stove. Far enough that he could relax, for it would take him but a moment to Shout to disarm, if the woman were so inclined. One chimney, far too narrow - another point of entrance for enemy spellcasting. Kyne’s holy tits, there are no damned
Blowing upon her tea, the Nord girl’s face was sly. “Oh, don’t misunderstand. I don’t mind. You’re a fine figure of a man, and it’s quite the shitty job your superior has handed to you, Galmar. How many death notices have you passed out already?”

“Dozens. Too many to remember.” He sipped the tea, hardly tasting it as images of the dead flashed into being. Lines upon lines of them, piled in the streets of the Imperial City. Slumped upon doorsteps and half fallen into the bay, bobbing in the water as the fish fed in a frenzy. The smell…

He noticed she was motioning to take his tea, which had grown cold while he dawdled in nightmarish thoughts. “Here. It’s no good unless it’s hot. Well, I owe you thanks for letting me know of my father’s demise, at the very least.”

Gliding to the door, she latched the lock. And turned, fingers straying over her breasts. Playing with the ribbon upon her braid as his mouth grew bone-dry. “Is there…anything I can do, to show my gratitude?”

Yes! No. Damn. “Nothing that I could ask for in good conscience, Astrid.”

The pretty Nord huffed as she approached once more. Sitting astride his lap in a practiced motion, he had no time to react as swiftly her hands tugged down her bodice. Revealing a creamy expanse of bosom, all rose tipped and pert. Made just for his mouth to suckle; to touch…like a lodestone that drew his gaze, he was unable to look away.

His back went ramrod straight, as hands still trapped by steely wristguards dug into the sides of the chair. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Oh, it’s the best idea. Here I am, bored to tears, and here you are. All…noble, and so damn tense I could snap you with the barest lick. Come on.” Tilting her hips against him, Astrid grinned to see his eyes nearly roll back, as he groaned through clenched teeth. “It’ll be fun.”

“It’s…not right. I don’t even know you.”

Those treacherous hips dug into his stiffening cock once more, teasing out another sob as she pulled her arms out of the sleeves of her kirtle. Bearing her more fully to him, as heat roared inside his veins. “Nonsense. I’m Astrid, and you’re Galmar…if that is even your real name. I noticed you stammer, you know. But that doesn’t matter now. All that matters—” Her fingers pulled at the strap of his pants, seeking the release to the buckles of his greaves. “—Is what we can do for each other. You take my meaning?”

Against his will, one of his hands slid around her waist as she stripped off one of his greaves. Licking his lips, he sat stunned as Astrid yanked off the rest of the armor covering his legs, along with his belt and any self control he could claim to possess. “I think you’re getting the raw end of the deal. What can I do for you?”

Bunching her skirt in his hands, Ulfric forced himself to draw one ragged breath. Then another, as Astrid seemed to think upon what to say. Her blue eyes faded slightly.

“Don’t shortchange yourself. You have something I greatly desire...” Her breath smelt of tea, warm and sweet. Wrapping her arms around his neck, the chair creaked as she moved her lips against his
chapped mouth; an almost kiss.

“You...please. Make me forget.”

Forget what, he didn’t know. He hardly had the mental capacity to string two words together, as she sank onto him through his pants. A tease, as the friction rubbed them both raw in a near agonizing shield; her mouth claiming his in a scalding rush of teeth and tongue.

A rip was heard as he nearly tore the dress from her, lifting her up in his hands he stood from the chair. Nearly falling over, her feet that had tuckeds themselves around his hips helped pull his pants down, impatient as those soft lips peppered him with kisses. Small nips to his chin, his scars, his lower lip that fairly inflamed what he brought to bear, hot and hard beneath her.

Watching, fearful as she sank down upon him, Astrid’s face glowed in wild triumph. Remaining her own face, unaltered. No tinge of yellow appeared, as he marvelled at this unforeseen miracle. Clear blue eyes remained unclouded by amber, as that temptingly full, human mouth formed words that spurred him into action. “Don’t just stand there, you great lummox, move!”

He moved. He nearly broke the table, slamming her onto it. Her hands twisted through his hair against his scalp, digging in almost painfully as he pounded her tight, warm cunt with furious strokes, gasping as he buried his face in her shoulder. Like a concussion blast, the orgasm ripped through him with the force of a singing hurricane; making him cry out as she bit his ear, pulsing around his cock as she came shortly after.

Shaking, Ulfric held her tightly. She was sweating now, the odor sweet and salty as his mouth reached her ear; nipping her gently in return. Practically drugged from the dull fog of afterglow, it took him awhile to realize that the hair cascading across his face was no longer wheat blonde, but brown.

Ash dark, like smoke. The smell of sweat no longer sweet, but rust rich like blood.

Feeling a vague sense of trepidation, Ulfric slowly pulled back. Strands of that brown hair followed, caught upon his beard. Tickling his nose as oh my gods-

-Small hands enclosed his throat. Tightening, choking him as the mist-grey eyes of Nemain stared back at his look of horror in laughing amusement. Her crooked teeth pulled pouty lips in a wicked smile. A smile that widened, as black cobwebs speckled his vision. Warning him that he was about to pass out, from lack of air.

“Och, fear thuaidh...did I tire you out? So much for the vaunted stamina of Nords!” Her voice deepened as she spoke, a hollow bell of dark profundity that sent an icy chill through him, as he struggled to breathe, to loosen those clawed hands, nonono-

“Allow me to put...you... to SLEEP...”

**********
Awakening with a rough bark of shock, the Jarl of Windhelm fell out of bed.

His hips ground the smear of his night-dream further into his bedding, as he groaned and slammed a fist against the floor.

Almost. He had almost gotten the little witch out of his head, where she had been ceaselessly distracting him for the past three weeks of absence. He had even, he thought as he hit his forehead against the ground repeatedly, undertaken a trip to Winterhold. To check upon the Stormcloaks stationed there, as well as to visit his old Legion friend Korir, the current Jarl.

Korir had been as obstreperous as ever. Ulfric had sat through the obligatory hour of complaint about the college, mages, elves ( fuck, the man was more wroth with magic itself than even Ulfric was); finally steering him towards the topic of dragons and rumors of dragons. Only to be frustrated once more, as Korir had nothing new to tell him.

Ulfric had hoped that the ruler of Winterhold - one of the four Old Holds settled by the ancient Nords, dubiously famous for its College of mages - would know more about the reappearance of dragons. All the history books he had pored over listed them as long dead and gone; the cult of the dragon priests disappeared to the depths of long buried barrows and cautionary tales of the draugr - undead warriors that guarded them still.

Nothing explained the strangely fortuitous arrival of the black dovah at Helgen; the largest and most evil specimen Ulfric had ever seen to date. He hoped Nemain would be available to provide further details about the dragon at Kynesgrove.

-For there was not the slightest chance, he remanded himself, that the witch would manage to get herself killed or eaten. She would probably give the beast indigestion.

Shor knew, he had endured his own pains thanks to the Reachwoman. Every time he ate at the table in the great hall, his gaze was drawn to that particular bench. He couldn’t eat an apple without remembering how the juices had tasted fresh from her lips. It had nearly spurred him to follow, seeing her run away up the stairs from him, when the witch ran from nothing and no one…

Yes, it was driving him fairly mad, waiting for news from her. It did not take weeks to travel to Kynesgrove, and the Jarl found himself growing worried. But he would bide his time. He had to. Gods, he couldn’t help to think of it even as he shunned the idea as it formed- to get her in the same situation once more, sleep dazed and dressed in that see-through nightgown some night soon upon her return...

Wake up. Dreams are not reality. And you are late. Rolling up from his prone position, he stripped his soiled clothing off completely and was reaching for a new set of pants when the maid Skjora barged into his room.

“A little warning!” He called out, hastily pulling up his pants as his old nursemaid sniffed. Casting a disparaging glance at his sheets, she bundled them up without touching the stains. Giving Ulfric an
arch look as she threw them in a hamper, along with the other socks and used garb he had thrown all over his room, Skjoró began her age-old tirade.

“Pffht. Don’t take that tone with me, Ulfric. Nought for nothing did I feed you at my breast when your dear mother – may she rest in eternal splendor – died in the birthing bed. Aye, I’ll scrape and bow like all the rest, once you’ve attended to your appearance. You’ve quite a crowd waiting downstairs, and a Jarl must look the part.”

*Her mouth runs like a drunkard’s vomit*, he thought uncharitably. Searching for his boots, which had disappeared somewhere... *hah. There, by the dresser. Don’t say it old woman, don’t say it...*

“-Considering your night was ‘clearly’ less than restful. And what a waste, for as I’ve told ye - time and time again! You **must** beget an heir. You **must** marry, boy. What are ye doing, wasting your nights spilling seed upon sheets?”

He growled, voice muffled by the shirt he was currently pulled over his shoulders. “What I spill and where is none of your concern. I’ll marry when I’m damn good and ready...there are far more pressing matters to attend to. Who is waiting?”

“Oh, the usual sorts.” Placing a covered tray before him on the end table, Skjoró lifted the lid as he immediately snatched a flitch of horker steak and stuffed it in his mouth as she tutted. “Paw, and that’s why you’re not wearing Mara’s medallion round yore neck, you brute. You don’t care to even pretend. Women like it when you at least try to make believe ye aren’t a total savage.”

“Why pretend when they already know, marm?” Patting her shoulder, Ulfric pulled on his fur cloak and fastened it, wincing as the stickpin drew a drop of blood. “Who is there?”

“That Ambarys Rendar and Belyn Hlaalu, come to gnaw your ear off about the Gray Quarter’s needs again. Viola Giordano and that Lonely-Gale fellow, your second Galmor with news from the western front. Jorleif, with summat urgent about the murders that have been happening of late. I think that’s all, unless more have come.”

“Murders?”

“Aye, murders! Three women dead, and the killer still at large. I know you’ve been gone these last two weeks, but surely the news has hit the roads by now! And the city be fair teeming with hearsay and finger-pointing. Shor’s Beard! I can’t imagine what those knuckleheads be thinking, throwing our darling girl Nemain into prison on a whim. Tis not like ‘she’ could be the murderer, so sweet she is. Been gone all this time, after all, but nooo... as a mage and a suspect Viola says tis better safe than sorry. Gods save us all from idiots. That Jorleif has been spinning his wheels ever since the first murder took place, and now-”

Ulfric turned to stare at Skjoró’s creased face in unbelieving fury. “...What?”

**Chapter End Notes**

There will be more 'Blood on the Ice' questline chapters coming right up. Had to get this POV out though, and it didn't fit in the narrative of the next chapter all that well. I ‘love’ the idea of Ulfric being bossed around by his old nanny, as she gripes at him to get
married and pop out a few babies.

Dragonsreach has a couple of older cleaning ladies running amok, so why not Windhelm? Haha. I die.

**ALSO, there is historical basis for the...uggh....nastiness of the penis jar I mentioned that is in Elenwen's possession. During the second World War and in Vietnam, the Japanese and Vietnamese liked to cut off American GIs private parts and stuff them in their mouths, often choking them to death upon them. One jar of pickled penises (penii?) was found in the possession of an Imperial Japanese officer who ran a POW prison camp. Disgusting stuff...I'm not going to post a link. You can look it up yourself if you want, but I warn you...it ain't pretty.

Point being - Ulfric is fucking traumatized. There is a very, very good reason he hates elves, magic, Thalmor, the very idea of the above things, etc.

Comment with questions, or review if I've boogered anything up grammar or typo wise.
“People forgot; it was in the nature of people to forget, to blur boundaries, to retell stories to come out the way they wanted them to come out, to remember things as how they ought to be instead of how they were.”

-Robin McKinley, ‘Spindle’s End’

Looking around at the squabbling group of mixed men and mer seated before him, the bickering still going strong after hours spent in conference, Ulfric drummed his fingers upon the stone armrest of Ysgramor’s throne. Mulling over the Forsworn woman currently cooling her heels in his dungeon, aptly named ‘the Bloodworks’.

“You be too quick tae condemn all views with which ye disagree, Bear.” Nemain had insisted a mere few months before, a sneer twisting those lovely lips into a sinister curve.

“Outright rejecting ideas that dinnae attract ye, that be the sign of a narrow mind.” The tiny woman poked him in the chest, invading his personal space as he struggled to hold his tongue. The twist of her mouth lifted into a superior smirk, seeing him thusly affected.

“And th’ sign of a poorly cultivated intelligence.” She added sweetly.

*Says the backwoods hedge-witch.* “The Dunmer have lived in the Gray Quarter for decades since the Red Year...and this situation, mark me well, is one of their own creation. Note that I say ‘lived’ and not ‘worked!’ Nearly half their number subsist upon handouts and the charity of neighbors rather than the labors of their own damn hands! Reparations in regards to their ‘refugee’ status have been in place for just as long, and I refuse to weaken Windhelm any further by caving in to their outrageous demands.”

“Bigotry be always ignorant, Ulfric. A wise man seeks tae understand - tae see the truth in ideas with which he doesnae agree.”

Leaning over to dwarf her with his greater height, Ulfric felt his own face deepen into a frown at her pious words. *The little hypocrite.* “Right. And that’s why the Forsworn have continued killing Nords to this day in Markarth and the surrounding Reach. Because your People are so fucking wise and tolerant of others unlike themselves.”

“Cúl tóna, they be far wiser than you! You be gone sae often, yer left hand doesnae know what the right be doing! Yer city suffers and -” She was practically stuttering in rage, face bright red as he clenched his fists, restraining himself from reaching out to physically throttle her - “ye go off to play war! A war ye cannae win! Not like this, all spread out too thin with no allies tae count upon!”

“An ally is merely an enemy, delaying the moment of ultimate betrayal!”

“Cor! Why not wall yerself off from th’ rest of Skyrim like...like an orc stronghold then? I doona have to cast any bones to tell ye that that do be the future I see!”
“Perhaps then the fucking Empire would cease demanding taxes to support their crumbling soft southern lands, and allow us the god damn right of setting our own laws! To worship Talos in whatever way we see fit. I’ve bowed beneath the Thalmor before...been forced to kiss Aldmeri ass like the rest of the fucking Legion, and I swear by Shor, Kyne and all the gods - never again!”

“Like anything stops ye from doin' whatever the Oblivion y’want!”

“You insolent bitch!”

“Téigh trasna focáil ort féin! Augh!”

That argument had led to a rather undignified wrestling match, causing Galmar to pry them apart with gruff words that fell deaf upon both their ears. Ulfric was left with a new furrow of scratches from her fingernails down his unscarred cheek, and a rigorous itch from the electricity she had zapped him with - retaliating as he shook her like a ragdoll. Leaving bruises he had apologized stiffly for, later, as they sat upon the rooftop for their lesson that night in a silently accorded cease fire.

They had learned never to veer that far off course in their discussions touching the rebellion he currently waged, or the touchy matter of Markarth or the Forsworn ever again. But it had prompted a good deal of thought upon his part, occupying the space left unoccupied in his mind by troop movements and fomenting plots.

*Am I truly biased against the Dunmer of my city?*

Seated at the high table that still bore half filled bottles of mead, sujamma and stacks of paperwork, the Jarl could see Ambarys Rendar gaze up at him in undisguised loathing. His companion Belyn Hlaalu remained far more circumspect; listening attentively to a hysterical Viola Giordano, whose hands waved and fluttered like a bird without a perch.

“You say I'm just snooping around bothering people, but I'm trying to save lives! Those pitiful excuses for guards say they're too busy with the war - I say what good is winning a war if we're still terrorized by one of our own?”

“Another Nord woman. Murdered.” Ambarys scoffed, blinking red eyes as they narrowed in ridicule at Viola. Glancing back at Ulfric, the Dunner’s sharp features contorted in annoyance. “None of this matters to me. Until someone takes a Dunner, I say let Windhelm deal with its own problems. Why should I stick my neck out for some snowback who’d just as soon chop off my outstretched hand? You’re a romantic fool, Viola. Murder happens. Deal with it.”

Cutting off Viola’s blustering retort with a wave of his hand, Ulfric sighed. “That is enough.”

Leaning forward, Ulfric cast off the lazy demeanor that was his shield during court appearances. Bringing his full awareness front and center, the Jarl fixed upon the Dunner clumped together on one side of the bench. The Nords and Imperials occupied the opposing bench. Both groups looked up at him in a variety of expressions, ranging from bored indifference to outright hostility. *Damn elves. Still holding themselves aloof, even now as we are under attack from everyone else. It will not do.*

“Master Rendar. Correct me if I’m wrong, but do you not live here in Windhelm? Is the Gray Quarter now governed beneath one Ambarys Rendar and not myself?”

“Well, I-”
Refusing to give an inch, Ulfric leaned further over. Templing his hands, interlacing his fingers as he allowed just a hint of wrath to leak into his voice. “Why yes, you do. And judging by your business reports - your taxes are late, by the way - the New Gnisis Cornerclub has been doing a roaring trade in spirits and gossip. Wouldn’t you say that what transpires in Windhelm affects all who live in this fair city? Would it not behoove you to join your efforts with the other citizens, to find and capture this killer of women who has been allowed to run free? Does this not matter to you?”

“Taxes!” Ambarys practically spit. “Your taxes go to fund a conflict that is directly opposed to our interests! ‘Skyrim for the Nords?’ By Azura, I’ve lingered in this frozen cesspool since before you were born! Little enough of my profits go to my own purse, as anyone could see from taking a walk down the Grey Quarter. Our streets are blocked with trash, your Nord filth flowing downwards into our gutters and alleys! Our roofs leak, the stone walls falling around our ears in holes, riddled with skeevers and fleas! Pickpockets, beggars and thieves haunt our district, stealing what little we do earn. And what do you do about it, you and your court and your wretched guards? Nothing!”

“No, my Jarl…” The Dunmer’s voice dripped in scorn. “The Empire is good for the Dunmer, and what’s good for the Dunmer is what I will support! I care nothing for your Talos or your fight, and well you should be reminded of it!”

Reminding himself to breathe calmly; betraying nothing of the fury he felt, Ulfric released his hands to lie open in supplication upon his knees. Bare and vulnerable his body language may have been, but his tone brooked nothing but admonishment.

“Master Rendar. Ever since your people were invited by my ancestors to settle here after the eruption of the Red Mountain, efforts have been made to accommodate the influx of immigrants from Morrowind. An entire island - Solstheim, was gifted in the sixteenth year of the Fourth Era in a show of friendship and compassion between our two peoples. Yes, such indifference we Nords have, for the plight of your people, Ambarys.”

“Dunmer have always had the same rights as Nords of Skyrim; to pursue free enterprise and entrepreneurship. You may own businesses. Purchase property. Stalls, shops, farms, anything a man or mer might wish to choose as a sustainable livelihood. The very taxes you have declined to pay...do you not realize that they are roughly twenty percent lower than the taxes required of Nord business and property owners? A remnant of my tolerant forebear and his policies. Perhaps a lack of foresight on his part, I think.”

“And insofar as crime is concerned...well. Your problems may not be entirely of your own creation, Dunmer, but I cannot say I sympathize much based upon the evidence. How many pickpockets and thieves bear red eyes and gray skin?”

As Ambarys moved his mouth soundlessly, the Jarl opened his hands wide in an imploring sweep. “Come now, Mer. Let us be reasonable. What if your daughter was the next one found upon a stone plinth by some passerby? Her nude form bared for all to see, the organs torn out like a horker upon the butcher’s block? What would you do then? Would your elven pride finally break?”

Belyn was the next to speak, shaking his head ever so slightly as the Cornerclub owner seethed. “My Jarl, we have come before your court many times in search of redress of wrongs. Not just of the...conflicts that Ambarys here has brought to your attention, but other grievances that have been summarily dismissed by your steward that ought not to have been so ignored. Thefts, repair of city-owned sewers, rapes that have gone uncontested...with the perpetrators walking free. And near every time, your steward refuses to hear us, or give us due process for the issues we as Dunmer face in Windhelm.”
“How can there be an open discourse when we have no voice to speak with? Why should we care, when it is abundantly clear the Nords care little for our problems?”

Ulfric smiled thinly. “That is a problem that I am of a mind to remedy. Immediately.”

He lifted his voice to carry across the length of the hall, drawing the attention of the Thanes and courtiers to him as their speaking quieted. “It has come to my attention that I have been remiss in my duty as Jarl of Eastmarch and ruler of Ysgramor’s city, Windhelm. The war I wage is a cause of which I believe in most ardently, and it will remain at the forefront of my priorities. But you, my people, are the backbone of Skyrim. Her strength and her lifeblood. I cannot allow a murderer to roam free and terrorize my citizens.”

Turning a cold glare upon his steward, Ulfric raised an eyebrow. “Nor will I allow anyone bearing my crest to wrongfully imprison anyone based upon scant evidence. Wroth as I am to alter tradition, it seems changes must be made for the good of all.”

“My Jarl, I must protest. Missus Giordano has been quite insistent that it is a matter of safety. After Susanna’s death, and the interviews that were taken of the residents at Candlehearth Hall…” Jorleif spoke for the first time in an hour, his watery eyes darting nervously to Ulfric, then back again to the door that led to the Bloodworks.

“I do...I mean, I believe we have caught the killer! The witch obviously has been studying tomes of dark lore, and I can bring them from her quarters as proof of evidence if the court will allow me a moment. I think it unwise to-”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Belyn Hlaalu.”

“Yes, my Jarl?” The Dunmer farmer looked positively unenthused to be addressed. At least the Mer bore some semblance of decorum; the scarlet fury wafting from Ambarys could peel paint.

Ulfric regarded them all, concentrating upon the farmer. “Master Hlaalu, if you would spearhead the investigation of these murders along with Jorleif, Viola and the city guards, I would be most appreciative. In fact, should the murderer be apprehended through your actions, I will raise you to be a steward by my side. A voice to be heard, twin to Jorleif in influence and weight of office.” He nodded in satisfaction at Belyn’s stunned look of shock. “A Dunmer in power, at last. Does this not please you?”

“My Jarl, this is simply not done! He-” Squawked Jorleif in a panic, only halted in his flow of words when the Jarl’s finger paused in midair.

And pointed, straight to him. “You have some explaining to do, old friend. This situation has gotten completely out of hand. I expected better from you.”

Flushed in humiliation, the steward nodded begrudgingly as Ulfric fixed his attentions upon the other members of his council. The Shatter-Shield patriarch was here, but he had not the time to mediate the wage discrepancies between the Nord and Argonian dock workers. That would have to wait for another session of court, for the light passing through the windows was already creeping low upon the carpets; the tell-tale sign of days’ end.

Examining the remaining members of his court for any signs of displeasure, Ulfric saw the old sea captain brush off Viola’s wandering hands. Lonely-Gale barely spoke on a good day (and was probably ecstatic that Viola had been assigned to work with Belyn Hlaalu instead of pursuing him, Ulfric thought in some amusement). The elderly Imperial bint was truly a force of nature. And perhaps given some direction, her single minded pursuit of the killer would bear fruit.
“Galmar.”

His second in command snorted awake from where he had been dozing off at table. “Yes, Ulfric?”

“Find that useless brother of yours and give him a very clear warning, else he ends up in the stocks. My patience has all but run out with him of late.”

Niranye, the Altmer who kept a stall in the Stone Quarter had been beaten and robbed by unknown assailants last night. Ulfric suspected it had been Galmar’s racist bullying sot of a brother. Though he had no proof - and unlike his cowardly louse of a steward, he was not so inclined to immediately imprison any soul without concrete evidence of wrongdoing.

Windhelm seemed to have stirred itself into a hotbed of tension and fearmongering as he had been about his errands; the stalls that had sold bootlaces and axes now peddling charms that claimed to repel foul magics (the magic in question being vague enough that the purveyors of the charms could get away with a broad claim of benefits, selling charms like batches of hot sweetrolls). Instead of imparting blessings, his priests of Talos were going about decrying mages and magic in general, drumming up even more discord. Tempers were running high as markets often were cleaned out by mid-afternoon, as paranoid shoppers bought and stored produce ‘in case’ of siege by mob. There even had been talk of riots.

And so of course, the Dunmer had brought the case of Niranye up in court - claiming that this act surely proved that change was needed. Completely ignoring the fact that three - three! Nord women have been murdered in plain sight for body parts. Not Dunmer women- Nords. Ysmir take them all.

Yes, change was required. Ulfric merely remained uncertain of which changes should take place first. He continued to address Galmar. “Remind him that though I have no proof of Rolff’s wrongdoing, it is only a matter of time until he slips up...and when that happens, Galmar, he will do time. Being your brother only grants him so much clearance for tomfoolery.”

“All must contribute to the good of Windhelm, or we will all fall together. Master Rendar, please attend to Niranye with this pouch of septims along with my condolences for the loss of her valuables and her injuries. See that she has what she needs to recover. Torbjorn Shatter-Shield, I’m afraid I don’t have the time to address the accusations levied by Master Free-Winter. It will have to hold until the next council.”

“Ambarys Rendar.”

The Mer’s voice was resigned, still laced with resentment. “Yes, my Jarl?”

Ulfric pondered the wisdom of his choice for just a moment more, then made the decree. “As of now, all residents, business owners and holders of property pay equal tax across the Districts of Windhelm.”

The Dunmer stood in uproarious clatter, shouting down the announcement. Ambarys was actually turning purple with apoplexy, unable to speak in the face of ‘equal treatment’, Ulfric thought snidely. Brunwulf Free-Winter was shaking his head, Viola struggled to speak over everyone else, and Captain Lonely-Gale looked as though he wished he were anywhere but here.
The Jarl’s voice erupted into a rumbling dictum. “Sit down.”

Hubbub subsided with whispers and stony red squints as Ulfric spoke chidingly. “Yes, you will pay more taxes than you are accustomed to. These increased funds - which will be fairly adjusted to be equal what any other citizen, Nord or not pays - will then be matched by Windhelm’s coffers to upgrade the sewage system, the roads and housing of the Gray Quarter. Repairs that indeed have been pushed back in the work queue for too long. Winter is upon us, and construction will have to be held off until spring for safety reasons. But they will take place.”

“Septims have to come from somewhere, Master Rendar, and since you have fairly made my ears bleed with all your talk of equality, well. Now you have it. Congratulations.”

“As for the rest of you, you are dismissed. Court re-adjourns tomorrow.”

Ulfric’s legs ached from being seated for so long, as he walked haltingly to pass the table where many lingered, striving to gain his attention. They could wait. There would always be something, he had learned in the decades spent reigning over Eastmarch Hold. Some issue to contend with, a law to be amended. Someone’s dainty that had been stolen, someone’s wife tupped by a brother in law whose cuckolded husband sought revenge.

Better to attend to things in a timely manner, in court with a full complement of witnesses. For he had learned to his detriment that it was all too easy to fabricate makeshift stories when no one was around to corroborate a meeting with a Jarl. After one memorable debacle fifteen years ago, Ulfric was pointedly on guard around any female who requested an audience alone with him. The lovely Redguard woman had been all smiles; elegance itself. She had also been quite an adept assassin. He bore her blade marks upon his back, still.

Taking his evening meal in the blessed silence of his room, with a spare nod for Skjora as she left him in peace...Ulfric reflected that one woman - irritating out of proportion to her diminutive size - required next to nothing to fluster him completely.

Why Nemain had not returned to the Palace of Kings upon her return two days ago, but instead had chosen to slumber in Candlehearth Hall, he couldn’t guess. What it meant did not bode well. For him or for Kynesgrove. Gods, let someone have survived that damn dragon. Let there be more than ash and smoke.

Did she hate him for taking that kiss?

Pushing down the niggling thought that betrayed an unmanly sort of overweening longing, Ulfric focused upon what was important in the here and now.

He would allow Nemain the courtesy to speak for herself. Ulfric had heard varied accounts of the fistfight between her and Rolff Stone-Fist, enduring blow-by-blow retellings of how she had won. He had listened to stories of her flirting outrageously with the maidservant of the inn that had led in turn to another eyewitness swearing up and down that they- Susanna and Nemain- had been overheard making torrid, noisy love, splashing bathwater everywhere.

Which had nearly made him choke as he held back a laugh at the unlikely scenario, pleasant as it was to imagine. That particular testimonial had come from Stenvar the sellsword, so Ulfric would give it
what credence the known lecher was due. Which was to say, none.

There were just as many stories of seeing Nemain standing red-handed over the body of Susanna in the graveyard. Some said she had been sleeping all night, that it had been a Dunmer who had been seen running away from the scene of the crime. Others pointed fingers at Helgird, the Priestess of Arkay with her collection of ancient Nord artifacts. Next I’ll hear bards singing of how Nemain hopped upon a broom, cackling as she soared over the Stone Quarter silhouetted against Secunda’s light. Fucking bullshit.

What was the elusive truth of the matter? As he pushed the heavy doors of the Bloodworks open, Ulfric realized he both longed for and feared the answer.

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Ulfric lifted the torch from the wall, peering through the darkness to the cells. Two occupied cells, where he had expected only one. “Who is this?”

A cloud of frizzled, dark hair popped up from a haybale. Scurrying as she shed pieces of straw, Nemain gripped the bars of her cage, rattling the manacles against the steel. Her grey eyes shone like lamps in the torchlight, his gut coiling at the condemnation he found there. “Milord Ulfric, meet Aventus Aretino. A child tossed in here by one o’ yer guards fer trying tae summon Sithis, tae save him from the nasty bitch what runs the orphanage ye Nords sling yer spawn intae. By the gods, be this really what happens tae those what have nae parents here?”

Stepping closer to the cell on the left, Ulfric lifted the torch closer. It was a boy- hard to say if he was Imperial or Nord, as he cowered in the corner blinking rapidly against the abrupt appearance of the light. Appearing frightened out of his wits.

And very, very young. “I wasn’t hurting anyone, I swear! I used the things - my mother’s bones, from the Hall of the Dead. To ask for help, that was all. I didn’t steal nothing! Just don’t send me back to Riften, please!”

As her fingers tapped upon the bars to get his attention, Nemain pressed her face against them. Taptaptap ...her hands were clean, he noticed, yet reddish gore remained beneath the beds of her claw-like nails. A stain she could not expunge.

He forced himself to look beyond her hands, scrutinizing the strange expression in her tired eyes as they stared at one another. Their first meeting since that night, in the hall. He felt a dip in his navel...warm heat filling the hollowness, like the burn of mead as those small hands squeezed the thickness of the bars. Caressing them like a lover.

“Did you do it?”

A solemn expression passed over her face, shifting as they both noticed the small head of Aventus popping out of the bars of his cage, straining to see what they were doing. Giving him a sly wink, the woman pushed her face even closer; squishing her cheeks between the metal until her lips poofed into a pucker, eyes crossing crazily. “Doeyy wook wike a murberer?”
Aventus giggled. Seeing Ulfric’s flat look in response, Nemain pulled back with a pop.

“Alright, alright, fear thuaidh. I be taking this seriously. And no, I didnae kill the wench. So y’may as well let me out, right now, for I’ve been a very good witch. I havenae escaped, though yer fool guards left me practically unbound. I could ha’ cast Fear or Frenzy at any time - but I held back! Sae y'see, tis impossible that I be guilty.”

“Many people claim they saw you and Susanna together alone. It was the last time anyone saw her alive. So forgive me if I do not entirely believe you.” And why did you choose to sleep at Candlehearth Hall? Why did you not come to see me upon your return?

She scoffed, the vocalization turning into a raw hacking cough as he looked at her in concern. “Why - ugh, this cold - would I be wanting to kill ‘er? We bear an agreement, remember Bear?”

Nemain sniggered at her own pun, still choking with every wavering breath. The rattle of fluid in her lungs raised a frisson of alarm in his head, causing him to step closer with the sputtering torch.

Her skin was more blanched pale than usual...her cheeks wan and eyes dull. Despite the chill of the dungeon, sweat ran thickly down her forehead. There was nothing - her cell was entirely empty, save for her and a pile of hay. Shit.

“You’re ill, Reachwoman.”

“Oh, and how’d ye guess?” She laughed coarsely, grimacing as he brought the torch up next to the cage bars. “Please, doona hold it so close. The light hurts tae see, after a full day and night of darkness. Aye, I think I be ill from the fine conditions of yer Bloodworks. It be very cold here.”

“S-so cold I could blow cloud rings with my breath! Like the d-dragon Miss Nemain was telling me all about!” Aventus chattered excitedly. “I think I saw a skeever too, but it ran away when I threw a rock at it. It didn’t c-come back. I’ve been looking for it, though.”

Ulfric looked at the child askance. The boy was positively encrusted with dirt and smears of grime; his eyes black and overly bright. “Are you sick as well, boy?”

“Nay. Aventus has...been left alone fer too long.” Nemain winced, as Aventus shuddered back at the attention he was receiving. Crawling into his bed of straw, he cast a longing look at the door of the dungeon, then turned away from Ulfric and Nemain both. Ignoring them, as he began burying himself in the hay, quick sharp movements as he soon disappeared from sight.

The woman tilted her head, inspecting his face. “Ask me later aboot him. It tis...a fair saddening story. Och, you havenae been sleeping lately either, have you. I can tell.”

He refused to contemplate the jittery leap his heart gave with her innocent query. She can ask after your health without it meaning anything untoward, asshole. “I've been on the road these past few weeks. Just got back yesterday to this maelstrom of shite. Almost wish I had stayed in Winterhold.” Ulfric cracked a grin. “Almost.”

She covered her mouth with her sleeve as she coughed, clearing her throat as her shoulders shook.

“Well, you be in good company. Think ye might deign to use that dastardly charm to snag us a couple of blankets and summat to eat, Bear?”

“You've had no meals? I thought Viola said you've been here a full two days, so far.”
“Well, she be not wrong. Two absolutely wretched days. I’ve had a mere cup of water, which the guard was kind enough tae piss in. And the boy has been given nothing.”

Looking dejectedly at the corner where a small dented cup of water sat, Nemain sighed. “I’m no quite desperate enough tae drink it yet, but I’ll praise yer name and call ye handsome if you can procure me a drink of something not tainted by bodily fluids.”

Blowing out a breath in exasperation, Ulfric felt like tearing out his hair to hear this on top of everything else. “Of course. I’ll have the guards bring hot meals and blankets down straight away.”

Thinking of Niranye and the turmoil waiting outside the palace gates, Ulfric walked over to a storage chest and retrieved a fresh torch, reeking of turpentine. Lighting it, he placed both torches securely in their sconces. Turning back, he noted that the Reachwoman looked far more ill in the stronger light.

Shit. “It may be safer though with the...unrest in the city if you two were to stay here, in the security of the cells for the time being.”

She slid down the bars, slouching in a pile of robes against the hay. “As y’say.”

_Something is wrong with them both. Damn. She never accedes to my opinions so easily._ “Nemain, did you kill the dragon? Was anyone left alive in Kynesgrove?”

A shifty look passed across her sweat-drawn face. Lifting a length of hair, she began braiding it back, her fingers nimbly twisting the strands out of her face. “No one alive, Bear. But aye...I slayed the wyrm. Though it near killed me tae do so.”

“And what have you been doing since then?” Ulfric crouched down, resting a hand upon the bar as she stilled her movements. As he pointed at her nails with an inquisitive look, Nemain grimaced in reluctance as she realized what he was getting at. She had time to clean her hands, but not to scrub beneath them. “It doesn’t take all that long to travel to Kynesgrove and back. Unless you chased that dragon all the way to Riften...highly unlikely. What have you been up to?”

“Och, no. I...well.” Nemain chewed upon her lip, seeming to think very hard about what she was about to say. “Ulfric, you...damn ye, fer you were right. I-”

The door squeaked open. “My Jarl, pardon us. Just interring another prisoner here. Thank you, Imperial, but your assistance is no longer required.”

Ulfric turned and stood, by now truly annoyed. She had been on the verge of telling him something vital, he was sure. Hearing the door slam with a heavy thud back into place, he watched in amazement as a guard led Wuunferth the Unliving down the dungeon steps. Followed by none other than Viola Giordano, who preened as she noticed his eyes upon her.

“And what’s this about, now? Wuunferth, what are you doing down here?”

The old Nord’s voice was dry. “I was scrying and augering alone in my room, searching for the butcher when this woman and her associates invited me for a stroll. I don’t like being interrupted mid-scry, Ulfric. It does nothing for my bowels.”

“Apologies, my friend. I’m sure we’ll have all this sorted out in no time.”

As the guard escorted Wuunferth to the last remaining cell, Ulfric faced Viola with a glower. “Talk.” He commanded, seeing her face fall.
“Well. Don’t look at me that way, my Jarl! I’m just doing what you ordered me to do! Well, me and Tova - you know, Lady Shatter-Shield, the poor dear, she's been such a wreck since poor Friga was killed - we both unlocked Hjerim after I found a positively scandalous sign of a blood trail! And do you know what we found inside? Hmm?”

The woman was twitching with excitement. Fixing her with an implacable stare, he folded his arms. “What.”

Raising her eyes to the ceiling, Viola shook in macabre delight. “*Horrors.*” She moaned theatrically. “Truly! The butcher had built a secret hideaway there, all filled with occult books, diagrams...even his journals! And the remains of those poor girls, bones and buckets of...of blood and things I can’t even describe…” The old bat sniffed, squeezing out a fake tear as Ulfric took in the show with dismay.

“To be clear, it was a success. Truly a find.”

“But it wasn’t until I showed a strange amulet found among the butcher’s things to Calixto - you know him, his museum is so very quaint- that he told me it was the Wheelstone!”

Viola paused for effect, deflating as Ulfric remained stoically unimpressed. Somewhere behind them both, Nemain coughed.

“The Wheelstone - carried traditionally by the Hold’s court mage?” She supplied fretfully, glancing in fear to where Wuunferth stood behind bars.

“Woman, you’ve got less sense than what Shor left in the dross bucket of the Making to create trolls.” Wuunferth replied, seemingly miffed at any mention of his title. “I don’t wear amulets - they catch in my beard.”

That’s it. Pinching his nose between two fingers, Ulfric summoned patience from his already-depleted reserves. “Thank you for your efforts, Viola, but I think we’re going to need more evidence than the suppositions of an Imperial trinket collector. Keep at it.”

Ignoring her gravelly squawk at being reprimanded so, Ulfric turned to the guard. “Who has been attending the dungeon and guarding the prisoners?”

The guard shifted upon his feet. “Uh, Harald sir.”

“Have him transferred to guard the outlying farms on the sky road. Oh, and put him on privy duty this week. If he asks, inform him that pissing in prisoner’s water is frowned upon, no matter who the prisoner is. Get to it at once.”

“Yes, my Jarl.” Saluting, the guard hesitated only once to look back before climbing up the stairs. Viola followed, pausing upon the last stair to the door as Ulfric stood at attention...waiting for her to leave so that he could speak to the damn unfortunate bastards (and bitch) alone.

The moment drew on, as the woman remained uncharacteristically speechless. Breaking the silence with a wave, Ulfric beckoned to the Imperial hurriedly. “What is it?”

“My Jarl…” Her wrinkled eyes darted to the three prisoners with not a bit of fear. “Now what shall we do? Belyn Hlaalu seems to agree - we’ve caught the butcher! One of these three miscreants must have been chopping up women left and right. Is there some sort of protocol, now that they are safe behind bars? Beheading? Ooh, perhaps...burning alive by fire?”

Hearing all three prisoners groan as Viola shrank back, intimidated, the Jarl rolled his eyes.
“We wait. If you are correct, and one of these…” Ulfric cast his gaze upon the three prisoners, one of which was sneezing miserably, leaning against her cage. Aventus had stuck pieces of straw up his nose, and was desperately trying to scratch them out. Wuunferth rocked in place, breaking wind with a grumble and snort as a foul smell permeated the dungeon. Redolent of cabbages.

“...terrifying potential murderers is the culprit, then we have nothing to worry about, do we? We must wait and look for more evidence, before dispensing judgement.”

“I see. Yes. Thank you, my Jarl, for putting an old woman’s mind at ease.”

“Think nothing of it. And Viola - if you’d be so kind, would you send one of the new guards down with three blankets and meals for the prisoners? Thick blankets. Hot meals. And something to drink, as well.”

Aventus made a tiny yip of glee, quieting as Ulfric made a motion behind his back, to shush him. “Is that clear?”

“Y-yes, my Jarl.” Looking at him as though he bore the sign of the Morag Tong upon his forehead, Viola escaped through the dungeon door. Fleeing what most likely she thought a pandering request.

He’d have to follow up on that order later, to ensure the three here were well treated during their stay. However long it would be.

“Ulfric.” A hoarse croak, as the woman’s face swam into view. Surrounded by a now braided halo of dark hair. “What's goin' tae happen now, really?”

“Nothing, I hope. You three have an unremarkable stay in the dungeons for the next week, while the guards do a thorough investigation of Hjerim and the surrounding homes. Either they find the killer and you go free, or you stay and the killer strikes once more. So unless you’ve had some bloodthirsty agenda I remain unaware of, this will be a temporary stay for all of you.”

She smiled, wheezing as she hacked. “Damn. I was aboot tae commence my ritual bathing under the twin full moons, esconced in the blood o' nubile Nord virgins. My beauty spell be all ruined, thanks to ye fear thuaidh.”

“A shame, then. You look sorely in need of such remedies.”

“Pthptb. Arse.”

“I don’t want to go back to Honorhall!” Aventus moaned, dragging his head along the bars. “Don’t make me. I’ll just run away again.”

“The boy has a point.” Standing shakily, the Forsworn patted her dress. Dislodging clumps of straw, some pieces still stuck in the wool as she clung to the cage in her weakness.

Against his better judgement, Ulfric came closer to her. Bloodshot, her pale eyes still bore sharp awareness as she looked upon him. “In the Reach, fear thuaidh, children be precious. We would ne'er abandon them to some...institution, to raise. They belonged to all of us, and sae the task of raising them fell t'he People.”

Sighing as he felt a headache coming on, Ulfric squeezed his eyes shut. Blocking out the sight of the one who always managed to find some fault in him. “Well, unless an orphan has family to take them in, we Nords are forced to give unwanted children to the orphanage. I have no appropriate
facilities...no place for Aventus to go. He has to go back.”

Cutting off the boy before he could complain, Nemain waved her hand. Still looking at him with that strange, pondering stare, the witch spun her hand. Emitting the tiniest flicker of flame, thankfully burning off what noxious smell remained from Wuunferth’s gas. He inhaled gratefully. “All this be a non-issue, til the murders be solved. Yet I find I rather like the lad. He's got pluck.”

Reaching her small hand out of the bars, she grasped blindly until she felt the searching hand of Aventus grasp hers. Fingers interlocking, she gasped with the effort, smiling at Ulfric as he stared, dumbfounded.

“Mmm. I think I'll be a'keeping him.”

“Really?” Aventus breathed in joy, scrabbling for balance as they broke their handhold. “You mean...I'll have a home, and a family? To stay with? For real!”

“Aye. I'll make ye eat yer vegetables and everything. Don't make me tell ya where naughty boys go, fer where I come from, little pip it be not pretty.”

“Wow! Thanks Ma! I can't wait!”

“Whoa there. Let's be holding off on the name calling. There's still the matter of being imprisoned to contend with, boyo.”

Marvelling at just how soft the woman’s face had gone despite her harsh words, Ulfric peered at Nemain. “You? But you live here.”

She smirked. Nearly a full grin, free of recrimination or worry. Her crooked teeth shone white, the lips bloodless and similarly pale. “Then so will he.”

_Gods damn it all to Oblivion._ “Och, take heart, Bear.” Reaching out of the cage, she patted what she could reach of his stomach; nearly grazing his hip as he turned in surprise. “You know, in Markarth they would ha' kilt us all...or thrown us in Cidna Mine, to rot. Never troubling themselves to investigate the whodunit, or the why.”

Her raspy voice was a calm whisper. With a start, he realized she was trying to comfort him. “Content yerself that ye have done more, at least, than that.” She retreated backwards, dissolving into the blackness of the cell.

Wuunferth harrumphed. “Of course Windhelm will do more. And so will we, little witch. Strength and steel are well and good, but magic is the true power in this world.”

“Aye, old one. I have nae bones t’cast here, but scrying by water and blood will do just as well. Never fear...we be prepared to do our part to help catch this murderer.”

A pregnant pause. “...If only to sleep upon something other than straw.”

Stirring somewhere in the darkness, Nemain’s face blurred into view as she curled into a tight ball upon the ground of the cell. Transient as the moon shrouded in clouds, as the length of her hair shifted to cover her once more from his view.

“Dinnae fash yerself, Bear. A good hot supper, some fresh water and a blanket...och, we'll all be right as rain.”
“Good. I'd hate to think of all that training I spent on you going to waste.”

"Aye, right. Training. That be the Nord term fer torture, true?"

Chuckling despite himself, Ulfric tapped upon the metal bars of her cage. “Allow me to remind the guards to see to your comforts.”

A soft sigh. “Thank ye.”

As he climbed the steps to leave, he heard a small voice timidly ask. “Can we ask for sweetrolls, too? Can I have a bottle of mead all to myself? I've drank it before! Honest!”

“Nay, ye silly pip. Ye'll make yerself fair sick, y'will. Decent victuals first. Then we'll discuss desserts. Don't e'en think of becoming a drunken sot this young, or ever in fact. I willnae stand for it.”

Silence.

“What about honey nut treats?”


“Yaay!”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah...gonna have to break this up into sections. Never fear, I've got the majority of the Blood on the Ice quest written.

As ever, comment and critique away. If I have any typos or if something just doesn't make sense, let me know in the comments. I am only human, as my Thalmor overlords love to remind me.
“...Havin' bathed the blade in human blood, present his sword at Rebel's Cairn together with yer sacrifice and intone the words...” Nemain posed, her braided bread loaf hoisted high as Aventus craned his neck out of the cage in fascinated awe.

Smiling inwardly at the enthralled look the young one wore, she made her voice a pleading cry. “Lord Red Eagle, ancient one, first an' foremost among Reachmen...heed the call of yer people! Still we fight for freedom! Still our blades be dark with blood!”

Wielding the bread like the fabled sword of old, Nemain swiped it against the bars of her cage, making them echo dully with a resounding thonnggg. “Turn yer gaze upon us, and grant us yer blessing anew! I renew the ancient covenant: When at last our lands be free, we shall return, yer sword of victory in hand.”

Flourishing the bread dramatically, Nemain swept her other hand in a dramatic bow. “Then arise, O great one, from yer honored tomb! Reclaim thy stolen throne! Rule o'er us, High Lord of the Reach, forevermore!”

Chomping upon the end of the sword, she chewed in triumph. Accepting accolades of laughter and clapping from the Aretino boy with graceful nods.

Managing to swallow with effort (for the bread was quite crusty) Nemain reached her hand out to her fellow prisoner. Her fingers barely touched his, as he grabbed her pinky and squeezed it tight. “Thanks for the story! It was great! I really liked the part where Faolan killed a bunch of warriors, all screaming and naked! Wow. Do your people really fight naked? Even the girls?”

Nemain chuckled hoarsely. “...till he himself came forth fer battle, alone and robed in nothin’ but his righteous fury! A thousand foreigners fell before his flaming sword, and the enemy was routed! Aye, we did and still sometimes do, painted with the symbols of the Gods...though I wouldnae discount a good Alteration spell or a cuirass, for th' record.”

Placing the hard remnants of the bread upon her half eaten plate, Nemain gripped her belly. The food had gone down poorly - too much, too soon. Her illness was giving her the shakes, switching from blistering sweats to chilling shudders. She was enduring a heatwave, now.

Pushing the pain from her mind, Nemain forced herself to endure it. To think of something else. “The Nords also fought naked once, y’ken. A long time ago. Great berserkers of the North - wendigos who were crazed from th’ lack of sunlight far north in the continent of Atmora. They begged Lord Hircine for mercy, and he Blessed them with the ability to were; to change intae the monstrous, half human, half beast forms of bears and wolves!”

Hearing him gasp in awe, she smiled. Growling through her teeth like a bear, as an image popped into her head of Ulfric. A werebear, all tinted shaggy and blonde. Beastly paws caught in a honeypot...she snickered at the mental image, saving it to tell him later. I want tae see the look on his face...

“Whoooaaaaa....” Aventus yawned, releasing her hand as she heard him shuffle around on his straw
bedding. “That sounds...ahhh...like a great story too. Tell me tomorrow? I think I can sleep now.”

“Of course, child. Sleep be important.”

Humming under her breath, she continued pressing upon her stomach to soothe the aches. Listening for the rustling sounds to cease, the soft snores announcing the boy’s descent into slumber apparent at last.

Wuunferth spoke; his aged voice a sibilant growl punctuated by the sounds of water dripping somewhere in the Bloodworks. “A right bloody tale, that one. First Era, if I’m not mistaken?”

“You be right. When the Imperials were bound beneath Empress Hestra, the Alessian conqueror. Why the woman wanted our lands was never written or told. But we drove her back, fer a time. And someday…” her voice sounded wistful, even to herself. “We will be whole again. Under the great ruler who holds the Red Eagle’s sword pulled from th’ stone, the tomb of Rebel’s Cairn.”

The old mage sighed. “Such dreams. They don’t sound too different from many such tales I’ve heard around our own fires, youngling.”

“I suppose you be right.” Though I doona much care to think of it.

Shifting to a squatting position, Nemain drew her bucket of water closer. “Old One, I will try again...to scry for a depiction o’ this killer.”

Dipping a finger in the water, she sucked it clean. Clear, cold well water...drawn up from the depths of a glacial runoff filled crevasse. Even seawater would do, but she had asked for this specifically. The most pure water available, to cast true sight far and wide. To see.

“Hmph. Mind that you tell me what you see immediately afterwards. I’ve had little success myself, but any advantage in this long game is a victory for us both. Those clods upstairs could do with more reliance upon the mystical arts.”

“I agree, Wuunferth.” Picking up a rock she had chipped into a sharp point, Nemain pressed it into her palm. A single drop of blood fell darkly, mingling in a trail of red in the water. Until it disappeared fully to her eye; the power of it still there as she pushed out her senses. Tasting the minute trace of blood; like a call in the water.

“As ye say…” ‘A strong sword-arm wins battle, but a keen mind wins wars.’ Ulfric be doing ye a disservice, no calling upon ye more often.”

“If Ulfric needs a favor, he has it. Though we don’t find much use for each other. My position tends to be mostly ceremonial, Nemain - we both leave well enough alone, as you know.”

The witch sighed, kneeling down up her knees as she strove to clear her mind. “I know, aye...Ulfric and magic. Never may the twain mix.”

A grunt, then a heavy sigh. “Clear your mind now. Focus on the water. Look - and tell me what you see. After! Not during, else you cloud the vision. Look!”
She looked, casting her sight and the curl of her powers in one curved arc, willing with all her might for the water to guide her mind’s eye. *Show me what I seek!*

The water lay clear and calm. The wood of the bucket, every flaw and chip...the uneven edges and divots where mold and rot had worn it away faded as the water blurred. Shifted...

She saw.

- *dragons, great and small; circling a high mountain peak. The light faded. A great dovah fell, its black body burned to ash, scattering to the winds as an old dragon mourned him. They lifted their voices in sorrow, Alduin mahlaan! Such sorrow and joy, all blended into a churning swirl of sound. Zeymahi lost ont du'ol Barmahu! Sahrot thur qahnaraan! Thu'umii los nahlot!*

Darkness. Light.

- *A bonfire, naked witches and werewolves dancing and singing. Hailing the Horned Lord with great praise, as giants hoomed and stamped their massive feet to the drums. A Briarheart led them, his eyes black opals of shadow; the darkness of the moon to the light in her eyes.*

*Nemain knew the words and could sing the songs, for they were as dear to her as a lullaby. She sang as in a dream...*

*I arise today*

*Through the strength of the gods, in all their forms*

*Light of sun, radiance of moon,*

*Splendour of fire, speed of lightning,*

*Swiftness of wind, depth of sea,*

*Stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*So mote it be - So blessed be!*

Darkness.

She cast her mind’s eye further. Seeking deeper, for surely what she sought would be there to find, if only she pressed a bit more…

*Su'um ahrk morah!*
“What does it mean?” The boy asked, blue eyes wide. His hand rose, mouth seeking his thumb as Arngeir gently pushed the pudgy hand down.

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“Breath and focus. This phrase may also be used to express goodwill, or farewell. Now say it once more. Su’um ahrk morah.”

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The boy pursed his lips around the strange syllables. “Su’um ahrk morah.”

“Very good, young Ulfric. Now, let us try something else. Say this after me. Tiid bo amativ.”

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“Tiid bo amativ. The words...they taste funny, Arngeir. What do they mean?”

“Tiid bo amativ. The words...they taste funny, Arngeir. What do they mean?”

The old Greybeard chuckled. “Yes, I suppose words do have a taste after all. Since they mean so many different things. Tiid bo amativ translates from Dovah to ‘time flows onward.’ To express moving past something. Dez motmahus...’not knowing what will happen.’”

“I don’t like these words.” The thumb re-entered the boy’s mouth, as he sucked upon it fitfully. Speaking around the digit, the boy whimpered. “C-cold. Where’s Papa? Is Skjora here?”

Master Arngeir of the Greybeards gently but firmly pulled the thumb from the boy Ulfric’s mouth.

“Master Arngeir of the Greybeards gently but firmly pulled the thumb from the boy Ulfric’s mouth. “You have been chosen - a rare calling, for even I cannot remember the last time a summons came so strongly for a child to be trained in the Way of the Voice. Your father is proud of you, young man. Only five winters old, and you are starting on the path to become a great Tongue, like Jurgen Windcaller. Or Tiber Septim, though you may know him as Talos Stormcrown.”

“Talos!” Blue eyes shone bright, as the boy jumped up and began slashing with an imaginary sword. His baby-fine hair puffed in the cold breeze, flaring like a sunburst as he dodged and leaped like a fawn. “Ysmir of the North! Slayer of Dragons! The God of Men! Aye, I want to be like him!”

“Calm down....”

-Cautioned Arngeir, urging the boy to sit once more upon the snow. The courtyard of High Hrothgar shone cold and bright; the freshly fallen powder soft and pure as they both reseated themselves upon the bare rocks overlooking the view from the Throat of the World.

The old man spoke in a calmly chiding tone. “Ulfric Stormcloak...violence is the least of the uses of our Thu’um. Thu’um being the Dovahzul term for ‘Shout.’ Say the word for Shout in Dovahzul.”

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The boy looked down at his boots. Scratched his nose. “Thu’um.”

“Very good. We will make copies of the dragon language later, in your very own book. The Voice was a gift of the goddess Kynareth, at the dawn of time. She gave mortals the ability to speak as dragons do. Although this gift has often been misused, the only true use of the Voice is for the worship and glory of the gods. True mastery of the Voice can only be achieved when your inner spirit is in harmony with your outward actions.”

Looking down, Arngeir sighed to see the boy distracted, his blue eyes tracking the lazy fall of snowflakes in the air. He continued on, as Ulfric jolted back to attention. Hastily kneeling, red faced as he folded his arms in the posture of meditation once more. “In the contemplation of the sky, Kynareth’s domain, and the practice of the Voice, we strive to achieve this balance. Do you understand?”

“Yes Master. I- I will try, to understand. There were a lot of big words.”
“So there were. Let us learn a small word, then. Perhaps something you feel, even now? Say it after me. Krosis.”

“Krosis…”

“It means sorrow. Do you feel it? The emotion welling up within you, as you Speak the Word?”

Ulfric gazed off into the distant clouds. Somewhere deep below the switchbacks and rocky crags lay Windhelm, City of Kings. Father, Skjora, his dead ma’s tombstone, his dog Branch...home. But High Hrothgar was his home now, Pa had said. And it was big and cold and scary; sounds echoing down hallways that he ran through, looking to see who had spoken as he shouted back. -Only to find that it had been him all along. Him and Master Arngeir, for Borri, Wulfgar and Einarth merely looked sadly down at him when Ulfric had asked them, haltingly, to talk back to him, even just once. Had begged them, for gods it was so lonely up here...no other children to play with...

“I think...I know I feel it. Krosis.”

Arngeir nodded. “Very good.”

Darkness. Then, a light.

The Stone Quarter lay dark and quiet, a new moon concealing his form in stealth as he crept quickly, quietly along. No one to see, to know what he would do. For he would bring her, find her, yes...bring her back to him. His sweet sister! Never to be alone again.

The tall form of Friga Shatter-Shield, carrying a basket of mountain flowers skipped along. Merrily humming a tune so sweet, just like his sister. Perfect.

The dagger made her cry out - but only a little. Those blue eyes so wide and glazed in the perfect death, death coloring their trail as he dragged her back to her house. Pretty house, all tall eaves and warm cozy fire. Perfect, just like her.

She had lovely bones. So white and hard and pretty, to play with-

-Flashes of darkness, then light. Undulating until Nemain felt her heart fairly racing, and then-

He moved upon her, in her. The warmth of him was a guiding fire that she warmed herself in, even as he quenched the fires that plagued him deep inside her. The sea and the sun, revolving in one eternal round.

The altar silhouetted starkly against the sky filled with stars. Drifting constellations shrouded in ever-changing auroras blessed their union as they made love upon the altar of sacrifice; its surface dark with the blood of a thousand men.

Blood that was the life; blood that made the grass grow tall. Nothing so dark for them now, for she felt only light inside as he moved. Thrilling her, light bursting behind her eyelids as a warm calloused hand lifted her leg beneath him; rubbing against the perfectly roughened spot that made her jerk
back in sweet agony, head hitting the stone as he thrust once more-

Bringing her to the peak, an exquisite oneness she had never, ever felt. Not with anyone, for what was making love without love? And she had never loved. Not truly, not until now.

He came soon afterwards, losing all of that careful, tamed control as she wrapped her arms around him; legs clenching the tapering waist as he cried out in the same realization that had broken upon her like a wave, earlier.

They were one. Never again would anything ever be the same.

Her hand hit the bucket, sending it flying to spill against the wall in a gush of water. It clattered and rolled; sound breaking the silence like falling glass as she stuffed her hand in her mouth, to muffle the screams.

“Nemain?” Wuunferth’s croak came out of nowhere, as the torches had nearly gone out with the night. The old man sounded as though he had just awakened, for his breathing was still a dragging rasp. “You took so long...are you all right? Did you see anything of note?”

“Y-yes…” Clutching her robes closer to her, Nemain smoothed away the wetness of water that had landed upon her face. Shivering in despair, for it had been a true sending. As true as any she had ever Seen.

Gods save me. “The killer hunts the Stone Quarter at night, Wuunferth. We can tell the others in the m-morning.”

A grunting sigh. “Good work, youngling. It’s cold...use that blanket and wrap yourself tight. It sounds like you spilled something over there. Sleep well.”

She stayed awake, long after rolling herself in the thick woolen wrap. Gray eyes wide open, for she could not get the moving pictures out of her mind. They replayed themselves, over and over...a neverending hoop that tormented her with the knowledge of inevitability.

Trying to focus upon the dragons, the dance...cor, even the child Ulfric had been would have been more bearable. Sliding her fingers down her stomach, Nemain rucked up her dress and touched herself. Slid a finger inside her womanhood to find what she already knew; that she was wet. Sopping with her own secretions, painfully swollen and aroused at the thought, the vision-

Visions of Ulfric Stormcloak, fucking - nay, making love with her upon the altar of Deepwood Redoubt under the stars. Completely and totally at peace, with a love and understanding she had never before felt to such an extent.

Not once. Not even in Galan’s arms.

Hissing under her breath, as her heart pounded in frantic fear, Nemain began cursing in every language she knew, in Dovahzul, Man and Mer. Her breath rasped, still sore in her chest from the cold she had contracted. Distracting her not one whit from the tight, aching heat fit to burst inside from the dream that was not a dream. That would a be a reality; though she could hardly imagine the way to such a-a thing. What she had felt...
Rubbing herself with a guilty thrill, as it took not long at all, until her cunt pressed in sweet agony upon the three fingers she managed to impale herself with; thumb circling like a top around the pearl of her pleasure as she bit down upon her other hand, seeing stars explode as she orgasmed like a song reaching a perfect pitch-

-All to the image of the scarred Nord embracing her willingly as she opened herself to him, an oyster bearing soft innards to reveal a pearl. That strange, flaxen hair falling like a veil around her face with warm, chapped lips pressing against her own, invading...taking what was theirs. Causing her to rub her mouth in cruel want, even as she moaned in unbelieving dread.

Feeling herself pulse pathetically in the hazed aftermath, Nemain covered her eyes with her arms. Hating the Gift of the Sight. What!? What absolute bloody tripe was this obscene parody of a joke?

_Give me murderous dragons an' dancing any day. What be I supposed tae do with this, Et'Ada? Be this part o' some grand plan?_

_-What the actual fuck?!!_

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul dialogue from these two websites:

http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Epilogue_(Skyrim)
https://www.thuum.org/learn/practice/phrases.php

The Irish poem from this website (I altered it, but I can't really claim it as mine, hyuk)
http://www.northernway.org/school/onw/prayers.html
You guys. GUYS. I found it...the perfect fanart of Bear! Whooaaaahhh
And honestly, I never even thought of Tom Hardy, but it totally fits. Even better than
Sean Bean, if you look at the character model, because yeah. THOSE LIPS.

Omigod. Perfect. Between you and me, I've always wanted to chop those damn braids
off. Or grow them out.

http://modji-33.deviantart.com/art/Tom-Hardy-as-Ulfric-Stormcloak-630622251

Nemain, I always kind of pictured as a young Angelica Huston with grey eyes.
Somewhat sinister...but kind of cute. Maybe a morph of her and Christina Ricci? Since
Christina is way more petite and has no butt, which totally works, right?
http://cdn.smosh.com/sites/default/files/bloguploads/old-hotties-anjelica.jpeg

Or. wait.....I know.

EVA GREEN.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Star-scrying to the edge of the ice-mind

Look to the lights where the souls dance

Revealing the time when a spark will revive when

The rotted unites under most skillful hands.”

-(translation from Aldmer text, as interpreted by the Ayleids and first transcribed by Altmer) -

Nilsine Shatter-Shield was found dead three days later.

Found by the beggarwoman Silda behind Candlehearth Hall, who had screamed high and
loud...shouting over and over for the guards to come! Come quick! For the known pickpocket was
sure, she prattled to anyone who would listen...that a man had slid away unseen in the shadows
when Silda had first laid tired eyes upon her, in the early hours before dawn. Nilsine Shatter-Shield...broken, limbs bent askew upon the icy stones. Eyes blank and clouded with frost - not five
hours dead.

May the gods grant peace to the surviving members of the Shatter-Shield Clan. Two daughters, lost
to this murderer in the same month. Ulfric stood in the Hall of the Dead with Arkay’s Priestess
Helgird and Belyn Hlaalu, overseeing the preparation of the body as the Dunmer cast an edgy look
at all the crypts surrounding them.
Bodies - lying on shelves draped in linen shrouds. Contained in countless urns, surrounded by the freshly lit candles of visiting kin. Some skeletons had been propped up, fully dressed in armor and jewels; treasures to offer solace in the afterlife. Weapons tucked lovingly into skeletal hands; axes, shields and swords for the loved one to bear up to Sovngarde and the Halls of Blessed Shor.

Belyn’s long grey nose twitched as he fidgeted. “Something the matter, Master Hlaalu?”

“Isn’t there always, my Jarl? Ugh...”

Glancing about him, Belyn sniffed as he betrayed a grimace of disgust. The Nord man held back a sneeze himself, for the scents of the Hall of the Dead were strong; embalming fluid, pine resin, crumbling cloth and hot tallow...the sweetish-rot stink of decay from various corpses that had not fully mummified yet. “The Dunmer race doesn't bury their dead, or leave them to rot inside a stone sarcophagus. When a Dunmer passes, his body is given to fire, so he might return to the ash from whence he came. Back to the soil, the beginning of all things.”

“Yes. I’ve read of your grand ancestral tombs. Some are built to be more like palaces than a simple coffin. Though to be fair, we have also been known to burn our dead. I hear the Skyforge of Whiterun is one such place, where the warriors of Jorrvaskr are laid to rest. Upon burning pyres laid over the coals.”

Swiping his nose, Ulfric shook his head to dispel the overwhelming smells as Helgird began pulling open the skin where Nilsine had been sliced. Peeling back layers of skin, fat and muscle to reveal the florid guts, white streaks of bones...

“Aye. The Ashland ways must seem strange to you, Nord. Yet I find the longer I live here in Skyrim that I am continually surprised at the connections our people share. After all, Dunmer don’t believe that death is the end. It’s a beginning.”

Glancing at the Dunmer in surprise, Ulfric was treated to an uncertain smile by Belyn Hlaalu, sharp white teeth appearing very bright against the dark dusky skin. “We may not believe in Sovngarde as a...” he paused, seeming to search for an inoffensive word...“-preferable afterlife, but the daedra that consecrate my people; Azura, Mephala and Boethia, well...”

“They have their own realms of existence, no doubt.”

“Yes. Indeed they do.”

A wet, sucking sound accompanied by a crack broke the stillness of the tombs, as Helgird opened the chest cavity. And frowned, her wrinkled lips a drawn pucker as she peered inside...nearly tilting her entire top half into the corpse to look.

Ulfric held back a sigh, shifting his feet. The council had adjourned early today; not much being accomplished thanks to the hysteria brought on by the appearance of Nilsine’s body. Tova Shatter-Shield had been beside herself, escorted out by her silent husband Torbjorn. Such grief...the bringer of which left to rot now only as so much meat. A young life cut short, its potential lost forever...stolen by this murderer who hunted his streets with callous impunity.

He reminded himself to check up on the prisoners after his. To see if their days spent resting from illness and scrying had brought up anything useful. At this point in the bedlam surrounding these murders, Ulfric would cling to any chance of finding - and ending - the sorry bastard responsible for
these deaths. Though he rather doubted any such sooth-saying would provide the answer. *What has magic touched that it has not spoiled?*

Forcing the sight of little Aventus - pale, starved, quite possibly mad - from his mind...Ulfric turned his full attention back to the priestess. “Helgird, what do you think? Anything strange about the body that is of note?”

“How…” The old woman poked around a bit more. Lifting what appeared to be spongy pinkish tissue - the lungs further out from the ribs. Sticking an actual finger below in the gushing run of fluids, which caused Belyn to make a sound as he turned away from the grisly sight. “Well, she’s dead my Jarl. But I guess that’s not unusual, at least not for somebody in here.”

He felt his eyebrows crawl up practically to his hairline as the woman wheezed a flighty laugh. “Er, haha, I mean someone who’s not me, that is. Sorry, was only joking with you.”

Gesturing with his hand, he silently implored her to continue.

Pulling a wickedly curved knife to hand, Helgird nodded briskly and began slicing the chest. Opening the side of the chest facing them both, where a single, fried egg breast lay waxy white and flat upon the sagging skin of the chest. “Hmph. The only unusual thing is what’s missing. The killer made the same cuts as he did on Susanna, but in slightly different places...choosing the chest and neck, instead of the legs and arms.”

“I think, my Jarl, we have a necromancer on our hands. With Friga, he took the bones...leaving only that - er, clump of skin and the other organs. The girl before her - well, she was too decayed to tell, really, but the there was so little blood, hmm...and Susanna’s tendons were removed. By someone who knew what he or she was doing.”

“This one…” Helgird tapped her knife thoughtfully upon the ribs, where the lungs and liver lay exposed, oozing in the dank air. “They took the heart and the arteries...vessels that carry blood flow to the head and body. Hmph.”

*Odd.* “What would any mage want with such body parts?”

The Priestess spared him a look that clearly bespoke her opinion of his intellect. “Necromancers traffic in death, my Jarl. This one seems bent on assembling a body of his or her own. A female thrall, perhaps, though it seems like quite alot of trouble to build one dead girl when there are so many live ones about. No way to tell without asking the killer himself, sir.”

Cleaning the knife of its glistening layer of blood with a clean linen scrap, Helgird placed it carefully upon the stone plinth, where several other knives of various shapes, sizes and thicknesses lay. “Other than that, the cuts look like they were made with an ancient ceremonial knife, like this one here.” She pointed at the knife she had just wiped down, lying innocently next to an ebony dagger.

“The Nords of old used these kinds of curved blades when they embalmed their dead. I don’t know who in Windhelm would even have something like that. Other than me, of course.”

Belyn stiffened as she spoke, turning to face the priestess with an accusing frown. “Perhaps we need to look no further than here for the culprit, then!”

Shaking his head, Ulfric watched as Helgird made a sound of astonishment; a kind of *oonk* that was both a snort and a huff. “Hah! I’m too busy tending the dead to spend my time making more of them.” Her creased, button bright eyes grew sly. “Besides, I wouldn’t very well tell you about the cuts if I had made them, now would I?”
The Dunmer glared at her, stumped as she drew a linen shroud over the mortal remains of Nilsine. “Now, I really must get back to the body. Lots of work to do, to prepare this one for the grave.”

“Talos guide your efforts, priestess.” Ulfric made the sign of respect, knuckling his fingers to his forehead as the woman stood creakily to her full height. Smiling her toothless grin at what small attentions she had been lauded with.

“To you as well, my Jarl. May Arkay shine his light of peace upon your soul.”

“I’d just as soon settle for some fresh air,” Belyn grumbled as both males climbed the steps to the surface.

Ulfric ignored the Mer as they exited the Hall of the Dead, thinking upon what Helgird had revealed. The sun shone brightly upon the freshly fallen snow, nearly blinding after the darkness of the catacombs. A peaceful day, after such a restless night.

Death and blood and ruin. The handiwork of an evil mage. Bones, blood, tendons...now a heart. What creation of the dark arts is this killer seeking to give life? And why by Ysmir is it killing women?

What was it that Nemain had said upon the matter? For he had asked her, once in one of their many conversations about the nature of magic, of good and evil.

Her rolling brogue perfectly resounded in his memory. For he knew her voice, now, as he did his own. “Does anyone choose evil purely because it be evil? No Bear...we only mistake it for happiness, the good we all seek. Do not be so quick to judge the actions of others. Fair or foul, all have their reasons for what they do.”

Striding to the Palace of Kings, Ulfric heaved a sigh of frustration.

But sometimes, evil is clearly evil! To take innocent lives, with no care to the consequence...the aftermath? All the grief and unrest caused by this killer...could it ever be twisted to say it was all in pursuit of some lofty goal of happiness?

No. Honor is honesty to what is, not blind supplication to what one wishes life to be.

Reassured by his thoughts, Ulfric entered through the doors of the barracks hastily opened by the guards, nodding at them in passing. And made his way to the Bloodworks, to see what Wuunferth and the woman had come up with.

********

She wouldn’t look at him.
Huddled in a ball in her cell, Nemain faced the stone wall. From what little he could see of her face, red spots burned high upon her cheeks. *Burning with fever, then. This is a bad idea.*

“Och, I be fair convinced that this is the right way of it. From my vision, we now know it be a man, killing these women for his own. So allow me to play the bait.”

He walked closer, ignoring the protests of the guards who had accompanied him. Approaching the bars of her cell, Ulfric listened in growing impatience as she expounded upon her (*poorly conceived, not to be attempted*) idea.

“Let me walk the Stone Quarter at night, Bear. Just a wee maiden out for a midnight stroll, minding my own business. Then, when he pounces, your guards be there waiting and ready! It is a sound plan.”

Aventus peeped through the bars of his cell. His voice was small, afraid. “It doesn’t sound like a good plan to me. What if the murderer gets you?” Small shuffling sounds, as the boy kicked his feet against the straw. “I don’t want you to die.”

“Everyone dies someday, boy.”

Ulfric squinted, a perplexed frown pulling at his lips as he craned his neck. Trying to see her face. “And yet only fools go off to seek their death so willingly, for so little in return. Woman, are you still feeling poorly? You look flushed.”

Her breath rattled in her chest as she coughed, betraying herself as the Jarl huffed in displeasure. “Nemain. I will not ask you to do this. Obviously you’ve fallen ill...gods, will you turn around? I feel as though I am speaking to your hair, here.”

Crackling, her voice came out weak and reedy. “It does tend to have a mind of its own. Ugh…fine! You win.” Wheeling upon her knees in a circle, the Forsworn heaved a put-upon groan as she faced him properly.

Ulfric stared.

She bore the strangest expression he had ever seen upon her face. Her mouth was tightly compressed into a grimace, with those pale grey eyes held as wide as they could go; eyebrows lifted in a look of perpetual shock. And on her sallow cheeks, high spots of color now flushed all the way to her neck as she continued to squirm beneath his perusal.

He crossed his arms, giving her his most menacing glare. “Explain this.”

She curled in upon herself, still staring at him as though he were about to swallow her whole. “What. There be no ‘this’.”

“Right. In all the months I’ve known you, witch, you have never backed down from an opportunity
to argue. Never given me an inch of leeway, debating every gods damned point of contention until I’m of a mind to give you the upper hand, just to shut you up.”

Lifting a hand, he drummed his fingers upon the steel of his wristguard, continuing to pare her down with his eyes alone. “Not once have you ever just ‘let me win’. Not for anything. What in Shor’s name is going on?”

Wuunferth the Unliving broke the silence. “Do not push so, Ulfric! The lass was scrying late into the night, sacrificing sleep for her visions...and it is her we have to thank. For now we know the killer’s habits. The place he haunts, when and where. That it is even a ‘he’! This could turn the tide in the investigation!”

Coiled tightly as a dwemer trap, Nemain nodded. She wet her lips, tongue darting out as finally, her eyes tore away from his first. “I say we do it. Honestly, how dangerous can it be? The killer will no doubt be chuffed from his many successes at slinking about, uncaught. His mind seemed...fixated. Unstable. So we catch the stook - and make him testify of his wrongdoing.” She shrugged, a smile finally pulling up one side of her mouth.

“Then, we kill him. Tis a simple plan.”

Allowing himself to contemplate it, Ulfric continued tapping his bracers. Idly clicking his nails in a soothing rhythm, as the guard began to pass out the noon meal to the three prisoners.

It would solve many problems, he reflected, if they could catch the killer while at large. Force him to testify, at sword point if needs be. It would bring Windhelm back to a state of peace. Calm the public from their frenzied paranoia, and also end the spate of killings for good.

“Are you certain you feel well enough to attempt this, Nemain?”

Looking up from blowing upon her bowl, the woman seemed to shiver. Looking down hurriedly, she spoke to her leek soup; as though she were afraid to gaze overlong upon him. “Quite certain. Wuunferth says tis a full moon, which be perfect. I say we do it at midnight. Get it over with, so we are free to sleep in actual beds, with furs.”

Aventus hit the bars of his cell in glee, making them ring. “Yay! Beds and furs!’ Wrinkling his nose, he scratched his head with a sheepish look. “I think...I might need a bath first. I’m pretty sure this straw has fleas in it.”

“I’ll comb your hair out, once we’re free. Never fear...you can comb me in turn. I hate the wee pests.”

Unwilling to let the point go, Ulfric allowed his arms to rest upon his hips. “And what does a full moon have to do with the timing? Why can’t it be three nights from now? Or a week?”

Still refusing to look him in the eye, Nemain spooned some soup into her mouth, smudging it by accident. Wiping the greenish smear from her cheek, she sucked upon her finger as she paused to think about his question.
Damn. Despite the vulgarity of their surroundings, watching those pert lips close so smoothly around that extremity…

He could feel himself getting hard. *Fuck.* And it was the absolute last thing he needed right now, conflicting his focus. Swallowing, he thought about the most disgusting thing he had ever seen…

*Galmar.* Bending over the boiling mudpots of the Rift’s geyser pools, stark naked and hairy in odious places Ulfric wished he could blast from his sight, never to be seen again…

Better. He could concentrate more fully on what was being said, now. For Nemain was winding on lyrically about the phases of the moon… “-and a full moon manifests great power to any spell one would wish to cast under it. And either Masser or Secunda would do, which be just as well since both are bright tonight. This killer be on a roll, he willnae stop with just one, when to be sure he is near finished with his thrall-woman. But we can keep trying, if needs be. Bear, are you listening? Am I boring you?”

“I’m listening. I remain unconvinced that it should be you, however, who does this.”

Her face broke into a sardonic smile. “Who else will do it? Play the patsy? No one will cry to see me cut down, I can tell you that. And what better way to make a glorious comeback, as the doughty mage what brought down the ‘Windhelm Killer?’ I quite like the absurdity of it.”

Lifting her spoon, she pointed it at him. “Besides, then you’ll owe me a favor, Ulfric.” Then she licked the utensil impishly, snickering until she coughed. “And there’s many a thing I can think of, to use such a boon for. Do we have an accord?”

*Not again.* Vainly summoning thoughts of anything but her tongue, Ulfric bit his own until he tasted blood. “We have an accord. Guards, give her what she asks for, to prepare for tonight.”

“At once, my Jarl.”

**********

*Shite and ballocks! Why did I agree to do this again?*

Nemain slouched against the wall separating the smithy from the Stone Quarter marketplace. Everyone had closed up shop for the night. Even the beasts in their pens; shaggy cows, bleating goats and chickens had calmed to a sleepy state. Every now and then, she heard a warbling cluck come from the coop. The occasional gravid low, as a cow lifted its moist snout to blow clouded breath into the air.

Puffs of smoke-like warmth emerged from her mouth as well; fogging the wind that remained oh-so-cold, despite the potion she had forced herself to down prior to walking out here. Pennants advertising their seller’s wares flapped in an idle breeze, as a stray bucket rolled down the open circle of the quarter. Resting idly by the produce stall, where it rattled once. Then lay still.

Everything was calm. A picture perfect scene.
But he was here, somewhere. She had cast Detect Life upon arriving, and knew...the killer was lurking in the mews behind the White Phial. Biding his time, waiting no doubt for the moons to reach a peak fullness.

She waited as well, struggling to remain focused. Undistracted...and failing miserably. That arrogant berk. Recalling just how distant Ulfric had been during their last exchange, Nemain seethed as she waited. Hopping from foot to foot to stay warm, as she pulled the sleeves of the garish yellow gown more tightly around her form for comfort. In the relative dark of the night, the hue stood out like rouge upon a warlord. Hopefully drawing all attention to her, as she picked up her prop - an empty basket - and began strolling towards the animal pens. Ostensibly to collect eggs.

Didn’t sweet Nord maidens collect eggs under a full moon for fertility spells, or some such rot? A good enough excuse. Though she was neither sweet nor a Nord.

*Would it have bloody killed him to act interested in anything magic-related? It be his stupid city I stick my neck out for, tonight. His precious womenfolk I save. One would think the dolt would be far more attentive...not that I want any attention from him-

Damn to the depths of Oblivion that cursed vision.

Gently pushing the dozy hens out of her way, Nemain’s fingers found a few speckled eggs for her troubles. “Shh, little mother, shh…” she cautioned softly. “I’m not of a mind to eat you, yet. Just your unborn children, yes...they be quite fine all scrambled, with a good bit of cheese and salt...shhh.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a figure stalk her. Blade glinting in the light of the full moon, as the man - an Imperial, somehow familiar though she could not place him - lifted his dagger. To kill.

Biding her time, Nemain continued to play dumb. Collecting three more eggs, as the hens began peeping irritably. “Och now, doon make such a fuss. After all, tis not as though I be here to...”

She spun, stepping backwards as he struck down. “-Wake you up!”

And cast a mighty fist of fear upon him, this murderer who stalked women. Slaying them with a knife to the back. Like the lowest snivelling coward.

Rolling her eyes at herself, she reflected that not long ago she would have been in this Imperial’s place. *These Nords and their queer sense of honor. Something in the air has been poisoning my brain with delusions of valor.*

Baring her teeth at the squawk of fright the man eeped with, she gave chase as he turned and ran. Throwing the basket of eggs behind her, Nemain’s legs pumped against the stone cobbles, gaining momentum as she huffed. Out of breath, for all the healing potions and soups she had swilled had not brought her back to full stamina yet.

“Slow down, you fleety wanker! Stop!”

The man did not bother to respond, racing through the graveyard road and into the residential district where the great homes stood. Darting past the Shatter-Shield Clan house, past Viola’s manse and onward, until she was sure...certain that his destination was indeed Hjerim.
Cor, but that fear spell must have knocked the sense out of him. For she could see in her peripheral vision the guards running, catching up to her as she finally stopped. Heaving in great gulps of the cool night air, as Stormcloaks attacked the man as a unit...piling onto him bodily until the only sight of the bastard was a twitching hand. Grasping...reaching out to her as she shakily stepped forward.

-And ground her foot onto the fingers, smiling vindictively as a small sound of pain emerged from beneath the grunting, hollering crew of soldiers that had sat him into submission. “There. A bit of manure for your troubles, killer. I hope you enjoy the Bloodworks - I can say with certainty it be absolutely frigid this time of year.”

One of the guards turned to her, saluting with a fist to his chest. “By the gods...you did this city a great service by catching that killer. Well done!”

Returning his salute with a jaundiced wave, Nemain stood wobbling on her own two feet as the consequences of running at a dead sprint while ill caught up to her. Oofh. Steady on, girl. Fingering her brow in sudden wooziness, she sat down hard upon the snow near the wrought-iron fence of Hjerim. She could still see faded smears of an old blood trail in what pavement was exposed. No doubt left by this overly confident necromancer, leaving such evidence of death behind. Sloppy. Very sloppy, lad.

Luckily, the spot where she had collapsed was nowhere near it. Feeling woodenly about in the pockets of her gods awful dress, Nemain uncapped a health potion and drank it to the dregs. Yet somehow felt worse for her pains, as the world began to heave and tilt sideways.

Blurgh. Time for a bath, a lengthy stay in my fine fur-strewn bed, and summat to drink. Maybe I’ll steal some of Galmar’s stash of Cyrodiilic brandy. Tis always fun to watch the blighter stomp and swear around the hall when he gets in his rages.

Something was digging into her ankle, a hard lump that she felt too exhausted to lean forward to investigate, since her head insisted upon spinning so. Feeling with her foot, she lazily drew her leg around the offending thing and brought it closer. Dragging it through the snow, until she could pick it up.

It was an amulet - a queer one. Eight sided, seemingly made of jade and ringed in ebony. The stook must have dropped it, she thought in frank admiration. Tracing the outline of the little skull, nearly worn away by time...she could sense it had an odd sort of allure. A presence.

And it fairly hummed between her fingers, like a friend. Playing with the fine patina-darkened metal of the chain, Nemain looped it around her fingers, watching happily as the Imperial (who had been knocked out cold) was dragged off by the Windhelm guards to take her place in the cells.

Settling the amulet over her head, she patted the little skull fondly and yawned. She felt pleasantly numb, now. The snow was almost warm. Odd.

“Nemain? Woman, wake up. It is over.”

Tilting her head with minimal effort, Nemain closed one eye and peered up at none other than Ulfric
Stormcloak. *Gods, he’s huge. What do they feed these Nords, to make them grow so tall? “Hey, Bear. Woo...what a rush. That man has some legs on him. Think I’m fair tuckered out by that run.”*

The man bent at the waist. Flicked a piece of hair from where it lay against her cheek. “You look awful.”

She blew out a breathy rasp of a laugh. “Thank ye, Bear. You always know how to butter up a lady. Woof - *ack*! That part you be pinching in your armor is connected to the rest of me, you berk! Owowow!”

Lifting her into his arms without any visible sign of strain, Ulfric stomped off towards the Palace of Kings, as she wriggled away from where her dress was caught in his chainmail. “Do you have any idea how cold you are, witch? I can feel your legs freeze my arms, straight through this cloak.”

“Cold hands, warm heart. Sort of...I have nae heart, or so I’ve been told.”

Giggling, she lifted her hand up to poke Ulfric in the cheek. “Och, Thistle...that were his name for me. Isn’t that cute? Poor sweet bastard Moth. I think he might miss me even now. Where we be going Bear?”

“To warm you up, so you may speak with more sense than what is currently spewing forth. You need to be debriefed on just what in Kyne’s name happened. Whoa, don’t... no, Nemain, stay awake, gods damn it-”

-But it was too late, for she had fallen into a dead faint already. After days of imprisonment in a cold hard cell, plagued by sleepless nights and stress - the woman had pushed her body that last step too far.

Ulfric stood dumbly with his burden, jostling her slight form. Struggling to get her to respond as the woman moaned fitfully. All wrapped up in that hideously vivid yellow dress. *Just looking at it is giving me hives.*

Feeling the chill from where she pressed against him, he readjusted his grip and pressed on. He would get nothing clear from her about what had transpired, until the little witch was properly warmed and recovered.

He hoped, as he climbed the steps to the timbered walls of the sauna, that he wasn’t making a grievous error in judgement.

*For the love of Talos, let this decision not bite me in the arse.*

Chapter End Notes
So, there is a really sweet mod out there for Skyrim called jks.skyrim. http://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/61035/?

I have an Xbox One, so I'm not sure what it runs like on PC or PS4. But I can tell you...wow. It really makes Skyrim feel more lived in, part of the natural world. Windhelm's Stone Quarter, for instance, gets an entire stable area behind Niranye and Hillevi's stalls, which inspired the little chicken-egg scene I wrote for this chapter.

Check it out! Super cool.

As always, read and comment away on what you like and don't like.
The Favor

Chapter Notes

***SUPERSIZED chapter for y'all. I'm on a roll, here.

As always, comment and critique. I do not own Skyrim, the Elder Scrolls games or Ulfric Stormcloak. I'd keep him chained to my bed if I did...though I'd be far nicer than Elenwen.

*Giggles* Here. Another Tom Hardy pic that perfectly encapsulates the feeling of the chapter. LOLZ

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/118149190197883211/

Another art piece that really spoke to me about Bear's character. Random viking touching the snow, but hey! It works.

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/436778863851724712/

Nemain and her ungodly amount of rapunzel hair

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/436778863851543308/

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

And see how the flesh grows back
across a wound, with a great vehemence,
more strong
than the simple, untested surface before.

There's a name for it on horses,
when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,
as all flesh,
is proud of its wounds, wears them
as honors given out after battle,
small triumphs pinned to the chest—
And when two people have loved each other
see how it is like a
scar between their bodies,
stronger, darker, and proud;
how the black cord makes of them a single fabric
that nothing can tear or mend.
—For What Binds Us, Jane Hirschfield

Warmth.

She was surrounded by blessed, damp steaming warmth that somehow smelled an awful lot like honeycomb.

Not that she could smell much of anything, what with the fug of illness still plaguing her body. Nemain’s mouth watered as she swallowed, her throat like a husk of barleycorn; rough and prickling. It felt as though her head had been wrapped in a thick woolen blanket, and her nose, dripping steadily like a faucet left askew…

*Stupid gobshite Bloodworks…making me sick as a dog.* Keeping her eyes screwed tightly shut, the seconds ticked by as her hands investigated the uneven surface she lay limply upon. A wooden floor, maybe, for her legs were scritching against something that felt vaguely like bark. Though she couldn’t figure, without opening her eyes, where that delicious warm humidity was coming from. As warm as the mists that rose from the geysers of the Rift, though far less pungent. She was fain grateful to be spared that ripe-egg smell, though now would have been the time to visit the Rift. Being nasally desensitized, and all.

Something warm and solid was pillowed beneath her head and neck.

Wrinkling her mouth to itch her nose - Nemain stilled as her cheek encountered warm flesh. Opening her eyes ever so slightly, she could see a thigh covered with a dusting of golden hairs disappear into what appeared to be a towel, wrapped around a pale, scarred waist.

*The Bear.*

Craning her neck up, ever so slightly, she saw that his head was resting back against the wall of what had to be a sauna, eyes closed as he breathed deeply. Fast asleep.
Hardly daring to breathe herself, she lay as quiet as possible...a rabbit entrapped by the wolves’ paw. For there was definitely no way of moving that would not wake the man from what looked to be a much needed nap.

_How did I get here?_ Casting her eyes downwards, the witch realized she was wearing only smalls. The ugly yellow dress was nowhere to be seen, though her new amulet had been left in place. And though she had been stripped, she realized, undressed by someone other than herself - she was blessedly clean. With a bandage across her arm, what for she wondered as her skull pounded like a hammer.

_Ah, the scratch...the hagraven Moira had by accident clawed her at Witchmist Grove._

She had treated it, or so she thought, as Nemain looked over the bandages with a critical eye. Tidily wrapped, with something that smelt of elves ear and blisterwort seeping from beneath. The end of the linen had been tucked underneath the main bulk of it, military style. All in all, not a bad job.

Well. It explained why the healing potion had not helped one wit. _Must have contracted something from dear auld Moira that my salve did not cure. The black blight, perhaps. My ointment would have eased the symptoms of brain rot. Tsk. Time to redo my formulas once more._

Drawing up her legs, she inspected her feet. Someone had hastily scrubbed her down and rebandaged her wound. Possibly poured a potion down her throat, for though she still felt _rotten_ with this head cold...it was nowhere near the limpid weakness she had attributed to the rush of catching the killer at Hjerim.

At least her underthings were fresh; for she had changed them the previous day.

_And why should you care, about being embarrassed in front of him?_ She thought crossly at herself.

The man had seen her stark naked, numerous times in far more grotty conditions. He had held a knife to her throat; had literally beaten her with his fists until she saw stars, as she in turn had cast nearly every spell in her arsenal at the dratted Nord. There was not much more they could do to one another that had not been already done.

She blushed as the thought trailed to the logical tail end of that assumption - well. Save _that._

Releasing a very slow, quavering exhale so as not to waken him, Nemain pondered her peculiar position.

If it was written in the stars that what would come to pass would be, then why was she fighting so damn hard against the idea? She truly did believe in predestination - one could not cast the bones and receive visions (obscure as they were) without sensing the strange crux of the powers that ruled, shifting the pieces. Throwing omens that only a fool would ignore. The will of the gods.

Destiny, it seemed, had a rope tightened around her throat - strangling even as the handmade juniper bark had wrung her literal neck deeply so many years back.

And she felt it. Nemain certainly felt the sting of the noose, even now.

*Of all the bloody men, Et’Ada, you had to pick the one man in all of Nírn that would be hardest for me to embrace!* Even now, Nemain shuddered away from the very word - the slightest taste of the letters that formed the word that sounded like *love*.

Love was pain. Love was suffering. Love had asked her to rip out a man’s heart and had forsaken her from all she had known, for the frailty of showing it - even as her own heart broke to pieces. Ash on the wind.

She had no heart left. A hollow crater, a mere remnant that bore the barest trace of affection for Aventus, perhaps - that feisty little pip! A sense of fellow-feeling for the associates she had made here in Windhelm. Wuunferth, Skjora and Hatti, Galmar, even Ulfric (damn him) - mayhap even more than that for Bothela and Moth gro-Bagol, though she was loathe to admit...she had not thought of her orsimer lover for the space of several months, now.

*Were her decisions truly her own? Or was everything some cruel, labyrinthian plan? Orchestrated for the Divine’s amusement? Did all this woe; her pain and efforts mean nothing, at the end of all things?*

*If everything be already decided, what be the point of living?*

Her mind frantically spun in a daze, as the steam overwhelmed her sensitive throat. Clenching back a cough, she tried to ignore the mass of Ulfric sleeping beneath her. How natural it felt, after weeks upon months of training upon the roof and everywhere else, to be near the man. To feel him breathe. In and out, a relaxing and familiar rhythm she could match in a moment, if she so chose.

Surely, this was nothing more than a burgeoning respect for a worthy foe. A friend of sorts - one to fight and drink with, to tease...perhaps kiss when foolishly drunk.

But never. *Never* to tup, unless it was a purely physical thing. Like scratching an itch, or slaking a thirst. Leaving both parties satisfied and going their own merry way...no regrets. *That*, she could handle with ease.

Flaying away all feeling that did not belong to her powers of feminine appraisal, Nemain looked at the Bear of Markarth with a woman’s measuring eye.


Her mind jittered upon the last descriptor that had popped into her head. *Now, that has no place in*
what I be thinking of. Abandoning it, she narrowed her eyes at his towel. Hmm…

Just as Nemain was hatching a plot to somehow lift the towel, to gawk at the size of the Bear’s other ‘weapon’, the man suddenly moved.

Her hand that had been stealthily reaching out flew away in surprise, hitting the hot rocks as she hissed in pain. Hacking, as the coughs she had repressed broke out in a fit of noise, Nemain rolled over and away from him, lurching to all fours as she struggled to breathe.

Ulfric’s low voice rumbled right through her. “Thought you’d be sleeping a while yet. Here. Eat this….for your throat.”

Pulling the mass of her hair away, she saw his hand hold out a bowl filled with raw honeycomb. Still wheezing, Nemain pulled out a waxy chunk and bit into it; pulling a face as she crunched through what must have been bee wings and bits of detritus left in the sticky honey.

“Was it you who fixed up my arm?”

He grunted in assent, pulling out a waterskin from behind him to fill a horn cup. “Yes. Figured after you fainted dead away that it was something worse than a mere chill. Saw your arm, all swollen red with pus and...well…”

“Nay, you did right. It be fair well done. I thought I had tended to it, but…” She trailed off as another spasm racked her with coughing.

Nodding in thanks as Ulfric handed her the water, she drank thirstily...only stopping to pour some in her palm, to wipe down her face. She noticed his eyes were strangely hooded, mouth slightly open. Following the arc of his line of sight, Nemain looked down...

-and realized with abrupt shock that her breastband was currently riding around her waist. Her diddies completely exposed, bare to the air as her nipples tightened beneath that scalding scrutiny.

Shite!

Fixing him with an acidic glare, she popped up the breastband and folded her arms. “Get a good look?”

Returning her glare with a forced casualness as he shrugged, Ulfric dragged the bowl towards him and began fishing through for a slice with the most honey. “At what? All I saw were two pebbles laid upon a cutting board.”

She practically choked in rancor, searching for a truly inspired insult to retort with when she noticed a smile hovering around his mouth. Clearing her throat, she summoned what shreds of dignity remained to her and ignored him. Turning instead to pour more water upon the heated rocks in the center of the small room.

Clouds of steam filled the sauna as the water hissed in the heat. She could no longer see Ulfric...or
anything, really, but the hot muggy fog. The smoothed boards beneath her legs, rough in spots where the sander had been unable to smooth the knots and whorls in the wood. Smell the salt hot air, for the water had that mineral, almost fishy scent that bespoke the sea bay as its origin.

Breathing in shallowly as the heat eased the pains in her chest, his voice caught her off guard as she jumped. “A hagraven made that mark upon you, didn’t it.”

“Aye.”

He tilted his head. Face carefully blank, those blue eyes searching her for...something. “You going to tell me what you were doing that close to a hagraven?”

Thrusting out her chin, her challenging demeanor was ruined by the moist rattling of her indrawn breaths.

“-No!”

“Hmph. Well...your plan worked, at least.”

“It did? I mean...aye. Of course. The murderer.” She paused, collecting her scatterbrained thoughts. *He let that go far too easily. “Who was he?”*

Ulfric leaned forward out of the mist, holding out the nearly empty bowl of honeycomb. Nearly falling over, Nemain tried to snag a chunk of it and failed, as he pulled away, held it high above his head. Raising his eyebrows, as she gritted her teeth and clawed for the contents, she thought she detected the merest hint of humor in those icy cold eyes. “What? You...do you want this?”

“Yes, Bear! Give it here!” Coughing roughly to prove her point, she saw him roll his eyes as he tossed a piece at her, the honeycomb plopping squarely upon the bare skin of her chest.

Looking down, she looked up to see him fully grinning, now. “You did that on purpose.”

“No, it was...fortuitous circumstance.” He coughed, covering his face with a hand that she suspected shrouded a laugh.

*Arse.* Peeling away the treat from her decollatage, she popped it into her mouth and waved her hand airily. Summoning him to answer her question.

“What? Ah...the Imperial you caught. Yes. That was Calixto Corrium.”

Settling himself once more against the wooden wall, Ulfric’s gaze turned distant. Those frozen lake eyes cooling as he thought of things less pleasant than tormenting her. “The guards and I went through his residence, and found more evidence that he was the killer. Journals, rotting body parts and such that had not been moved to the necromancer’s more hidden study in Hjerim. That, and his attempt upon your life have landed him a cell of his very own in the Bloodworks.”

He gave her a little bow. A mere dip of the head, really. “Your cell. Congratulations on being replaced.”

Managing to swallow the sticky honey down, Nemain was forced to clear her throat twice again before she could phrase a question. “Is he in his right mind? The vision I had of him...it was not
“No. The man is utterly mad.” Ulfric stated flatly. “Raving on about his sister, his work in bringing her back from the dead. But it does not matter. He killed without true cause, has killed and will kill again. Let us see how he feels about murder, when it is his own head upon the chopping block.”

Nemain felt a slight pang of sympathy for the dotty Imperial. She had never visited his so-called museum; being far too busy with Wuunferth and books, but she had seen him often at Candlehearth Hall. Calixto Corrium had seemed entirely normal. *Just shows what good judging by appearances gets ye.*

Steam curled, lit by the light of the lamp that sat by Ulfric in the corner of the sauna. The silence following his announcement of the killer’s fate was a restful one.

Drinking once again from the waterskin without bothering to refill the cup, Nemain laid back down upon the floor with a groan. Her heart hurt...throat so scratchy she could scarcely swallow. A pounding pulse reverberated in her temples like a second heartbeat. Legs, arms, back...everything was sore.

Spooking, as his hand came out of nowhere, to tap upon her knee...she jerked from the half-slumber she had nearly slipped into and looked at him in exasperation. “What?”

His face was solemn, all vestiges of playfulness gone. “It seems I owe you a favor.”

“I’ll not be cashing it in just yet, Bear. I have to decide a suitable exchange for such a valiant task.”

Fluttering her eyelids, she pursed her lips coquettishly. “It will keep you on your toes. What will my favor be? Whatever shall I choose? And when?”

“...This favor does have a time limit.” Ulfric’s voice was an amused rumble.

“Meaning I have to actually be alive to grant you such a favor.”

She groaned, rolling herself up into a ball as her head spiked in pain once more. Rubbing her hips, the witch grumbled as a knot of tension rippled from the base of her spine, all the way to her skull. “Whatever, Bear. That goes without saying. Don’t think you get off sae easy from teaching me another Shout. I have a shiny new Dragon soul, thanks to the cursed dovah who ploughed through Kynesgrove and snaffled up its folk. Phwoar. An entire village gone...truly, tis time to see how we might castrate these beasts, for I hear more tales of dragons crop up every damn day.”

His hand flattened firmly against her lower back. “Have you decided which Shout you wish to focus on next?”

She writhed, as his thumb pushed near-painfully into the tender muscles there, a squeaking whine emerging as she spoke haltingly. “Er...I be thinking...Unrelenting Force? Gods don’t stop. That feels…”

A flush of mortification zipped through her, as she realized through the blur of her dysphoria that she was actually arching against his hands, those hot callused fingers that must have held magic despite his claim otherwise. For everywhere he touched positively *tingled.*
“...still in pain?”

Jerking away, she scooted from his side. Turning away from him, Nemain shuddered at the absence of solid warmth. Closing her eyes tightly, she rejected even the sight of Ulfric. “Just ill.”

She would not. She would not crawl up to him, rip that pathetic excuse for a towel away and ride him like a stallion. Not without a heavily medicated dose of something stronger than honeycomb, to ward off the inevitable breakdown that would ensue afterwards.

_Gods, what a mess._

The silence this time was less calm. More expectant; teeming with everything they had left unsaid. Lying herself flat on the floor, Nemain pushed her forehead into the rough wood and thought about good and evil. About what she had been taught all her life was virtuous and right, turned upside down upon its head...and the dastardly figure she had been brought up to hate somehow not so clearly evil as she had once believed.

The steam was nearly all gone when Nemain whispered. Knowing her silent companion could hear her. “Do you believe in destiny?”

Somewhere out of sight, Ulfric bit back a yawn. “What?”

“Predestination. That...that things happen for a reason. That even if we...change things, that they were already meant to be. Do you believe we all bear a destiny that cannot be fought?”

“I don’t indulge in philosophy unless I am truly in my cups, woman. What’s this about? Calixto?”

“No. Y’see…” She pushed herself up to her knees and hands, summoning the strength to remain still as her head banged like a gong. _Ouch._ “I was taught that free will be an illusion - that folk always choose the path they believe will reap them the greatest reward. That the gods decide everything; for it is up to us, the shamans and wisewomen to read their signs and omens, to decipher their meaning in our lives.”

A soft snort. “If everything has already been decided, then what is the point of living? Why not send us all to Sovngarde or Oblivion randomly?”

“To honor the gods, I suppose. Perhaps we amuse them with our foibles.” Curling her back into a bridge, Nemain felt her lower smalls slide down her legs from her hips. Exposing her to the air as she held her breath in strangely timid fear; the weight of her hair concealing all sight.

Desperate to draw attention away from her bareness, Nemain stuttered on. “I overheard Elda of Candlehearth Hall saying that Calixto - the murderer - he had a book at his museum. Something
about fate. That when you opened it, it be different for every person...revealing a word or line to some of especial significance. Did...did you read the book, Bear?"

His voice was toneless. “I did. It was blank.”

“Then...what does that even mean? Does it mean you be about to die with no future? Is it all some sort of grand trick? What?”

She heard him sigh. One long exhalation, as warm upon her bare skin as the steam had been, then sounds of his feet slapping against the wet wooden floor.

Guilty exhilaration sparked through her as his hands compressed her shoulders, forcing a hiss of dismay from her lips even as she surrendered...folding herself into a tight knot as those large fingers found every sore spot. Every tense fold of skin, smoothing over her pains with the gliding force of an oar dipping into placid waters.

When he finally spoke, the Bear’s voice was oddly thoughtful. “I believe it means we make our own destiny. Our paths are not written in any stars, Nemain. Only a coward, unsatisfied by his condition...unwilling to fight for what he wants will choose the easy way. Say that it cannot be helped. That fate has stuck him in the hole he could easily climb out of, if he would but apply himself to the task.”

A wild fear compressed her spine, even as he fought with steady, even pressure to smooth out the strain. “That’s mad talk. I should nae be shocked to expect such claptrap from you, Ulfric...you and your damn rebellion! Kicking against the pricks, throwing off the Thalmor leash...not everyone is blessed with such clear vision of what is right and the drive to make it so, you daft man. Or are given such a destiny, to fight at the forefront of it all.”

She coughed, jerking as a stray movement tickled her side. Something soft. *His hair?* “Your stars made you what you were, long ago. It is pointless to pretend otherwise.”

Ulfric’s voice was dry as he spoke, but she barely managed to listen as she nearly swallowed her tongue. For his hands were working their way down her back, following the curve of her hips. His thumbs seemed to linger upon the exposed flesh there, rubbing in small circles that teased out a breathy moan from her. “My starstruck destiny pegged me for a monastic existence at High Hrothgar, actually. A future Greybeard surrounded by silent old men...I would have gone mad, had I stayed much longer on that mountaintop. Sometimes...”

Raising her rear in the air, she bit her lip to avoid making any more damn noises, as his hands kneaded down the hips, caressing the hills of her barely-there arse. Gripping her inner thighs as she quivered in a breathless sort of anticipation. Waiting for him to finish his thought. To say something. *Do something. Gods! He does this on purpose! By Hircine, he would have been utterly wasted as a monk.*

“...the gods have a cruel sense of humor, giving you the thing you always wanted at the worst time possible. The Great War was one such thing.”

His hands left her, as she caught herself in check before she could physically sag in disappointment. Reappearing beneath her breastband, his fingertips spanned the width of her torso on either side.
Trailing downwards as she unconsciously flexed; stopping to rest at the inverted curve of her waist.

Fisting her hands in her hair, Nemain silently entreated him to continue. “I dinnae understand. So, you wanted to go fight?”

“Yes. Very much.” The husky words were somehow dragged from his throat. One by one her muscles unknotted as he began rubbing more briskly...short hard strokes that loosened up her tortured back. He paused. “I wanted to leave, to bear arms in the legion against the invading elves. To make a name for myself.”

He laughed harshly. “Like Ysgramor, and Talos of old. But then, I was young. Unblooded. I didn’t know any better, then.”

Despite her active interest in everything going on, Nemain felt her jaw crack wide with an unbecoming yawn. “Well, I do think you have succeeded in becoming notorious, at that. What be the reward for your head, now? Four thousand septims? Five? I be holding off until it reaches at least ten, you know. Houses dinnae pay for themselves.”

“A house, hmm. Which one?”

Nemain stretched...flaring her fingers in a strangely vibrant sense of well being, as she slid fully prone upon the floor with a sigh. Magic fingers. What do you know, the man be talented at things beyond politicking and wholesale slaughter. I willnae tell him, though...else he'll be claiming this as my favor, for sure. “Hjerim, perhaps.”

She could almost see it; see Aventus all bright faced and plump from a surfeit of sweetrolls, racing to greet her at the door. Her own private space, a nest to feather with her own things. What things? Her mind scolded, for all that she owned had been borrowed, gifted or stolen. Her hope sank a bit at the thought. For Nemain had never possessed so much as a room that truly belonged to her, before. How could you ever afford so much as a tent, witch? With what income? What will you do for food, outside of the palace? And Aventus...remember Galan going through his growth as a young man, and how many victuals it took to fill the bottomless pit of his belly!? Cor!

So caught up in her thoughts, she nearly forgot that she was not alone. Until footsteps sounded, moving further from her towards the sauna entrance. A blast of cold wind that blessedly cut off with a slam of wood made her break out into shivers of goose pimples. “...Ack, it be cold. Shut that door!”

“It is nearly dawn, and we should be going. Think you can walk?”

“Course I can walk, you idjit! I walked...here.” She swallowed, rubbing her throat as she suddenly felt very naked. Where be my clothes? “Didn’t I?”
“No. I carried you in here, remember?” Ulfric was regarding her with the strangest expression. A merger of exasperated humor, wariness...and a darkness in his demeanor that she slowly realized to be lust.

“Reachwoman, we really should talk about that night we-”

“NO.”

The longing that had so clearly stamped his features made way for irritation, as she folded her arms against the intrusive, miserable cold.

He tried again, his voice heavy with warning. “Nemain…”

“No, Ulfric! Just...no.” Chewing the inside of her cheek, Nemain fixed her most intolerant, bitch-faced glare upon him.

There he stood, all that scarred muscle wrapped in nothing but a towel and a smoldering look...which mattered not at all. For she was going to let him down. Let him down hard, since it was the right thing to do. Nemain had an inkling that the Bear did not do casual sex.

And she could not contemplate attempting anything else. Not now. Not at all. “It was a mistake. I understand you were out of your gourd that night, all sleep deprived and such. It happens to the best of us.”

He looked at her pityingly, which was perhaps the worst of all. Hackles raising, she stood as straight as her minimal height would allow, to show him she meant what she said.

Just as Ulfric opened his mouth; to say something she was sure would haunt her nights (just as this sauna would probably play a starring role in her fantasies, by Dibe) Nemain cut him off. “Look, we both be completely exhausted. And there’s plenty to do, for the killer has been caught and I have much to study with this new Shout and...and other developments. Let us retire to actual beds, to sleep.”

Holding himself with a pensive kind of stillness, she chafed under Ulfric’s thoughtful gaze. As though he were tallying up every word; storing it in a vault for later. To be weighed and measured.

“Very well. This way.”

“Wait!” Hopping after him, as he opened the door to a blasting frigid sky, the Bear turned as she licked her lips. Hating herself, even as she was forced to ask for help. “I don’t have a...a covering. A towel.”

His lips quirked. “You want my towel?”

“No! I do not be wanting anything under your towel!”

Nearly kicking herself for the verbal slip, she watched dolefully as the Nord’s face stretched into a provocative leer. “As you wish.”

And with that, he disappeared...slamming the sauna door shut.

“Hey! Hey Bear! Augh, you cannæ do this to me! We be a full street away from the main palace
Galmar was tired.

He had been graced with a mere three hours sleep, after keeping up with a steady stream of couriers reporting in from the various Stormcloak camps in the north and west. His commanders and soldiers had been distracted, too busy jawing off about the murderer who had been caught - by the little witch, no less - to pay attention to what Galmar wanted them to do.

It was fucking intolerable. Something had to give.

The Stone-Fist yawned uproariously, scratching his thigh as he hulked off towards the main palace gate. The rest of the missives could wait until midday, for once. There was no chance he would be returning to the stables unless there was a truly dire need.

He required a bath, some brandy and rest. Perhaps not in that order...for as Galmar continued scratching his thigh all the way up to his arse (damnable itch, who had been assigned to clean the privies? They were doing a shitty job) he considered speaking to that Elda, down in her inn. A fine woman. Damn fine woman. Unflappable despite the deaths that had happened right near her place of business. And saucy to boot. He was of a mind to visit her, first. Then, he could indulge in a soak, with a glass of brandy. Perhaps with company.

Making up his mind, the old Nord marched back down the steps of the Valunstrad...only to stop dead still as Ulfric appeared from a side street. Strolling along in nothing but a towel around his hips.

“Morning, Galmar.”

“Uh…” His second in command stared, as the Jarl was soon followed by a furtively sneaking she-Breton, nearly hidden in her own hair.

“…Nemain?” The Stone-Fist sputtered, hardly believing his own eyes. For the woman was clad in almost as little as Ulfric; her hands and hair doing nothing to cover the over-large underthings she was hoisting up over hips and ribs. Her pointy witch-face was a scarlet mess.

“You didnae see me!” She shrilly whispered; jogging in mincing, sneaky steps until the witch pushed past Ulfric with a glare that could melt stone.

“You’re...you...I’m going to do something just awful to you later, Bear! Awful! Pah!”

Ulfric halted, towel swirling around his legs as he and Galmar watched the woman go. Her hair fluttering behind her like a flag, the Forsworn practically stomped the rest of the way to the palace.
doors. Pushing through them like they had personally wronged her.

Eyeing his friend of countless years, Galmar debated on whether or not to ask.

_What the fuck_. He’d ask. “So...did you tup her?”

A strange sort of smile twisted the Nord’s lips. “I’m still in one piece, aren’t I.”

“That would be a no, then. Damn. How hard did you try?”

“Galmar. Don’t you have something to do?”

Nodding decisively, Galmar harrumphed. “Yes. Getting laid. Which apparently you have failed at, for the thousandth time since I’ve known you. You going to give her another go?”

“She’s not interested.”

Galmar rolled his eyes. Tugged at his beard, as his lips turned up in a knowing grin of their own.

“Well. If the shrew doesn’t care, then why would she taunt you? Women always nag the men they favor, Ulfric. It’s like some sort of code. They all do it....thinking we won’t notice!”

Ulfric sighed, wrapped his towel more tightly around his waist. “If you’re bored enough to debate the fairer sex, Galmar, then-”

“Say no more. I’m off.”

Whistling under his breath, Galmar Stone-Fist strode off towards Candlehearth Hall. Making up a very pleasant sort of plan for how he wanted his morning to go...only a bare corner of his mind considering other, more altruistic things. Would the labor of interfering pay off, he wondered...to get that backed-up bastard to shake the sheets with the mouthy little spitfire?

Galmar would be willing to place a significant purse of septims that whatever shit they got up to - it would be the stuff of a bard’s dream. Lecherous, bawdy, songs...

Hearing a distant shriek from somewhere inside the palace, Galmar sniggered.

And loud. Very loud.

“Elda! Honeymouth, it has been an age! I was wondering if you had a spare moment, to walk with me about the streets? Since you’ve hired Luaffyn and this killer has been caught, well...I admit. I have been making plans.”
Oh, Lucilla. Soon you and I will be together once more.

Calixto urinated into the slop bucket provided for him in his jail cell. The oddly named ‘Bloodworks’ was nothing more than a mere dungeon...foul and wet, as a criminal placeholder should be. Yet he wasn’t worried.

He had snuck a lockpick inside the fold of his tunic, yes...the guards had emptied out his boots. Had found the knife, the soul gem...even his scratched and poorly rendered painting of dear Lucilla, which he had begged pitifully to keep. And had been denied, curse these clodheaded snowbacks for their temerity!

No matter. For soon, he would be free once more. Calixto could see the single guard snoring off upon the hay bale in the corner where it was dry, the torchlight guttering in a slight draft. It would be the work of a moment, really, to pick the lock and kill the somnolent guard.

As he shook his prick, dislodging the last drops of urine, Calixto hummed to himself. Nothing at all, really, to kill and exchange clothing with the soon-to-be dead Stormcloak. That same spike of metal that would grant him his freedom could be slashed across a throat. Shoved into an eyeball, to pierce the brain. Spells, blades, fire...so many ways to choose from.

Those conical helmets would reveal nothing of his face - just another weary guard, making his way up the stairs past the others. On his way to assume the position outside the palace gates. He even practiced his lines in his head, with a heavy Nordic accent that was oh-so simple to ape, after decades of living in the heartland.

“I’d be a lot warmer and a lot happier with a bellyful of mead...No lollygaggin’! You hear that? I swear, there’s something out there. In the dark.”

Something that would soon include himself, Calixto simpered. Where could he resettle himself, to continue his great work? Aha, he thought to himself, mentally patting himself on the back at his own ingenuity. Riften . Of course. The home of the thieves guild. Bodies went missing in the Ratway and the Warrens so often, that the appearance of a bloated corpse hardly elicited any talk. Perfect.

Just as he was about to insert the trusty lockpick, the door to the Bloodworks opened.

“Who’s there? Wait, I know you...” The guard snuffled awake, coming to a rough sort of attention.

A hooded and robed figure, followed by two others similarly garbed, glided down the stairs. Extended a hand, a female voice intoning a word that rang like a bell.

‘ Pacify’. 

Sidling along the poleaxed watchman, the figure walked towards Calixto’s cage. Until it stopped, flanked by its two companions on either side. The cowl was drawn so low, the Imperial could see nothing but the shadow of a pair of lips.
Lips that spoke, revealing a hoarse female croak. “Calixto Corrium. The Butcher of Windhelm.”

Palming the lockpick, Calixto considered his options. And reacted accordingly. “Speaking? What is it that you want with me?”

The lips smiled deviously. “You? I be wanting nothing with you. You have caused me trouble enough. But they…”

The woman gestured to the two figures on either side of her. Who stepped forward at a flick of her fingers, to shadow him beyond the cage bars.

“...these women have a bone to pick with you.”

As Calixto watched the woman continue to grin in that unsettling way, he noted that his newest acquisition - the Necromancer’s amulet of legend - hung round her scrawny neck. “Hey! That is mine, woman!” He insisted fitfully.

Clasping a hand around the bars of his cage, he reached a hand forward, straining to reach his prize. The powerful artifact that would ease the difficulty of rebuilding Lucilla’s mortal frame. “Give it back, thief! I need it! Guards!”

The hood bobbed as she spoke once more. “No one be coming, scum. Nilsine! Susanna! I permit you to do to this man what he performed upon you. Attack!”

A hand grasped his outstretched limb, the fingers soft and pulpy. Relinquishing his efforts to reach the amulet, Calixto tried to break away-

-only to be caught by another, more decayed hand. This one’s skin was sloughing away from the rotten tissue, revealing white bone...an arm that was connected to - by the Eight Divines, no - he passed his eyes upward, not believing what he saw…

It belonged to the Nord server of Candlehearth Hall. Susanna the Wicked! Whose clouded bloodshot eyes had fixated upon him coldly, in emotion granted to her by the reanimator - who remained grinning still, as she stepped backwards precisely twice. Watching as he struggled to free himself from their grasp.

“No, wait my friend! Y-you don’t know what you’re doing!” Calixto babbled, as his clothes began to tear beneath the thrall’s undead strength.

“I can teach you! Teach you how to use the amulet of legends! Become a necromancer of truly great might! Don’t you see? How will you use it without me guiding you every step of the way, oh no...auughh - help!”

The Imperial yelped, the revenant undead hissing dully as they methodically carried out Nemain’s
final order. Limb by limb, Calixto was torn apart.

As she watched in bitter apathy, Nemain recast the spell of muffle upon the door. It wouldn’t do, she thought with some mirth, to have a full fist of guards spill through the door. Wondering what all the hubbub was about; treated to a full spectacle of her justice before it could be fully dispensed.

No one could stop it now. Calixto had ceased emitting that high, girlish scream minutes ago. Hanging limply half out of the bars (for the revenants had literally pulled him apart) gobbets of the Imperial’s guts splatted loudly, as the undead Nilsine and Susanna devoured what flesh they could, stuffed haltingly with increasingly skeletal hands into their gnashing mouths.

‘Harmony’.

The illusion spell hit both women simultaneously. As one, they dropped their bits of Calixto and turned, jaws still moving as their eyes looked somewhere in the vicinity of Nemain.

The witch nodded. And spoke, mostly for her own benefit. *I never want to see such wasted potential, ever again.*

“Susanna the Wicked. You may have been a wicked woman by name, but according to the patrons of Candlehearth Hall you be the stuff of sweetness and light. I be sorely grieved to part from your company now. And yes...I bear a slight regret that I did not take you up on your generous offer for warmth. Seeking the heat of another seems to be my downfall. Truly. I wish you to rest in peace.”

Like cutting the strings of a puppet-doll, Susanna’s corpse flopped to the ground at a gesture from the witch. The unearthly light that had swirled from her glazed eyes was gone.

Nemain turned to the more recent victim next.

“Nilsine Shatter-Shield. You lost your dear twin Freja not long ago. What a sorrow to bear...I never had the luck of a sibling, but if I had - I would say, ochone. Ochone for your loss, young Nord. Your killer lies dead, a fitting end to a slayer of so many women. Send your spirit to ghost over your dear mother, Tova, and your father Torbjorn...for you are mourned and they long for your comforting presence. Then leave, to rejoin your dear sister. May you rest in peace.”

A thud sounded, as Nilsine dropped to join Susanna sprawled upon the stone floor.

Uncorking a bottle of wine, Nemain stepped in widdershins around the bodies. Sprinkling the fruit of the vine gravely over the corpses, she intoned a blessing and a toast.

“Go maire sibh bhur saol nua. May you enjoy your new life. Both of ye.”
Dribbling some wine upon the guard who still stood in a dazed stupor, Nemain reached out with a hand to close his eyes.

“‘Sleep’, unfortunate one. I do not envy you your chore in explaining all this come the morning light. At least you’ll be enjoying a full night’s rest. I’ve made sure of that.”

Scanning the redecorated dungeon, Nemain heaved a sigh of relief. It was done...the women’s spirits would not now come back to haunt as ghosts. She had been unable to find Freja’s remains...and the parts that the butcher had been trying to assemble had already been taken and burned. But she had done what she could. Nemain prayed that the spirits would be appeased by her efforts, and trouble her sleep no further.

Stepping up the stones to leave, she paused. And turned around once more, stalking to the gory remnants of what had once been Calixto Corrium, butcher.

She hissed. “Imeacht gan teacht ort! May you leave without returning!” Flicking her hands in the symbol that warded off the evil eye, Nemain drew a tree in the air with a finger lit in flame for good measure. Ensuring the bastard would never come back, despite whatever precautions he may have taken as an adept necromancer.

Trees were symbols of life and death, their branches ever-changing with the seasons, yet the form remaining unchanged. Incorruptible; a shield against dark magicks. And fire was a sure defense against anything that lurked in the dark.

Nemain thought about trees; juniper trees. Trailing feathery boughs laden with sky blue berries, so tart and crunchy to the taste. The bark made excellent tinder for fires, and could be rolled into rope. Rope she could attest to for its roughness, if not for durability as she rubbed the raised scar that ringed her throat.

Trees, standing for life and death. And beyond.

Her rasping voice raised in a final invective, as she left the room...wiping the muck from her feet in a practical, yet meaningful maneuver. “Leave, and ne’er return! Rest and in your graves lie! Peace be unto you and yours, as foul feelings fly!”

It wasn’t her best songspell, due to the spur of the moment nature of it. But her words in closing got the job done. Feeling satisfied, the Forsworn shaman left the Bloodworks for a night of well deserved rest.

A guard arose from the spell-drugged sleep she had cast all of the barracks in, as she left. “Hey,” he mumbled weakly. “Don’t I know you…”

“No, fool. Go to sleep.”
The unfortunate guard slept in the longest the following morning, despite the racket and screams that echoed, when the contents of the Bloodworks made the rounds amongst the guards.

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*If this is some new Daedric realm I have ventured into, it is either Dibella’s or Sheogorath’s,* Ulfric thought wildly as his face practically smoshed into Nemain’s cleavage yet again.

“Stop olagonin’, Bear! Och, if you’d just hold still…”

“I held still!” Aventus proclaimed in boyish pride. His head had been sheared to lie in a fuzz standing up from his skull, as he ran circles around the seated Jarl of Eastmarch. “I got a sweetroll because I did so good. I only screamed the tiniest bit when she came at me with the comb! Hold still, mister, and Nemain will give you something sweet too!”

Ulfric rather hoped so. But he feared it would be a long time coming, as he gritted his teeth against the sharp swipes of the comb through his newly shorn hair. “Ack! Gods damn it woman! Stop tearing out what's left!”

“Don’t be a rawny ponce, Ulfric. Chin up! I’ve almost got all the wee buggers out of your hair. Thanks the gods you shaved your beard, else I’d be forced to look at your ugly mug all up close and personal.”

As he tried (and failed) not to ogle the pale curves of the witch’s breasts toppling distractedly from the tightly cinched bodice of her blue gown, Ulfric had time to reflect upon the past events that had led to this auspicious moment.

Nemain’s threat to do something ‘awful’ in return for spurning her at the sauna had come frighteningly true. Ulfric had not only come down with her disgusting cold…four days later, he was sneezing at random with watering eyes still. But he had *also* caught a head full of lice from the unfortunates who had been cast into the Bloodworks. Nemain had been beside herself when she had seen the tiny pests hopping from Aventus Aretino’s hair, and had been extremely fussy to discover that residents of the same had moved into her own spill of untameable mane.

*The Bloodworks...now I know why they were named so.* The Jarl thought darkly. Not just because it held murderers - or remains of murderers, he clarified grimly as he thought about the uproar of Calixto’s passing. That event (which had left Nemain curiously close-lipped, much to his paranoia) had also created a new craze for superstitious tales. Ghost stories, really.

No...the Bloodworks was truly well named for the blood-sucking vermin; fleas and lice that were bequeathed to any unlucky sod that was thrown into its cells.
Which dubious honor now seemed to include him, by dint of association. “...There! All finished. Here’s a glass, so you may look upon yourself and see what a grand job I’ve done, fixing ya.”

Shaking his head of the stray hairs that she had clipped away, Ulfric took the hand mirror and looked at himself with reserve.

He hardly recognized himself without the beard and rune-beaded braids. His face stood out in stark, rawboned planes...the weals and scars that streaked his face even more present than before. The reddish-gold hair on his head had been hewn down into a tight military cut, sticking straight up in tufts where his strands bunched in waves.

All in all, his sober blue eyes dominated his face, along with his father’s nose and his mother’s generous mouth. A face he had not seen since before the Great War, the last time he had been fully without a beard to cover the scars. Though there were now laugh lines and frown marks bracketing the sides of his mouth that had not been there, before. *Who the fuck are you?*

“See? Clean on.” Nemain smiled at him, the wariness she had treated him with for the past few days nearly gone in her triumph. He prided himself that his sight did not so much as dip down to view the cutout expanse of her breasts; to undress her from that smothering dress in his mind’s eye as he was often tempted to do while laying abed. Trying in vain to fall asleep, night after night. Alone. *Shor take you. Galmar. Naked. Mud springs. Shit, that did it.*

“Sae much better than before. We can actually see what lies beneath all that fur. For a bear, you’re sorely not bad looking, Milord.”

“I want a beard!” Aventus called out, mouth half-full of a honey-nut cluster.

“Och, no. Not unless you keep it tidy clean, you runt. I detest bushy, flyaway beards. They look as if they be inviting a mother bird to come in and lay some eggs.”

“Caw-caw! Caw-caw!” Aventus giggled, as the Forsworn tickled his sides and underarms with wriggling fingers, making obscene faces as she laughed along.

“Yeah. Come on, ye little gobshite. Off to the books with you now.”

“Aw, ma! Do I have to?”

“Tssk! What be I telling you about calling me that? I be Nemain to you, pip. Never Marm or Ma or Mummy. Just Nemain. Now go and do your reading. No son of mine, adopted or no, will be caught dead without knowing his history.”

The boy looked up with huge, pleading eyes to the Reachwoman. “Will we be seeing my friend soon? The girl I told you about?”

Ulfric watched in amusement as Nemain rolled her eyes. *If she did that any harder, they would fall right out of her head.* “Cor, boy! Cease your bedlam and get you to the books! I promised you, didn’t I? And I do keep my word.”
He decided to draw her attention back to him. For no reason in particular. “Who is this friend that will be visiting us in my halls?”

Nemain turned to him, hands planted firmly upon her hips as she smiled sweetly. “Och, did I not tell ya? I’m planning on adopting again, Milord. A sweet Stormcloak orphan by the name of Sophie.”

Ulfric stared, thunderstruck as Nemain tugged her fingers through her newly cut hair. It reached her waist now, instead of coursing like a dark waterfall to her knees. Even that much had made a difference...the hair wasn’t quite such a presence, anymore.

Nearly another person of her size, he had jested a few times upon becoming caught in the thicket of her hair. Untangling the mane infested with the vermin had taken the better part of that first, lice-discovering day. She, like the rest of them, smelled very strongly of the apple vinegar the witch had insisted they douse their heads with, to kill any remaining eggs and lice.

He realized that while he had been woolgathering, simply staring at the woman to observe her like a dolt, she had been jawing on about this Sophie girl. “...selling flowers. Can you believe it? A veteran’s daughter, forced to beg for food as her wanker of a da took off to die or some such malarkey. I look forward to meeting her.”

“You’re taking this girl on as well? Nemain, you haven’t even signed the papers for Aventus yet.” Standing from the seat, he brushed off even more piles of hair from his pants. “Do you even know what you’re doing, raising a child?”

“After all,” he continued blithely as he watched the woman’s fists tighten into white clubs. Concealing a smile, he waxed on. Picking up the comb as though he were merely toying with the mammoth ivory utensil.

“...I’ve heard that Forsworn fatten their foundlings up for the cookpot, leaving all intellectual stimulation for the sabre cats and wolves to teach by example. Do you plan on howling at the moon, Nemain? Showing your cubs how to scratch for fleas? You’ve made an excellent start.”

She was practically speechless with apoplexy now. Her face was bright red, mouth opening and closing as she sputtered, pointing at him in her ire. “What...you....shite...argh!”

“Oh!” Acting surprised, Ulfric advanced upon her with the comb held high in hand. “I think you’ve missed some! Think I saw something small just jump there from your scalp. Here, let me help.”

“Ack, no Bear! Get off! I already combed meself silly, you twit! There cannae be any more, oofh!”

Grinning like a damn fool, Ulfric wrestled her into his arms and pulled the fine-toothed comb exactingly through her hairline. Making sure that every point connected to the skin, as she swore and twisted...struggling to pry herself away from the torture of being raked raw. “Ack! Stopitstopit stop!”

“Now, now.” He intoned piously, crudely enjoying the way she rubbed against him; even for something so silly as this nitpicked (ha!) argument. Her flushed skin was set off quite becomingly by the sapphire darkness of the gown. If she wasn’t screeching like a barn owl, he could almost pretend
that the brass-bound bitch actually desired his presence.

*Which would happen when Oblivion froze over. And not before.* She had been crystal clear in the sauna with her feelings on the matter.

He sighed in inevitable defeat. “Well, damn. Looks like the lice are all gone.”

Turning in his arms, she began slapping his face. It hurt slightly more than he was used to, without the springiness of facial hair to soften the blow. Laughing despite the ridiculousness of the situation, Ulfric walked backwards; taking her blows in stride as he shielded his face with his hands. Nemain continued to lay into him, screaming in that fluid tongue of hers as she advanced. Stomping on his foot for good measure.

“What’s going on here?”

Both Ulfric and Nemain turned, him awkwardly catching her as she tripped into his arms. Galmar had stomped into the throne room, his weatherbeaten face wearing an incredulous glare.

“What are you doing? Don’t you know the Greybeards have summoned you both to High Hrothgar? I thought the messenger had reached you two hours ago!”

Releasing the witch in a swirl of blue cloth, he glanced her way as he noted just how red-faced she still was, from their spar. She’d have to work on her stamina for slapping, apparently. “Galmar, this is the first I’ve heard of any such summons. When did you receive a letter, and how?”

“How? What do you mean, how?” Galmar scoffed, his creased eyes darting back and forth between the Reachwitch and himself.

Ignoring the connection his second in command was implying, Ulfric shook his head imperceptibly and continued expanding his first thought. “High Hrothgar receives very few visitors. I’ve heard rumors that old Klimmek still trudges up the seven thousand steps every month with fresh supplies, but other than the odd pilgrim there are few that make the climb. Who brought you the letter?”

Galmar sniffed. “Some sod from Ivarstead delivered it to a Stormcloak courier. Said it was important. ‘A summons to both the Dovahkiin and the prodigal Greybeard.’ I can only assume they mean you.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“How far away is the Throat of the World?” Nemain’s face had cleared back to its usual paleness. She stepped forward now, bunching her gown in both fists as she sucked on her cheek. “How far away is the Throat of the World?”
Ulfric looked down at her askance. “Far. At least a week on horseback. Longer if we went by foot.”

“I didn’t say I was going tae be doing it, Bear! I doona care what some old goats think, all snookered from breathing nought but clouds! I be a busy woman! I have plans!”

Whatever she had been about to say afterwards was broken off, as a thunderous clap of sound shook the Palace of Kings.

Holding hands to his ears, Ulfric grimaced as the rollicking echo of the Graybeard’s mighty Thu’um reverberated against the stones. Worming into his mind with the insidious strength of their summons.

“.....dddDoovaaahhhkkiiinnnnn!....”

Further rumbles subsided, as both Nemain and Ulfric stared at one another in shock. Galmar shrugged. “Well. Whatever you were up to has been officially shelved, witch. The Greybeards want you. And they want you now.”

Ulfric sighed. “Guess we're going to High Hrothgar.”

_Only the foolish or defiant avoided a summons and a missive from the Masters of the Voice._ And he would fain count himself among neither party.

He hoped.

Temporarily struck speechless, the witch wet her lips. And asked in a wheedling tone. "So...are there really seven thousand steps? And is it counting the seven thousand as a round trip, or be that one way? Bear, I doon think I can walk it! My feet will fall off, they will!"

Pinching his nose between thumb and forefinger as he desperately prayed to Talos for patience, the Jarl of Eastmarch heard Galmar begin to laugh.

"Well, damn. You two are good and f***ed. Tell you what...if you both make it back in one piece, I'll owe you a drink."

Nemain began to snicker as Galmar cast a beady eye upon her with his next question.

"Say...do either of you know what has happened to my collection of Cyrodiilic brandy? I think I've run out. Which is odd, because I never run out. If you know what's good for you, you'll talk."

"Reachwitch! It _was_ you, wasn't it! Come back here!"
Chapter End Notes

Fillean meal ar an meallaire: Evil returns to the evil doer
Fear thuaidh: Northman

Sources for my Gaelic are here and here. I make no claims to be a native speaker of this beautiful tongue. I can only use it and bow before those who actually know how the hell to pronounce this shit.

http://irish.spike-jamie.com/gaelic.html

https://www.smartling.com/blog/70-irish-slang-words-phrases-you-need-to-know/
Return to your friends and tell them that we came here with no peaceful intent, but ready for battle, and determined to avenge our own wrongs and set our country free. Let your masters come and attack us: we are ready to meet them beard to beard.

-William Wallace

“And what be you travelling as? A blacksmith, advertising your wares?”

Ulf ric did not look away from tightening the saddlebags on his horse. Nemain had already climbed astride her own placid mare, arranging her robes to lie more smoothly as she checked her own haversacks. Potions, a clean change of clothing, carefully counted rations of food. (Extra rations. She did not fancy going hungry ever again). All she was missing was a knife. *Which I could simply nab from the Nord, if needs be. It’s not as though he’d miss it.*

Instead of the typical black fur cloak-over-chainmail ensemble she’d grown used to seeing him in, Ulf ric wore nordic steel plate. A gray cloak with a hooded cowl shrouded the man’s face, only a grim mouth rimmed in a reddish shadow of beard visible beneath. He positively bristled with weaponry, clanking with every movement like a Khajiit peddlar. She could see what looked to be a Skyforge steel blade strapped to his side, the telltale runes carved upon the pommel throwing the other, more utilitarian blades he had shoved into his boots, belt and wrist guards to shame.

*Is that a spiked mace hanging from a belt loop? Really, Bear?*

The overall effect would have looked silly on someone else. But the fear *thuaidh* bore himself with such unconscious arrogance that she was sure not a blade would *dare* scratch the noble bastard’s skin. She almost felt sorry for the poor horse, as he heaved the steel encrusted bulk of himself up into the saddle. His low voice shook her from boldly appraising him. “I know you agreed with Galmar’s objections, but trust me - this way is for the best. The only souls who take the mountain path are pilgrims and messengers. We will move faster, draw less attention without soldiers or banners...taking what provisions and weapons we can safely carry.”

“I see that. Did you leave any armaments left in the barracks? Or are the guards now required to wield forks in defense of the Hold?”

He tipped back his head as their horses pulled alongside one another, those blue eyes finally visible. She squinted against the brightness of the sun upon the snow, to see what expression she could prise from his impassive face. *Looks like he has gotten about the same measure of rest that I have. Namely, none.*

“Better to be prepared than not. If I didn’t bring it, I just know I would regret not having it later, on the road.”
“Does this perilous road require you to mimic a Dwemer Centurion? Ulfric, if you kill your horse with all that folderol, then I swear by the darkness that eats all things you’ll be walking up the seven thousand steps. Alone.”

Nemain thought she glimpsed the briefest stretch of a smile, before he spurred his horse into a trot. Clicking her tongue, she dug her knees into the mare’s side to bid her to follow.

And wasn't that just the way of things now? After the mucket with the killer and her imprisonment, baiting and capture of the now infamous Butcher of Windhelm (though she still thought of Bear when the term Butcher came up in conversation, a habit that had accidentally ended several friendships) Nemain had wound up in a strange sort of holding pattern with the Jarl of Eastmarch.

In the five days they had taken to prepare for their departure to High Hrothgar, Nemain had meandered from playful to prudent in her interactions with the man, while he either outright ignored her, or surprised her. The man was capable of shockingly insightful revelations...but was just as likely to gift Nemain with a withering insult.

Most days they were getting along swimmingly. He teased, she taunted, she veered ever closer to sneaking into his bedchambers at night to jump the man’s bones.

But with a careless word, the moment would be turned upon its head. And the witty, patient teacher who had successfully gotten her to Shout Fus Roh Dah! (she had nearly cried at the justice of seeing Ulfric blown over, gods, that had happened to her SO many times) morphed into a cold, intolerant stranger.

One whose arguments often had Nemain’s fingers straining for her knife, to plunge it into his chest and end this nonsensical farce. Surely you have learned all he has taught? Do you truly need the Bear to accompany you to the old goat Greybeards?

But it was likely that the old Masters in their monastery would not take kindly to her murdering a former student of theirs; prodigal rebel though he may be. And, she reasoned with herself, what was the point of learning the Thu’um from Bear only to reach an impasse with the ones higher up?

She had not a clue of what to do. The days of packing, writing letters to Markarth and Darklight Tower had passed as quick as a flash of a salmon’s flicked tail. And though she tailed the courier every morning, no new missives arrived for her.

And so she rode along, the wintry landscape of Eastmarch passing by uncaring eyes. For her sight was now turned inward.

Why has Máthair not returned my letter? Moira surely has passed along my message. Could it be she has truly cut me off for good? And Madanach...my ‘father’ gets letters all the time, I saw Nepos scribe them meself. They must have received them! Cor, make them listen. For I must warn them both about the dragons, as well as whatever Bear be planning for my people in the hostile takeover that is this Stormcloak movement.

At least the coven of Darklight Tower had been more responsive. She had been cordially invited to join in their Beltane festivities for the coming spring; a festival to which she frankly looked forward to. For she had touched herself twice more all alone in her bed since that night spent in the sauna; foolishly dwelling upon his hands on her skin. That moment when he had paused behind her...hands spreading the softness of her inner thighs apart. To look, her inner woman whispered knowingly. He wanted, did he not? The Bear be no eunuch, but a man. With a man’s hot blood.
It did not do to dwell upon daydreams at the expense of the present, she sternly scolded herself as they rounded a lip of rock that held the expanse of the geothermal basin before them. Though she had not seen Máthair for more years than she would wish, that voice still held a commanding sway in her thoughts. Guiding her actions. *No more wasting time, witch.* For she had enough to do, and to spare. The desires of the flesh could wait.

*If I can tup my brains out with some handsome sods next to the fires of Beltane, for sure this gods blasted yearning; so counter to all I believe, will be lessened. And I will be able to relax in body and mind...all the better to learn these Shouts.* To reestablish contacts with the witches of the southern wolds, to find some means to provide for her new foster son and daughter.

And perhaps to return home to the Reach. To Deepwood Redoubt; more a whisper of a stale memory of a dream than any real place.

*Perhaps that will change when I rejoin the People. So much has happened...*

Windhelm disappeared behind them, as their horses pounded the path due south. Nemain blinked back sudden tears, surely from the speed of their passage. It wasn’t as though she would miss the boy child for all that long. She had instructed Aventus to show the shy Sophie about the Palace of Kings in her absence. The girl was as jumpy as a worm on a hook. *One month of travel and study at the very most. Then, the little ormadorm will be plaguing you with questions once more. And you may be sure to see both well fed and warm...Hatti and Skjora will probably spoil them rotten.*

Smiling at the thought, she nearly missed the question the Jarl shouted back at her.

“Isn’t there some sort of spell to fortify the beast’s carrying weight or some such ‘malarkey’? For I am rather fond of this horse.”

“Not for a horse. They tend to shy away from such magicks. And….dinnae say that. It sounds downright cobby when a Nord says it. Your accent be strange.”

His deep voice called out mockingly as his horse sped up from a trot into a canter. “Och, an’ you be one tae talk, Reachwoman!”

Slapping the reins, she irritably fixed the hood that insisted on strangling her, pulling it out of her face. “Not even close, Nord!”

Despite her misgivings, they made good time. They were only stopped once, by a pack of wolves that had burst from the bushes to leap upon them, fouling her reins as she kicked out with her booted foot against snapping teeth.

She made short work of two canine predators with judiciously thrown ice spikes. And her companion had stabbed the one who had tried to tear him off his horse in the chest, leaving the
dagger planted in the dead beast as he wheeled away to follow the road once more.

“Aren’t we going to skin them?” Nemain called out, halting her mare as she looked at the carcasses of the wolves. Food. Furs. It made her uneasy, wasting such when it could be put to use.

Ulfric’s horse pawed the ground near the wolf he had dispatched. “These starved things? There wouldn’t be enough meat to justify the effort, Reachwoman.”

Grunting in reluctant assent, she steered her horse to follow him. “Tis been a hard winter.”

The sun that had risen on her left shoulder was burning upon her right by the time they finally slowed near the path that led to Kynesgrove. The month of Sun’s Dawn was still fraught with chill...the warmth of spring a fair ways off. The entire day had passed in a cold bath of blurred wind while on horseback. And her arse was nearly numb, from sitting for so long without rest. She shivered as Ulfric paused, then nudged his stallion left upon the path.

“What are you up to? There be nothing left there.”

He did not respond, already too far ahead to hear her. Or he was simply set on ignoring her again.

Her mare whickered uneasily as she urged the beast to follow, Nemain blowing out a breath in frustration of her own.

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Kynesgrove had been covered in a thick coating of snow. One would hardly know that there had been an inn there, for the burnt remains had been covered in drifts of sparkling white.

But the dragon skeleton remained untouched. Something in their intrinsic makeup prevented the accumulation of weather, perhaps...similar to how their flesh dissolved into ash upon dying. An interesting field of study. I wonder why only scales and bones be left over when the beast dies. Recalling the burning rush of absorbing a dovah’s essence, Nemain gripped the reins more tightly. Perhaps that be why. Something to do with the soul.

“We should camp here tonight. Continue on at dawn.”

“Aye,” she sighed. Standing up in the stirrups, Nemain’s legs trembled as she eased the strain of sitting for nearly a full day on horseback. Her own two feet were good enough for her, she thought sourly. But the Jarl had been adamant that travelling by horse would be far faster (and safer) than walking.

Not the way I ride. Flexing her ankles, she heard Ulfric whistle in appreciation as they rounded the dovah bones.

“A big one.”

“Aye. Not near as big as the one at Helgen, though. That one was a right massive son of a bitch.”
“Hmm.” Seeming to nod in agreement, Ulfric walked around the dragon skeleton. Taking in the wreck of Kynesgrove, the torn and shredded trees...his expression was bleak. “To think...I always wanted to see a dragon as a boy. I pray Master Arngar has answers for us regarding them. Where they have come from, and why. It cannot be mere coincidence that a Dragonborn has appeared at the same time as this resurgence of dragons.”

“Too perfect to be unplanned, I agree. Though I find myself grateful to be in possession of my head still. Ratty wankers, those Imperials...chopping off heads at random.”

He gave her a wry glance. “Yes...you were ‘randomly’ roaming the woods of Falkreath seeking to assassinate the leader of the Stormcloak Rebellion, who happened to be travelling through the area close by.”

“I didnae know you were right there! I was lost! Cor, I’ve never left the Reach before in my life!”

He simply shook his head. Dismounting with ease (despite being a walking armoury) she watched him in envy, pulling her horse around as it champed at the bridle, searching for a big rock or some such lift to help her get off the high saddle.

Her mare did not appreciate it. Snorting and ducking, Nemain was forced to snap the reins again, to make the damn thing obey....until a pair of searingly hot hands grasped her about the waist. Lifting, dragging her off the insouciant beast as she narrowly avoided being kicked in the gut, as her mare’s tail whipped her in the face. Making her cough, as the rough hairs tickled her nose.

Ulfric’s voice sounded amused, somewhere high above her head, as his hands squeezed once upon her waist, then released her. “If you need assistance dismounting, why not just ask?”

“I can take care of meself, thank you very much.”

Shrugging, the Jarl strode off. “You’re welcome.”

Sticking out her tongue at his broad back, Nemain stamped her foot. Argh. That fear thuaidh...that man!

The horses were curried and tended to, the beasts already cropping at exposed clumps of grass and moss further in the trees. As they cut and stacked pine boughs to lay their bedrolls upon, Nemain noted that a line of graves marred the whiteness in a scar of black earth. Stones had been stacked atop the bodies...the density of the pile and the carefully scratched gravemarkers speaking of the care the individual had taken. To bury the fallen.

Noticing where her eyes lay, Ulfric nodded as if to himself. “Someone has been here, to inter the bodies.”

“Perhaps someone from Windhelm? Family?” She ventured a guess.

“Possibly. Talos preserve the dead.”

A sly smile twitched at her lips. “Because he hasnae done jack squat for them insofar, you mean?”

“Hold your tongue.” Resetting the sleeping furs to lie more or less flatly upon the boughs, Ulfric cast a sharp eye upon their surroundings. “I do not disparage your heathen gods or your traditions.”

“...to my face,” she mumbled.
“-and I’d appreciate it if the same courtesy was shown to my god.” He continued as though she had not spoken.

“Fine.” He’ll have to explain this Talos thing sooner or later. “But by Hircine’s horns, what ails you? Tis time for sleep. Are you not going to untangle yourself from all those razor edges?”

He clanked around their campsite, pointedly not looking at her as she shucked off her outer robes. “We must take turns keeping watch at night. Since you seem overly eager to rest, you can take over in four hours.”

Chewing her lips, she watched as the tall Nord unsheathed his blade and sat heavily upon a stump. Ostensibly to watch her sleep all night. And be a right miserable git in the morn, what with those baggies under his eyes. “Horkershit. Step off, and let a mage do her work.”

Stepping gingerly in her bare feet around the clearing, Nemain began casting runes around their sleeping area. Frost runes furthest away, followed by a ring of fire, then a couple of shock runes for good measure.

Daintily stepping to where he sat, she fisted her hand and reached up to slap it down upon his head as he blinked. The cold spill of the ‘look not here’ spell slid down them both like a cracked egg.

“There. I’ll even add a simple ward to notify us if by some miracle the runes do not awaken us with their deafening implosions. Savvy?”

Swirling her hand around her head to cast the wards, she watched in smug assurance as Ulfric bit back a massive yawn. “Fine. But don't wake me without calling out, first. I usually sleep with a dagger under my pillow.”

“Oh, and not a wee rag doll?” She jibed merrily, savoring the look of irritation he threw her way. “Just go to bed, woman.”

Slithering into her sleeping bag, Nemain chuffed a breath into the cooling night air. She could hardly wait until spring. Green salads. Warm sunshine! Colorful blooms of flowers. I hear there be Nord festivals where the mead flows like waterfalls. But no orgies, those prudes. How will their Divines gift them with bairns if they will not lay with one another in the auspicious ides of spring?

Restlessly pushing thoughts of mead and sex from her mind, Nemain struggled to relax. Blowing with a thread trace of Thu’um, she caused her breath to spiral, grinning as it the fog condensed into a perfect circle.

Nothing could ruin her mood, she decided while staring up at her breath made into beauty. Not Ulfric, or the damn dragons, or her lack of letters from family and friends. She was off to High Hrothgar! To learn even more Shouts (that Ulfric hadn't a prayer of learning, she snidely celebrated) and doubtless a letter or two would be her reward upon her return to Windhelm.

Snuggling to lay on her side, she realized the noisy clash that had been Ulfric denuding himself of all his weaponry had fallen silent. He was shuffling into his sleep furs now, with a near inaudible sigh...the bulk of his armor and array of pointy minions carefully wrapped in hides against the weather. Readjusting against the lumpy thickness of the boughs as she had done earlier; she sleepily watched him toss out a few rocks with a grimace as his head smacked against the ground; a dull thud
Night had fallen into full dark, now. The moons were waning, as the stars retook their prominence amidst the swirling green violet auroras in the sky. Nothing but the beauty, she thought in a daze...rubbing her feet against the soft furs. Lovely skies and stillness and cold. Somewhere out in the forest, an owl hooted. The wind sighed through the treetops, a dry whisper that lulled her further towards her rest.

As her breath cloud dissipated, another shape curled lazily to greet it. A sword, clearly identifiable by its cross guard and pommel, formed of misted breath that she had not exhaled.

Yawning, she looked over to her teacher, who lay as one in the grave with his hands folded upon his stomach. “Not bad, fear thuaidh. Match this!”

Hollowing out her cheeks, Nemain pushed every ounce of her will into this breath, crafting in her mind’s eye the curved wings and toothy maw of a dovah.

As her breath coalesced into a rough shape that somewhat resembled the fabled legend, she heard a soft noise. A whistle, as Ulfric’s sword was propelled through her mist-dragon; both shapes falling apart upon impact.

“Not fair! My poor dragon was doing nothing to taunt your sword!”

“That it even exists makes my sword wish to bathe in its blood.”

The witch snorted, jaws cracking in another almighty yawn as she double checked the horses to be sure their picket lines would not allow them to meander towards the runes. Where did he think his precious Shouts came from? Oh right...the dragons that were supposedly lying all peaceful in their burial mounds. “Remind me never to introduce you to some of my family, then. I come from a long line of illustrious witches, werewolves and vampires, you ken? Be a shame if you stabbed first, and asked pardon later.”

His voice came out in a slurred drawl. “Quite the assembly of monsters. Was there a reason for such madcap diversity? Or is your clan simply filled with degenerates?”

“Ease off, you stook. You know…” Shifting in her furs, she saw him do the same, so that they were facing one another, causing the thick boughs of pine to crackle beneath their weight. “...my people, the Forsworn. They were originally Bretons. Ignorant as you be, that much is known to you, yes?”

She could barely make out his face in the darkness, despite the light of the stars. But his tone of voice was unmistakably cold. “Yes. Manmer; created in the First Era when Mer held Men as slaves. Which foul craft lead to Ayleid masters impregnating their female captives...spawning your mongrel species. I know enough.”

“You make it sound like such a bad thing.”

Mongrel!? But she had her pride. She would ignore the jab, for it was a truth. “The creation myths of my people are a tad more lovingly described. But my clan was one that kept close contact with the elves. My own mother's mam bore the slant-tipped ears of Mer ancestry. Gods keep her.”

His breath fogged the air between them. “Where do the vampires and werewolves come in, then?”

Turning upon her back, she rubbed at her eyes. Somewhere in the distance, the horses could be
heard chewing. Scuffing their hooves against the earth and the snow, reassuring her...for horses could be trusted to also keep a wary eye for predators. “We have a very low birthrate, fear thuaidh. Less and less Reachfolk be born every year from the ritual joinings of the Beltane fires. And so, we sought union with others of similar ilk. Any elves who would have us...Bosmer being the likeliest, as they could sustain their Green Pact with our hunting habits. The blessed ones; werewolves. Hunters of Hircine and the night walkers that drink blood and bear powerful magicks of their own. Possibly some Nords, Imperials or Redguards, though I know none personally.”

“Some say we even slept with the Jötunn...the giants, to bear children...though I cannae imagine how that may have worked out. What with the height differences and such.”

Ulfric laughed in surprise, a cut-off sound that he turned into a cough. “No, I cannot see how that would have, erm. Born fruit.”

“Aye.” Nemain chortled. “It would have been exceedingly painful for the mothers, I think. During the breeding and after, bearing such children. Anyhow, that was what happened. We joined with the people of the spirits...some liking it very much. And others, not at all.”

Licking her chapped lips, Nemain fingered her skull faced amulet. It pulsed against her fingers, like a tiny heartbeat. “Perhaps it be too much to ask that all the clans of the Reach be of one mind, even on such a matter as survival.”

To her right, Ulfric turned over in his furs. “Hmph. Must be why the Nords tell tales of Forsworn nabbing babes straight from their cradles, to replace it with a withy doll made of sticks. Enchanted, so as to look like the child...until the poor parents dispel the trick, and are left with nothing but a handful of twigs.”

Wincing, Nemain thought about what to say. She had heard of such things happening with desperate mothers who had lost children in miscarriages, or from stillbirths. “If that be true, I shall not condone it, Ulfric. Children be precious. Is it so wrong that my people would look outside their own blood, to bring in new life?”

“I would have thought the Forsworn’s hatred of all things Nord would prevent such unions from ever happening.”

Huffing, she rolled over to smack the Bear on his back. “I didnae say ‘Nord’ alone, did I? Though Máthair did say that the ancient Ayleids did breed our people from the Nedics and Atmorans. Tis possible we be related!”

“Ugh. Fair sure your Mer blood has killed off all the Atmoran remnants in you, woman. Else why would you always be so damn cold?”

Giggling to herself, Nemain wriggled into her furs with a pleased sigh. For they retained her body heat like a charm, wrapping her in an almost stuffy embrace that smelled like...well. A musty dead bear. But warm! “I bet you do have some Mer in you, Ulfric. Some ancestor of yours slummed with an elf, giving you the gift of gab. Doona deny it.”

“Oh, I deny it.”

“Pah. What elf would sleep with you, anyhow? Probably too afeared that you'd crush her with your stupidly tall...bigness.”

His sleepy voice made her grin, even as she shook her head at his denial. “I like human women, little
Breton. Plump ones. Elves are about as thick bodied as draugr...and just about as pleasant to bed.”

The name ‘Elenwen’ hovered near the tip of her tongue. She had not forgotten the revelation of what the Jarl of Eastmarch feared the most. But it was not the right timing, to pry into such a personal matter.

So . She drummed her fingertips upon the earth near her sleep roll. *Levity it was.*

“Ooh, so you like big tits and fat arses? You be in luck. There be an orc stronghold not far from Ivarstead, or so I hear. I can hook you up. You've never seen such shapely females.”

“Please. Don’t even…”

A sigh. “No.”

“Hah! And they fight with monstrous large axes, too. Tis a match meant to be, Ulfric! Doona deny yourself.” She snickered as he pointedly rolled even further away from her bedroll.

Silence reigned, as her breathing lengthened into a steady, drowsing cycle. The forest itself breathed with her; trees swaying and sighing in the wind. Wind that the Nords knew...celebrated as Kyne’s breath.

It amused her, to think of how similar and yet so different their own cultures held the gods that controlled nature. Where Ulfric saw Lady Kyne, the Goddess of Skies and Storms she - Nemain of Deepwood Redoubt...she saw Y’ffre.

*Earth’s bones, the First Storyteller ...*He who taught the birds to sing, and gave music to the babbling brooks and springs. The Green God. His influence was everywhere; in the boughs that cushioned their rest. The moss upon the trees, the rocks that lay deep in the earth. Hircine, his paradoxical brother, held command over the beasts that swooped and stalked, but Y’ffre...

Y’ffre was life. Was the green of song and spring itself. How she had loved the celebrations when distant cousins from Valenwood had come, bringing their bone bows and caterpillar mash that had made her pull faces, to taste the sourness as they laughed at her in chiming voices. *Harm not a blade of grass or cut a branch from my trees, daughter, for the Green will provide if thou dost comply.*

Thinking upon the Bosmeri hymns that hailed the change of seasons, Nemain felt her eyes grow heavy. She almost didn’t hear the man next to her whisper, until he repeated himself.

“Good night, Nemain.”

“...Eh? Oh. G’nite, Bear.”

An annoyed grunt. “For the last time, my name is Ulfric. Not ‘Bear’.”

“You would prefer Ulfy? Or ‘Ric? ‘Laird Ulfy Ric’!”

An aggrieved sigh. “No.”

“Good. Then we’re agreed. Sleep well, Bear.”

“....you as well, Fox.”
She snorted to herself at his name for her. “That be downright tame. I’m half surprised you didnae choose ‘troll’ or ‘hag’, fear thuaidh.”

“You’d prefer I call you a hag?”

“Och, no! Just...really? A fox?”

Their slow puffs of breath clouded overhead. Shielding the stars with a haze. “Small, loudly yipping thieves with a ravenous hunger for eggs. A fox fits you perfectly.”

*I do love a finely boiled egg.* But he was going to find a passel of fire ants in his boots...no! His smalls, when she could manage it, for his pains to give her such an odious nickname.

“Fine. Goodnight, Bear.”

“Goodnight, hag.”

Grasping for a pebble, she tossed it in the general direction of the boor. It clonked off his head, making him jump with a sound that *may* have been a laugh.

“That be *Fox* to you, cúl tóna!”

*******

Three days later, they were making their way through the trackless wilds of the western forests, when she heard it. A thin wail, that rose and fell. Barely audible, but there.

Bringing her horse to a halt, Nemain’s brow furrowed. Something just wasn’t right about that sound. It did not match the mournful howl of a wolf, or the pealing screech of a rabbit being caught and taken by a hawk, or other beast of prey.

*A child.*

“How? Nemain, wait!”

She barely heard Ulfric as she urged her mare off the trail and into the woods. Branches brushed her face, tearing away her hood as she wove through the trees; shadows of early evening making the ground treacherous. A rock, root or ravine could rise at any moment, causing the horse to throw her at this speed.

Uncaring, she continued digging her heels into the horse’s flanks, for that wailing was growing stronger. Something stirred within her; an instinct she didn’t even know she had inciting haste as she
suddenly tore into a clearing in the trees.

There was a farmhouse with a surrounding garden plot and stableyard...left by its owners to run wild, by the looks of it. A fox stalked the flock of chickens, evading the hoof kicks and headbutts of a goat that was tethered to the fence, bleating angrily. Two cows in a crude stable lowed miserably in chorus.

Dismounting, she scanned the area in worry. No one came to greet her. Nothing but the racket made by the animals, as she staggered with sore legs towards the cabin door that remained shut. “Hello?” She called out, lighting a flame in her hands just in case someone lay in wait. Though they were doing a piss poor job of it, if they were...the mooing, clucking uproar was enough to wake a tavern full of drunkards. The insistent cries were coming from inside, giving away whatever stealthy surprise an attacker might have counted upon.

Just as she was about to yank on the handle of the door, a heavy hand pulled her by the shoulder, dragging her back. Ulfric had his sword drawn, and with a solid shove he pushed her away from the door.

“Next time, don’t run off. Can’t you see the signs of spellcasting?”

She did, now that he had drawn her attention to it. Blackened scorch marks had seared the stacked timbers nearly head high, with other signs of disturbances evident in the churned up snow. Footprints that had torn up clumps of dead grass, white spots of frost with melted rings about them...reddish smears upon a nearby tree that looked to be blood. But where be the bodies?

Her foot tapped nervously as she listened to the child’s wail wind down to a pathetic whimper. “Ulfric…”

Metal and leather creaked as he shook his head. “Stay here, and keep watch. I’ll go in first.”

Allowing the flame to climb in her hands, she kept an eye on the horses as they pawed nervously at the din of the farmyard. A chicken raced across her boots, squawking for all it was worth as the fox darted in pursuit...chomping it in its jaws and shaking roughly; snapping the poor birds neck.

She curled her lip at the sight. So he thinks I be reminding him of a fox, eh?

“Och, enough!” Stomping her foot, she threw a fireball at the ground in front of the little scavenger. It yipped in surprise, dropping the bird and running pell-mell for the forest.

Eyeing the chicken askance, she nudged the thing with her boot. It was still flopping brokenly, head bent at an odd angle.

Shaking her head at the stupidity of chickens, Nemain kept scanning the woods for signs of whatever had made those burn marks. Magic, just as the Bear had said. No torch made such clean, elongated lines of char. Or frost.

“You can come in. All clear.” His voice rang out somewhere inside.

Dispelling her magic, she grabbed the chicken and wrung its neck to stop the death-shakes. Hanging the dead bird by the door for later, she pushed her way inside.
The interior was a disaster; pots and pans strewn with cracked pottery all over the floor and beds. Fur pelts had been trampled upon with mud and cold, congealed stew; a chamberpot or something similarly foul smelling releasing its stench into the air.

Picking her way through the mess, Nemain stopped in place as she saw the body of a young woman sprawled out upon the table, facing away from the door. She could see nothing of the Nord’s face...only the blonde braids and rawboned stature giving away her race. The skirts had been hiked clear up to the ribs, exposing bruised bare flesh. A cloudy, foul smelling fluid leaked from her anus and womanhood, trailing in blood smeared patches down the contorted legs. Finely fletched arrows of dandelion gold pincushioned her back and head, revealing what had likely been a painful, humiliating end.

Breathless at the shock of it, Nemain licked her lips in fear. “Bear…”

Ulfric was bent over the upturned bed, his attention fully occupied by whatever was making that repetitive cry. “Over here.”

Tearing her gaze away from the unfortunate woman, Nemain carelessly trampled the soiled furs and cracked dishes as she stormed across the room to him.

It was a child; mouth gaping wide in a toothless squall. The swaddling cloths had been beaten off by pudgy fists, punching weakly into the air as it screamed. The Bear’s hands had been lightly touching a purpling bruise on the babe’s head, but he pulled away as Nemain gathered the wee thing into her arms.

“Oh, shush mo chroi, shush...nothing to fear now. Oh you poor dear.”

The baby’s breechclout absolutely stank of shit and urine. It sagged away as she lifted the babe in the air, falling off with a splat to the ground. Turning her head at the reek, Nemain noted that the now-naked bairn was female; swollen labia infected and red.

Bringing the golden light of a healing spell to bear, Nemain gently touched the babe’s belly, the soft skinned head. Probing with her magic, she could feel an echo of the child’s emotions: hunger...pain, loneliness, rage, fear. The spell took away the raw abrasions of being left too long in filth. Healed the contusion...swelling from the blow that must have rendered it quiet. Possibly saving the bairns life, from whoever had destroyed the cabin. It would have killed the little dear, had it swelled much longer. But healing did nothing to cease the child’s heartrending fuss.

“Who did this?” Feeling her breath catch in her throat at the feebleness of the little limbs, Nemain pressed firmly upon the chubby feet and wrists. The girl jumped in her hands, but did not push back. “The mother...the spells...”

Rubbing his face with a gloved hand, Ulfric looked pained. “Hard to say how long it has been left alone. It...she - the body does not stink yet. A day, perhaps more. Lucky the door had been shut; else some other predator would have been drawn to the crying. Would have made quick work of it.”

Trickling water from her waterskin into the babe’s pursed lips, she felt a snarl come to her throat. “Her , Ulfric. The wee one is a girl! A person!”

He touched her shoulder, blue eyes solemn. “I know. Stay here...I’m going to have a look around.”

At her incredulous glare, he shook his head. A fine, cold rage tightened the Nord’s features, as she shrank back from him involuntarily. “Did you see the arrows? Elven make. And the spells...the
woman was herded in here by fire and shock, cast upon the ground. It melted the snow, leaving a clear trail. But the animals are uneaten and the babe yet alive...so they must not be far.”

They? Who be they? And why? Searching frantically for something wipe the babe down with, Nemain opened and shut the dresser drawers, seeking a clean clout. A wiping cloth...something. Anything.

Bandits would have threatened violence for treasures or victuals, but likely would have let them be, afterwards. Her own people might have killed them, but they’d have done it cleanly. Not this...this pitiless, savage ending.

“Be careful. I’ll ward the door. Call out to announce yourself, or you’ll be greeted with fireballs up your arse.”

“Good. Stay safe.”

Casting them both one last lingering glance, the Bear stooped below the lintel of the door and with a crunch of footsteps in the snow disappeared.

Dragging an half-filled bucket of water towards her, Nemain used the least stained of the rags she had found to clean up the whimpering babe. “Hush, hush you mucky thing. Poor girl, left all alone. And your Ma…”

As though compelled, Nemain turned once more to the dead Nord woman. From the far side of the cabin, she could see the dead blue eyes that had rivulets of blood running from the tear ducts. More blood had erupted from her nose and mouth; brought on by the arrow to the head, no doubt.

A very bad end, indeed.

The little one mewled in short, hiccuping cries as Nemain thought frantically of what needed to be done first.

The babe must be cleaned and warmed, immediately. And then fed.

Water. I must boil water. A bucket of snow will do, though I must stoke the fire first. Right. Fire first, then water. Thank Dibe there be plenty of cut wood stacked inside. Then milk...the cows must be in an agony, not being milked for sae long. I shall have to attend to them as well, to feed the child. Gods, how shall I feed her?!? Ah, a rag. To dip in the milk and give her suck, as Galan and I did as children with the litter of kittens we found that one spring. Though only half of the kits lived...no. Dinnae think about it!

Looking around the cabin, she worried her lower lip with her teeth. Hard rations had lost their appeal with time, but she would have to scour a cauldron of the old rotting stew for its use. And the chicken...pluck its feathers and roast it? No...twill take too long, and not make enough for us both. No doubt Bear will be back soon as a song, hungry to boot. I’ll chop and boil it with summat of these vegetables that have not been cast into the slop. Use the hanging garlic and frost mirriam for garnish. We’ll be staying here tonight, for it be too late to press on now.
Feeling overwhelmed, Nemain buried her face in the baby’s fat smelly neck and heaved a sigh. The little one was shivering; small tremblings that shook the tightly squinched cheeks stained with tear tracks.

Opening her robe, Nemain snuggled the girl inside. Wrapping the sash so that the wee one would not fall out, she grasped the bucket and stood...bearing what felt like the weight of the world on her chest.

The dead Nord’s face was unnervingly still. Nemain blinked...struggling to look anywhere else but the blood and semen that had congealed in spattered clumps upon the pale thighs. She was no stranger to dead bodies, but the way this one had died…

“Time for some redecorating, I think.”

Extending a hand, she pushed her power in a cold invisible wave towards the Nord. Reanimating the limbs to a jerky unlife, the dress sagging down to cover the smeared spoor of rape as Nemain caused the mother to rise, standing unsteadily.

With a flick of her fingers, the corpse shambled out the door Nemain hastily opened for her to the woods. Watching, she waited until the dead woman was out of sight; then cut the connection. Hearing a distant thump, she heaved a tired exhale. They could always bury her later. Along with whoever was dead out there. She could not sense anyone directly nearby, but she was not trying very hard. The little one squirmed against her skin...prompting Nemain to open her robes. And become caught; staring at the wee, precious thing. So tiny and dear. Poor, parentless mo chroi!

Lifting the empty bucket, Nemain allowed herself a wry grin. “Guess I’ll be seeing just how well those milking lessons took, eh little babby. Let’s be getting you some milk then. And end this frightful noise your pets be making, before these ears begin to bleed just like your mam.”

So much to do.

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The elves would return. He knew it.

He also knew...he had to stop them. Before they found his travel companion and her helpless charge.

Clopping along, Ulfric breathed in and out through his nose. Calming the storm of his thoughts. Shunting aside worry and fear. Nemain was a formidable mage, after all. With the number of attempts she she had made on his life, he heartily respected her skills.

But tired and distracted, alone in that calamity-struck cabin...bearing the demands of an ill and needy babe? As well as tending to their needs, to feed and bed down for the night?
They could not have gone far.

Keeping his horse at a steady rollicking trot, Ulfric kept his mind upon the signs of recent travel in the woods. For they had left a clear track for him to follow in the snow. Bootprints that bore a tapered point, with brushings of robes behind, sweeping the icy crust in a meandering pattern.

Thalmor bastards.

He had passed the smoldering remains of a cookfire. Goat bones, broken bottles of mead and gristle strewn around the slovenly camp like paper streamers at a festival. A meal taken from the stables of the unfortunate Nord farmers...no doubt they would return to the larder for more easy meals. An occurrence he would prevent - by any means necessary.

Without fail, his mind revolved back to the cabin. The dead woman and her squalling babe. He had found the father in the copse of half-cleared trees not far from the farm; an axe buried in the Nord’s face rendering him unrecognizable. The body - tied to a tree and also molested, he had noticed dispassionately - had been fairly studded with arrows as well. Target practice to allay the boredom of a Justiciar’s patrol, for the rigid limbs bore residue of electrical burns, frostbite...the clothing half-burned and stuck to the skin where he tested the tensile strength by pinching the flesh. To see just how long ago the poor bastard had given up his ghost.

The better to track his murderers.

Ulfric was both relieved and distressed that he could not place the farmer in his mental map of the region. He knew a fair number of the residents of Eastmarch by face as well as name; the taxes and annual holidays bringing many to Windhelm with regularity. But he could not tell who the red-haired Nord was. Nor had he stayed long enough to turn the woman over, to gaze upon her face.

More casualties of war. Rape, casually committed and cruel. Murder and plundering of goods and property. He felt a slight stir of shock that the farmhouse had not been set to burn; the beasts also sodomized and killed for sport.

He was thankful that the child had been found alive. That he had not been forced to see the remains of it (a little girl! Nemain’s voice cried in his head) brains bashed in upon the wall, the tiny body crushed underfoot in a pool of gore.

He had seen enough similar atrocities in his lifetime as a soldier. In the Imperial City, in Bruma and the Colovian Highlands of Cyrodiil. In Markarth.

And though he had thought himself fairly inured to the sights and smells of war after more than two decades of it; Ulfric felt pain break through the cold shell...the chrysalis that shielded his emotions in battle. It burned; oh, it fair enraged him! To see such fell deeds take place in his own lands! His own people, taken by spell and arrow, not safe in their own homes. Motherfucking elves!

Directing his horse to step in the sodden ground under the trees, avoiding the snow melt that would splash loudly beneath steel shod hooves; Ulfric kept on the lookout. For the group of Justiciars that could not have wandered far. A broken branch here, a snagged black thread there betraying the direction of their passage as the snowy ground gave way to bare rocks and bushes.

Despite what Nemain may have thought, this was not his war. She did not notice the Shrine of Talos that had been toppled to lie in the corner of the cabin, he thought irritably as he redirected his horse
to veer left. The Breton witch had been completely absorbed with the bairn. Not that he could blame her. It rankled still, that had they passed by but a day earlier, all this could have been avoided.

You think so, don't you? All knowing, all powerful Jarl of Eastmarch. Arngeir was right. You walk too proudly, Nord. Conceit and arrogance will be your downfall.

His inner voice mocked him, ridiculing even as he gritted his teeth against the darkness there. When will you drop, forced to your knees by the reality that some events cannot be controlled? All you control is yourself, you gods damned fool.

A picture-painted moment flashed before his eyes. Nemain, in his arms. Her tongue down his throat...those small hands twisted tightly in his hair as she moved against him. All tantalizing pressure, unexpected passion. And hardly well, at that.

No. It was a war that had been started long before Ulfric Stormcloak of Eastmarch had been born. Prematurely halted in a punishing cease-fire that was the foul surrender of the White-Gold Concordat. A battle between Mer and Men; conflicting ideologies that neither time nor distance would spare. *How many ages since Saarthal, and yet man's memory grows dim?* He pondered. *Since the Ayleid conquerors laid waste, and the dragon priests held sacrificial rites?*

*Elves have long memories. By Talos, sometimes I wish the old Kings had been gifted true sight; to allay the troubles we bear. We have not had a true High King untainted by the Empire's steering hands since Jorunn Skald-King.*

A pity none thought to look past the shine of Cyrodilic gold, Ulfric sneered inwardly. Remembering the chests that had been delivered to the Nord Jarls who had openly celebrated, had cheered the signing of the White-Gold Concordat. Believing they were ushering in a new era of peace, when truly they had been bribed. *Buying the very souls of us Nords with filthy lucre. Abandoning Talos. Leaving us a bare trace of what we were, what we could be again.*

And it was a war that he would finish as well as he was able...for the good of the land he loved. No matter how many were called to fight, to die - it was a far better fate, than the slow strangling death of being sucked dry by the dying Empire. Asked to give up the heart of who they were. Their freedom; for the security of a few more years of uncertainty. *Not my land. Not my God.*

Ah. There they were.

Spurring his horse to a gallop, he drew his sword. No sense in subtlety now, for the wizards had already lit up like stars with spells that would shock. Would burn, singe his skin, strip him down and hold him still at their ruthless mercy.

Just like that poor dead fucker, his torn arsehole still leaking blood and shit and cum in the wooded clearing...

*No.* Forcing the worst of his imagination to yield, Ulfric bolstered his will. *The will is the power that*
drives the Voice. And they will hear my words! This was not Elenwen’s torture chamber, and he...he was no longer a stripling youth. A virgin monk turned warrior; bound to suffer their pleasure and his pain.

The tables had turned. He was the hunter. These elves were his prey.

Lifting his blade, he thundered past the first of the mages...taking the head with a swift chop. Hooves trampled the body of the sundered mage underfoot as he turned, wheeling around to face the others as the first of the thrown arcs of lightning hit his armor in a numbing zap. Lighting up the immediate area with a crackling boom of power.

He barely felt it; adrenaline spilling into his limbs in a tightly controlled fury that blocked all pain, all extraneous sound. Fear was a venom to which he refused to succumb. Nothing but the blade...the heads that had become mere targets. Yellow faces puckered in disgust, all faded in pure focus down to a single objective. To kill.

One down. Four to go.

He felt his lips turn up in a vicious smile as one elven mage announced in a clear, supercilious voice. “You will be made to see the truth, Nord heretic! Elven supremacy is the future!”

“All I see is a dead elf walking. Fus-Roh-Dah!”

Pulling a knife from his bracers, Ulfric hurled it behind him in a flash of silver. It found its home buried in the chest of the Altmer who had been creeping up to flank him; a mere prickle of gut sense warning him, as the Mer toppled backwards. Dead before he hit the ground.

Pulling out the spiked flail looped on a chain, he began spinning it in a lazily clanking circle as his heels spurred the stallion on; to charge once again. The two Thalmor he had blown over with his Shout...a male and female threw identical blasts of fire - and a cobwebbed red mist of... something that made his heart race. Skittering over the mental safeguards he shored up before every battle, urging him to flee! To pull the reins south and gallop back towards the safety of the cabin...to run!

I will not run! Throwing off the insidious coercion of the spell, he felt a nearly visceral thrill as both his sword and mace collided, making contact with the heads in perfect symphony. Throwing up a froth of blood and brain, the meaty thwacks of sword and flail like goddamn music to his ears.

Letting go of the spiked flail that had deeply embedded itself in the she-elf’s face, Ulfric pulled his sword free of the other with a wet sucking squelch. Lifting his free arm to wipe his forehead, he realized that it was not sweat, but blood that ran down his cheeks and into his panting mouth. Stinging his eyes, obscuring his sight. Tracing his teeth with tongue, he savored the alien sweetness, as his chest heaved - pumping like the bellows of a forge.
One left.

The last of the Aldmeri Justiciars had fallen to the ground, crawling away even as he tripped upon its own robes.

Taking the time to dismount his horse, Ulfric regripped his sword. Testing his hold upon the pommel, so that it would not slip and mar the aim of his strikes. Important. Necessary. His thoughts coalesced into single words. Simplicity itself.

Kill.

He advanced upon the last Mer, sword held crosswise in a block guard as the Altmer began babbling. Pleading in a reedy high voice that was almost unintelligible. Barely breaking through the pounding in his ears. The desire, nearly a full born lust to see this one lying dead with the others.


“Please, stop! No! I beg you, no more! Mercy! Y-you killed them all, so let me go! A favor, yes? I have gold! You snowbacks like gold, don't you? So take it! Take it all!”

Glittering gold septims showered his breastplate, catching in his hood as they hit his face. Turning slightly to avoid being blinded by the last, foolhardy throw, Ulfric scrutinized the coward. Ever vigilant for any signs of magic, any telltale curl of slender fingers that could hurl frost or shock faster than a thought.

The last Justiciar was young. The high planed cheeks were still soft with baby fat, grass green eyes wide with horror as Ulfric tramped closer.

Raising his sword, he let it rest upon the Mer’s throat. “The cabin...did you take part in that?”

The golden throat bobbed as the young Thalmor began shaking his head, then thought better of it. A hand rose beseechingly, causing the Jarl to push the tip of the sword further into yellowed flesh. Keeping the youth at a disadvantage...too concerned by the immediate threat to be aware. To see the knife Ulfric was slowly working out of the sheath upon his waist.

“N-n-no! I’d never! I’m just a humble s-s-scribe! A scout! I only cooked the goat, by the Nine I swear it! I laid not a finger on them!”

Such a one could impart immense pain without the touch of a hand, Ulfric thought in callous disregard. Prior experience had taught him that. He was more interested in the quick, sly flick of green eyes that had occurred when the little shit had mentioned ‘ I'd never ’.

Too disgusted by the thought of touching, much less raping a lowly man and woman. This one kept his hands clean due to disdain, not virtue.

“But you watched.”
A slash of crimson cut off whatever the elf was about to say, as Ulfric dodged the ice spike that would have impaled him through the eye. His blade parted the throat like silk, flecks of the jetting fluid hitting his face in a warm, nearly *hot* wash of blood as he stepped down in finality. Crushing the Thalmor’s chest with his boot. Hastening the end, for he reminded himself that he took no joy in this. Necessary though it was.

A flash of the man, the woman and their abandoned child burst against his retinas. Rendering him cold. Clear minded. *Perhaps a bit of joy, then. Small recompense, for countless lives lost to these invaders.*

The Mer thrashed, struggling weakly to breathe through a collapsed trachea as those long robed legs gave two final kicks.

Then twitching, shuddered. And lay still.

A thought penetrated the dense, single minded focus that had given him purpose. *Go through their robes.*

Action followed the thought, as Ulfric bent down and systematically went through the dead Thalmor’s robe and inner pockets.

Removing a tied string of parchment, he carefully spit out a mouthful of saliva and elf blood to the side. Looking down in mute surprise, he pulled a curved elven knife from his left thigh where it had penetrated straight through the armor, and tossed it away. The leg still worked - he would tend it later. *There may be something useful in here. Plans, or missives of some import.*

Ulfric gleaned two more stacks of notes, papers and parchment scrolls from the other bodies before he hobbled over; to haul himself back upon his horse. Tying the precious enemy intelligence in one of his spare saddlebags, he turned the stallion’s nose back towards the forest.

And blinked, for at some point during his hunt, night had fallen. Blanketing the woods in an ominous cast of shadows that were unfamiliar, keeping him on edge as he fought to stay alert. Aware, against the drugging lead weight of post-battle lethargy.

Hopefully it wasn't that far back to Nemain and the child, for he could feel himself quickly fading; the battle fury that had lent such endurance to his swings evaporating with the last gleam of daylight.

Clicking his tongue, he steered back to where he recalled the cabin lay...sagging as sheer willpower alone kept him upright in the saddle. *Southwest...no. Southeast. Gods. Must be getting old. Need to move, keep riding. Move now, before the scavengers find the bodies, and you lazing about on your ass nearby. Easy prey.*

*Just keep moving.*

**********
She had nearly nodded off for the fourth time when she heard him call out to her.

“That you, Bear?” Nemain rasped in a shouted whisper, reluctant to wake the babe that had just barely nodded off to sleep. By some miracle, a rocking chair had survived the pulverized furniture of the cabin, and she had made good use of it. The wee one barely wriggled, so deep in her slumber she was. Nemain smiled tiredly to see it. *Such a long, terrible day.*

“I’m outside. Can you unlock it?”

Lifting a finger from where she held the swaddling cloth, Nemain flicked a gesture at the door. Lifting the latch and raising her wards, to allow one very blood soaked and exhausted looking Bear into the small sanctum she had prepared.

Raising an eyebrow at the astounding amount of bodily fluids dripping from his armor, she creaked out of the chair with a muttered oath. “Go sit there on the stool, and wait. Let’s find out just how much of that blood be your own.”

“Hardly any. Is the child well?”

“Och, aye. Ate like a famished miner after a sennight underground, she did. I’ll be needing to feed her in another hour or so.” Gently placing the girl-child down upon a pile of furs, far enough that she would not roll into the fireplace...Nemain arched her back. Feeling it pop, as she groaned.

Turning, she watched for the space of a second as Ulfric struggled with the straps of his armor. After the fourth ill-made attempt, she tsked and walked over to him. “Enough. It be downright painful, watching this. Like seeing a glacier melt. Here...Let me do it.”

Feeling his fingers falter as she pushed them aside, Nemain made brisk work of the breastplate, gauntlets and greaves. His boots she had to sit on the floor to yank off, as an ungodly stench nearly nullified the homey scent of her chicken vegetable stew. “*Phfwoar*, Bear. You stink to Sovngarde and beyond.”

Sitting there in a very stained undershirt and pants, the man looked as though he was hanging on by a fingernail to reality. *Cor, he’s nodding off right now.* “I thought you didn’t believe in Sovngarde.”

“I don’t. That it exists, to be sure. But as the eternal resting place of my spirit? *Tch.* Bunch of hoity toity warriors slugging mead, jawing off about the good times and whacking one another with axes? Hard pass. Now, *Dibella’s* realm, on the other hand…”

That sparked a quiet laugh from him, as she hustled over to the hearth. Her knees popped as she kneeled, ladling a bowl of stew for him with a spoon. Stringing the bucket filled with soapy water and a clean rag on her other arm, Nemain toddled back to the warrior with a slow shuffle. “Ta da! Dinner...cock-a-leekie soup. Now wash your face and hands and eat up, while I look at whatever is making you bleed down there on your leg.”
His lips twitched. “Yes, Mother.”

“Damn straight. When it comes to wounds, I’m your Mam, your healer and gravedigger all in one. Now hold still...ooh. That looks downright nasty.”

Grasping the bowl in his hands, the Nord just sat there. Spoon in hand, as she prodded and poked the red slash high on his left thigh. Leaning closer, she nearly gained a faceful of stew for her pains, as she sniffed at the wound. Poisoned?

Taking it away, as the lunk was simply staring at it instead of eating, Nemain placed it upon the ground (that she had swept, shoving all the junk to the far end of the cabin for more room) and grabbed the soapy rag and bucket in its place.

“Hold still. I must find out if it be poisoned, so dinnae slap me. I’ve no designs to make an honest man of you, so don’t get your dander up.”

She could hear him grind his teeth, as she spread his knees wide and shoved her face close to the wound once more. It smelled... huh, it smelt downright sweet, come to think of it. Something floral. Inhaling deeply, the witch thought she detected a hint of nirnroot. A sickly aftertaste, hovering in the back of her nasal cavity. Deathbell.

“Damn it, it be poisoned.” She declared, closing his knees with a snap. “A moment.”

As she rooted around in her travel bags for any potions that would do some good, she heard him ask wearily. “Would the poison by chance be any reason that I feel like I’m about to fall off a cliff?”

“Yes. That be quite likely. Don’t fall over, though...you havenae eaten a drop yet. And you’ll regret not having the strength, come morning. Aha! Here.”

Brandishing a potion that would halt the progression of poison in its tracks, Nemain crawled over to where he slumped against the wall. Staring at the crude little shrine of Talos that she had stood up against the fireplace with some interest.

“You...so you saw it.”

Briskly cleaning the wound with a small corner of the soapy rag, she pushed a stifled groan out of the man as she squeezed up his thigh. Pressing down with all her body weight to rub the poison out...sponging away the tainted blood as she cautiously dripped in the contents of the vial. Watching in anticipation for the poultice to take effect. “I did. Here, drink this half. If we apply outside and in, doubtless it will do even more good. Bottoms up.”

Wincing at the taste (ground mudcrab and charred skeever hide, she did not envy him) he drank it all. Then bowed over, nearly retching as she kept him from toppling over. “Whoa there! Don’t fall! I cannae lift you if you do.”

She watching in concern as he barely kept the vial down. But the wound...as she peered closely at his thigh, she could see it begin to knit together already. Lighting up her hand with the golden light of a restoration spell, Nemain stuck her tongue out as she grasped the meat of his leg. Forcing her will downwards, she commanded it to heal. Feeling the skin quiver, the man himself shaking against
her left hand as she shoved hard against his chest. Keeping him from falling, feeling his heart pound like a drum beneath her sore fingers; even as her right hand sustained the healing spell.

Counting for five eternal breaths, she lifted her hand to see only a clean stretch of leg. No scarring at all. “Oh, good. Seems you did not even earn a scar for your efforts this time. I be correct in assuming you killed them all? Whoever ‘they’ were?”

Nemain could practically feel those blue eyes appraising her, as she looked up only once to be caught. Held fast by that indefinable something with which he held her in regard. “They were Thalmor Justiciars, here for that little Talos shrine you saved. Their actions were no more than what has happened all over Skyrim, since the Great War was brought to a halt.”

“Hmph.” Busying herself by wiping her hands upon one of the last dry rags, Nemain grabbed the cake of soap and wet rag. “I still doona get it.”

Ulfric closed his eyes again as she began wiping in curt, repetitive strokes. Cleaning the blood from his face, as he moved away from her. Grasping his chin with her left hand, she shook his head. To make him mind. “Stop it. Tis hard enough, managing this while tired. I’m at least half as drained as you seem to be. That babe was a right handful.”

His hand reached around her waist. Steadying himself, as his eyes opened to bare blue slits. Leaning away, she dipped the rag in the bucket once more. Squeezing it one handed, as for some reason her fingers were reluctant to move themselves.

Pausing before she began to wipe off his cheeks and chin, Nemain swallowed. “You’ve a bit of blood, there. Under your eyes. Close them.”

He closed his eyes. Marvelling at how obedient he was being (which was highly suspicious. If he wasn’t about to fall asleep then and there, she would have poked at him to find out the why) Nemain scraped off bits of what looked to be jellied brain and crusts of that strangely sweet blood that had caked his face. “Elf blood?”

His chin moved in her grasp as he spoke. “Yes.”

Rubbing a bit harder to dislodge the stuff trapped in his hair, Nemain nearly forgot his hand was still there upon her waist as she replied crossly. “Well, I hope you made those raping, rotty arselickers suffer for what they did. To the mother, and...and whoever else. Leaving this poor bairn all alone and injured.”

“Mmm. It went by too quickly for that.” Pressing his fingers into her waist, he cleared his throat as she continued tidily cleaning his face. “Nemain. Stop.”

_There he went again._ That soul searching, lake blue stare that pried her apart, making her insides churn in a snarl of lusty mush. She couldn’t deal with it. Not now. Not after all the jangling, unwanted emotions that had arisen from nurturing the wee one. “Do you want summat to eat?” She replied brightly, shaking free as she bent over to retrieve the stew. “I can get you a bowl that tis more warm, if you li-”

His other hand that was not holding her waist stopped her mouth with a touch. “Stop.”

The power of the Thu’um in his voice nearly froze her in place, as did the thumb pressing slowly
against her lips. Dragging against them, until her mouth nearly parted. Breathless, as she reminded herself to breathe. To exert her own will against the bastard that had stopped her with a word.

Drawing in a breath of her own, she nearly licked his thumb. Causing his eyes to darken, even as she pulled away bodily from his touch. “So. Are you ever going to tell me the significance of this man god of yours? This Talos? I’ve heard so many different names for him by now, that I suppose you’ll be having to straighten me out on the subject.”

Ladling him another bowl of stew, she took the one he hadn’t touched and began shoveling it into her mouth. Still warm; salty and filling. It did nothing for the emptiness that had filled the place his hands had held, but she was quite used to it by now. That dratted wanting; the craving of touch. *Beltane cannae come soon enough.*

They both ate quietly for a few minutes, until Ulfric slid off the stool with a sigh to place his empty bowl by the fire. His words seemed slow...as though every syllable had to be built brick by brick. Consonant by consonant. “Thank you for the stew. It was good.”

“Of course, fear thuaidh. Dried meat and hardtack be only good for the first day of travel. It gets old otherwise.”

“It does. So, for some reason you don’t care to enlighten me upon, you actually want me to talk about Talos. Correct?”

Folding her knees beneath her, she primly nodded. “Aye. It be time, I think, to get the why of this war straight from the horse’s mouth. Or bear, as it were.” She gave him a little sarcastic bow.

“Right. Well. As you said, Talos had many names.”

With a pained sigh, he laid himself down by the fire. “Tiber Septim. Ysmir, Dragon of the North. Hjalti Early-Beard...Talos Stormcrown. Whatever name you choose to call him by, Talos fought to unify Cyrodiil and all of Tamriel. Birthing the Third Era of Tamriel in a blaze of glory we doubtless will never see again.”

“I’m listening.” She felt herself biting back a yawn, as she struggled to keep her eyes open. But she was, in fact, listening intently. “I know that he is the Hero-God of War and Governance. That he became the Ninth Divine...though why that is such a bone of contention be puzzling.”

A whimper came from the bundled up babe. Nemain sighed in fatigue; yet her knees propelled her back, to pick up the wee thing and cuddle her to her breast.

“Och, go on.” She motioned for Ulfric to continue, even as he stared at them both. Pulling over the bucket of cow’s milk, Nemain peeled away her sweat stained robe to bare her breasts.

The bairn was rooting, now...the tiny mouth opening and closing as the Reachwoman carefully lifted the little mouth to her nipple. Grabbing a clean cloth that had been hung out to dry by the fire, she dipped it into the bucket of milk and squeezed it over the curve of her chest. Milk dripped in cream-white trails down her skin, gathering at the meeting of the babe’s mouth and her teat. She bit her lip harshly as the babe began suckling for all she was worth; as Nemain continued dripping more milk downwards. Gripping the cloth to wring it with increasingly worn out hands, as the girl made small squeaks of satisfaction. *Tired...ouch. Hurts. Worth it.*

It wasn’t for another few minutes that she broke her concentration on her task, to see Ulfric staring at her from his spot upon the floor. “What? This be the only way to get the little ormador to eat. She
wouldnae suck straight from the rag and believe me - I tried for the space of an hour, before resorting to this torture.”

Something like a smile lifted the Bear’s lips, as he seemed transfixed upon the babe’s slow, swallowing movements upon her breast. “Torture, huh.”

“Yes, torture! It hurts like a fecking vise has been strapped to me chest, you stooge. We’ll try the method upon you, next - unless you think she’ll no like the texture of chest hairs!”

Ulfric laughed, a genuine warmth creasing his eyes as he looked up at her, where she sat in the warm light of the fire. “You are something else, Reachwoman.”

She frowned at him, dipping the cloth once more in the bucket to resume the squeezing, nursing routine. “Thanks. I think. Talos?”

“Talos.” Rolling over to his chest, Ulfric pillowed his head upon his hands as he began talking once more. Averting his eyes to stare at the fire, which strangely caused Nemain to relax a bit. Something about this entire situation was entirely wodgy, and she didn’t care to examine it overmuch. Not when she was so rankly flummoxed, just trying to keep ahead of everything she needed to do.

“After his death, the gods raised Tiber Septim to become Talos. An ascension to divinity known as the apotheosis; the only instance of a man becoming a god. Other than Reman Cyrodiil, but even less is known of that.”

“To understand exactly why the elves bitch so much about Talos and his godhood, you must understand something about the way Man and Mer differ in their religious views. I understand your people believe in the Ehinofey? The Bones of the Earth?”

Like Y’ffre! Nodding eagerly, she cleared her throat as he cast an amused glance at her. His sharp blue eyes watched her continually squeeze the milk rag, as his fingers tapped the floor.

“Then you know somewhat of the battle I speak. Once, there were two groups of Aedra...immortal, powerful beings who shaped Nirn in their image. One group followed Auriel, becoming the Ehinofey and your beloved Et’Ada. From them sprung the Aldmer, among other races of Mer.”

She watched as his fingers traced circles in the soot near the fire. “The other group of Aedra joined with Lorkhan, the god Shor of the Nords. Whom you know as Lorkhaj, the missing trickster-god of the Moons.

So he did recall some of the things she spoke, Nemain thought uncomfortably. He continued on, blithely unaware of her awkward thoughts. “...and from them sprang all mankind. And thus was the rift formed, for those that followed Auriel believed that they had been inalterably lessened by the creation of Mundus. Regretting their decision to join in the creation that had hewn them into lesser powers, they saw the smaller, less magickal races of men as little better than animals. Fit for nothing but slaughter. Of course, Shor disagreed.”

“Of course he did. Shor can do no wrong.”
Ulfric glanced at her. “Well, that depends. To the Mer way of thinking, Lorkhan - Shor - is an enemy. He tricked their beloved Aedra into giving up their divinity. Making the Altmer mortal and...susceptible to death. Prone to weakness.”

As the man’s lips stretched into a truly wicked smile, Nemain felt heat pool around the core of her insides. *Wrong. Sae wrong.* “And what about other Mer? Or men?”

That smile remained, as Ulfric began flicking ash back into the fire. Rubbing it between thumb and forefinger, as he unconsciously drove Nemain a bit batty...watching with a guilty sense of longing as the man’s hands moved repetitively. Fingers twisting against themselves, even as the babe’s mouth drew upon her nipple.

“Well, the Dunmer actually hold a rather martial view of it all that I can respect. They believe - and rightly so - that mortality is a test of strength. But they differ from Nords in that they believe that all Dunmer will ascend from mortality to godhood...as long as they can overcome the obstacles that life places before them.”

*That was it.* Popping the babe’s mouth free, Nemain noted with relief that she had fallen asleep, at last. Fair timing, as her hand had become shaky from grasping the rag so tightly. Putting the rag down, she squeezed her legs together as she stood in a daze. Placing the wee one down upon her little nest of furs, safe and sound.

Valiantly ignoring the insistently tight clench of her womanhood at the sight of those fingers, Nemain sat in the rocking chair. *Dinnae fash yourself, woman. Breathe!* Deep breathing helped. So did a cup of water from the bucket. “You sound as though you actually respect the Dunmer, then. Will wonders never cease.”

“I don’t hold with many of their beliefs, no. But we share more common ground than you’d think.”

He was still staring at her. Dipping her head down, to see if she had missed any traces of milk or baby spit-up, the witch realized that once again her breasts were completely bared. Airing out in his presence. Like the cheeky blighters enjoyed the attention. They pulsed even now, tight with the cool air, the pain of being suckled and the thoughtful gaze of the Bear of Markarth...who flicked his eyes up to her face with a sudden, almost hungry look.

She did not think he wanted stew, this time. Taking in a slow, steady inhalation, Nemain cupped her abused breast and allowed a golden stream of healing energy to flow over it.

Watching his eyes darken as she touched herself, she repeated a steady, flowing mantra in her head.

*I willnae go over there. I willnae taunt him with what I be unwilling to give. I willnae seduce my instructor. Nopenopenope. No matter how fetching the fucker looks, all covered in the blood of his enemies and staring up at me, like he knows. Can see right through me. Damn.*
He continued that probing, nearly covetous perusal as she attempted to be casual. Tweaking her nipples, to ensure she had healed all the swelling and cuts, Nemain slid her robes back over her chest as she looked to the side. Her jaw fairly ached from biting back an invective, for she was truly well swollen and dripping down there, now. Her cunt ached like a bruise.

*Nothing to see here, not at all. Gods. We were discussing something...shit. I forget. Right. “So, what do mankind think of Lorkhaj, for saving them from those nasty Aedra?”*

If anything, that smile only deepened. “Well, we men don’t claim to be descended from the gods like Mer do. We were created by Shor, and thus owe our entire existence to him. We were not crafted to be idle playthings...mere toys, as the Mer believe, but beings in our own right. Gifted with free will. The right to pursue joy in our lives, to raise up children. To live and die with honor, fighting against those who would usurp that free will and take our lives to serve other, less noble ends. And Lorkhan himself, spread to the far corners of Nirn, with his heart...bah, that is truly a lengthy tale.”

He yawned, signs of weariness eclipsing the enthralled look he had borne while speaking. Completely ignorant of the near spell he had cast her in, with his stupidly mesmerizing fingers and his talented tongue. Twisting against the rocking chair, she continued rubbing her thighs together fretfully.

*And to think I was so tired, before…*

“-to discuss, another night. For it is a most fascinating tale. Nemain. Are you awake?”

“Er-yes!” She nearly overbalanced in the rocking chair, steadying it with a groaning creak as the baby snuffled in her slumber. Cautious to make no more sounds that would waken the little blighter, Nemain slowly stood from the chair.

“Where should I sleep?”

Looking at the length of the man, barely fitting on the floor even as he curled up around the fire, Nemain sighed. “You can sleep in the bed. I tidied it up...nothing nasty on it, now. Though I’ll have to steal a fur for the ground.”

Covering his mouth as he yawned once more, Ulfric pinned her with a knowing look. “Sure you don’t want to sleep in bed with me? There’s plenty of room.”

Gaping at him in what was surely the most idiotic of open mouthed gapes, Nemain desperately tried to close her jaw. She’d wire it shut, if that’s what it took.

“That damn fear thuaidh noticed!”

“For the briefest second, his eyes flickered down to her breasts. Then up, fixing upon her eyes once more. A sort of a smug triumph apparent on the man’s face, as he pushed himself up to his full height. She craned her neck, rubbing it as she scowled and turned.

Distracted, she almost didn’t catch the fur he threw at her. “I hope that answers any questions you had about the issue regarding the White-Gold Concordat, among other things.”

“Mm. Yes. That. It makes more sense, now, why everyone’s smalls be in such a twist. Thank you for clearing that up.”

There was not even the slimmest chance she would be able to bring herself off with her hands, no matter how desperately she felt like it. Not with him sleeping a mere few paces away, and the baby
who twitched at every sound. Threatening to awaken and cry. _Argh. Why me?_

Nemain sighed. The babe would be needing a clean breechclout soon, and all she had were the slightly damp, still drying ones hanging by the fire. _Gods, I wish there was a spell to instantly dry clothing. What a septim spinner that would be._

Cranky, drained and yet strangely pleased with her labors despite the odd turn the day had taken, Nemain laid herself upon the fur. Close enough to reach out and touch the little bairn, whose flowerbud lips suckled, even in dreams. Her breasts ached in sympathy, paining her as she bit her lip at the thought of other, less nurturing touches.

More insistently ardent, yet just as needy.

Forcing herself to think upon other things, the knotted tension in her lower half gradually lessened as she dwelt upon the tasks of the coming day.

_Need to bury the mother tomorrow. Find out if their names be anywhere in this cabin, though I didnae find so much as a book. We be making our way towards Ivarstead...perhaps someone will know of this family up there? Gods. Must milk the cows and the goats. At least there be eggs for breakfast. Cor, my nipples ache something fierce._

“Goodnight, Reachwoman.”

Torn from her reverie, Nemain flopped over upon the furs. Bunching them in a lump that she was forced to smooth out, painfully aware of the wee one breathing peacefully beside her. _Doona wake up, little pip, stay sleeping for oh, five hours more...” You as well. I pray we find other family up in Ivarstead, to take her in._

His voice sounded surprised, even through the sleepiness. “I would have thought you’d be leaping at the chance to adopt this one. Since you seem to be collecting children.”

Nemain nearly guffawed at the thought. But that would have awakened the sprog. “Hah! Oh no. I do think she be the sweetest little bud, once she be properly cleaned up. But my plate is quite full, thank you. We bear grim tidings, Ulfric. The mother’s death...”

“And the father.” Came his soft remainder, as she nodded at what she already guessed to be true.

“Aye. Him as well. We must bury them tomorrow. Then seek out any surviving relatives. Is Ivarstead the only village close by?”

“We are closer to Ivarstead than Darkwater Crossing. It will have to do.”

“I suppose it will.” Feeling a wave of renewed tiredness fall upon her, Nemain closed her eyes. And licked her lips, for the taste of the words she was about to utter was bittersweet.

“And - thank you, Ulfric. For the time you took to relate the story of Talos. I understand...well. Perhaps not understand fully - why is a God that was a Man such a terrible controversy? But I see that you feel strongly enough about the issue to take a stand. Your Shor and Talos ought to be proud, to have such a staunch defender.”
Hardly believing the verbal spew that had just erupted from her lips, Nemain silently hissed. Clenching her fists in self recrimination, she almost didn’t hear Ulfric’s response. “Sorry? What was that?”

His voice came a shadow of a breath louder. “Are you sure you’re feeling alright?”

Biting back a hysterical giggle, she squeezed her eyes shut. “No more than my usual dose of humble pie, eating away at me, Bear. Goodnight. I already cast wards upon the grounds, in case of any intruders. So dinnae worry.”

Unbeknownst to Nemain, Ulfric dug fingers into the sides of his head. Rubbing, distracting...trying desperately to expunge the view of perfectly formed, taut tipped breasts that she had carelessly exposed to him. Obviously uncaring of any reaction, even as he fought to control his own gods damned body.

*Fighting tended to do this,* he reflected in misery as his cock twitched pathetically to attention. Something about the fury reflected in the blood made the primitive in men come alive after battle. Causing a yearning to reaffirm their living state, after seeing so much death.

Eating, singing, drinking, fucking…

Ysmir’s beard, he would have bet a considerable purse of septims that the woman had looked torn at his invitation to share the bed with him. The witch was often such a panoply of contradictory emotions...Ulfric was not entirely sure of what he had seen. What it was that she had felt, shining out from those normally expressive, ghost grey eyes.

*She doesn’t feel a thing. She’s a Reachwitch. You’re a Nord. You’re using her, remember? Madanach’s get, and all that.*

*Keep your goddamned eyes on the horizon.*

Swallowing back bile, Ulfric managed to rasp out ‘goodnight’ in response. Then turning, he shoved out all thoughts of warmth, breasts, tales of godhood and orphaned babes from his mind as he fell with astonishing ease into a deep, dreamless sleep.

-Until his eyes cracked open three hours later, rimmed in sleep grit as the baby cried out in demanding wails to be fed.

“Eek! Shush shush shush! The bear is wakening from his hibernation, and I doona think he likes it.”

A grey eye shrouded by a fall of dark hair fell into his vision.

“...Hey. If you be alert enough to growl, then perhaps we might think of getting out onto the road? The faster we be getting this bairn to another wet nurse, the better. My tits positively *ache.*”
Groaning at the thought, Ulfric tried to smother himself in the fur pelts of his bedding. Ignoring the woman, as she began tapping upon his back.

“Bear? Bear. Get up. I need help! I cannae do this all by myself, and you’re needed to contribute. Either use one of those buxom nipples you’ve been blessed with to feed the girl...or your hands, to milk the cow. Either way, stir your stumps!”

He shuddered involuntarily as the sight of her unclothed dominated what senses had awakened; swollen tipped breasts fully on display as she ran about the cabin. The baby screeched in short, hiccupping wails. Outside, the rooster began crowing, though the sunrise was not to come for another two hours.

This was going to be a very long day.

Chapter End Notes

Yeaahhh...I thought about chopping this chapter up into two separate ones. And then I thought, ‘screw it’. It belongs all together, to make the most sense.

Read and review. Else I become bored, and pull a George R.R. Martin...killing off everyone that you love in my fanfic until there's nothing but a sweetroll. A lone, single sweetroll singing its sweetroll tune in a high, tinny voice. 'Someone steal me! woohoo! Eehee!' Does anyone read the author's comments? ANYONE???
“It does no good to preach the goodness of a diet of grass, if the wolves are of a different mind.”

-Terry Goodkind

Taking a long sip from her waterskin, Nemain wrinkled her nose at the sour-milk aftertaste. She had washed it in the river, refilling it three full times. Yet the dairy flavor persisted. *I'll have to sacrifice some of my dried frost mirriam to flavor this...this muck.*

Ivarstead lay below them; a rustic collection of stone and wood homes that seemed to melt into the very rocks and trees of the mountainside. A cold breeze blew strands of hair onto her nose and mouth. Pulling them back, she took in the view while hastily braiding the mass of her hair back from her head, securing it with one of her hairsticks. It truly was a sight to behold. From this height, Shroud Hearth Barrow dominated the village...looming over the smaller houses with an ominous weight. As though the circular stone ring was a spider, ponderously still in the middle of its web; all of Ivarstead caught in its grip.

Not anymore. She had been downright tickled to see Ulfric haul the pretender’s head into Vilemyr Inn, to show the innkeeper the slack features of some Dunmer whose name she had promptly forgot. The stupid git had been terrorizing the villagers, all slopped up in some incandescent potion that obviously had born some side effect. *Like brain rot.* She had been far more interested in the gold septims Wilhelm had handed her; the pouch clinking with a satisfying weight as she hefted it in her hands. Tightly squeezing, as she recalled with a pang the previous day spent riding and feeding the wee bairn on horseback from the milk filled waterskin. As though it were a pleasant dream, rather than a recent memory.

She had been utterly fatigued from the sleepless night spent tending to the girl. Barely able to keep her eyes open on her horse, it had taken several warnings and shouts from the Bear to force her to stay awake and alert. To not yank the reins of her mare in her dazed stupor, sending the horse off trail. All too easy to become estranged from her erstwhile travel companion that way.
Once, in the early afternoon as she had sat practically topless in a daze, he had helped. Had taken the rag from her shaking claw of a hand, as the wee bairn shrieked in her rage at the delay in being fed. Had crouched down behind her; soaking the rag in milk and crushing the cloth in his grip. Allowing streams of life-giving milk to flow down upon her chest, as her nipple went practically numb from the pressure of that greedy little mouth sucking in nourishment. Leaning back against him, his steady, untroubled breathing and warm reassuring bulk had eased her into a strange sort of half-sleep. The sun filtering through the evergreens shadowing her face in a mix of light and dark; the babe’s insistent pulls, the breathing - all served to send her into a trance. One that had lingered until nightfall, when they had - at long last - arrived in Ivarstead.

After a blissful night spent in her very own bed, with the godsend of a cradle provided for the child, they had arisen to ask about the farm and the deceased couple. Seeking to know their identity; showing the sleeping girl all wrapped up tightly in bunting furs to the other, half-asleep residents of the inn. No dice...no one knew anything of a young Nord couple with a youngling. Wilhelm the owner had finally pointed them in the direction of Shroud Hearth Barrow; the gruff man insisting that he could help them...if they would but investigate the troubling disappearances that were associated with the old tomb.

Always something to do, Nemain had thought with a sigh. Jiggling the baby in a reverse cradle hold, the girl urped up the gas from her last feeding as Nemain resolved to wait right there in the Vilemyr Inn. Tit for tat, nothing be free. Ulfric had patiently listened to Wilhelm’s descriptions of the ghost (more reservedly than she would have, being blackmailed in such a way) and had trudged off to resolve the matter of the ‘haunting.’ Which had ended with the Dunmer’s smelly potion-smereared head exchanged for high praise, septims, and further directions to Fellstar Farm.

To Jofthor and Boti, an older Nord couple who had greeted them with shock and sorrow when they learned the news. Their daughter, briefly introduced as Fastred hovered behind her parents, staring with wide eyes at the placid baby half asleep in Nemain’s grasp. Listening as the Breton explained in oblique terms how they had chanced to find the farm, with Jofthor’s nephew and niece by marriage dead and the child wailing. Leaving out everything but the bare facts.

“...Dead? You’re sure? Kjeld and Mette were young and strong! They must have put up quite a fight, to keep little Iona safe and sound from those Thalmor bastards!”

Recalling the state in which they had found the couple...the hasty cremation of the bodies, where Bear had uttered a short blessing upon the corpses before she had burned them (blood and semen and shit), Nemain had licked her lips. And shared the quickest of hesitant glances with Ulfric, who had shrugged. What do I tell these goodfolk? That their relatives died a long, agonizing death by rape and torture? How does one just speak such things? I can’t.

Though the Bear’s blue eyes remained cold as ever, the man responded in the only way one could to the farmer’s unasked plea; to reassure him that they had not suffered. Compassionate brevity. “Your nephew and his wife are surely walking the whalebone bridge to Shor’s Hall, Jofthor. We did not have time to do their graves justice, and so we cremated the bodies and brought you the ashes. Here.”

Accepting the small flour sack with trembling hands, the wife Boti dipped her head in a nod of acceptance. “Thank you for your troubles. It was kind of you, to save Iona and bring her to us...with-gods . With the remains.”

Handing the ashes to Fastred, who accepted them with a grimace of disgust. Boti then approached Nemain. Arms extended, to take away the child. “You’ve done so much. Here...allow me to take care of her, now. I know - raising bairns is at times a thankless task. You’ve done well for so long.
And with nothing but a rag and a skin of milk!"

Though her chafed nipples positively throbbed with pain, no matter how many healing spells she had stealthily cast upon them - Nemain felt suddenly reluctant to give up the little bundle of a person she had just learned was named Iona.

Iona. The plump cheeked face and wee bud mouth had become dear to her. A tiny fat hand swiped the air irritably, as Nemain hooked a finger around it. Allowing the child to grasp her finger, as she sighed brokenly. “Ochone, Boti...now that we be here, with her rightful kin and all - I confess, I do not wish to see her go.”

Looking up pleadingly at Ulfric, his hard demeanor softened the slightest bit at the misery in her face. He gave her a single shake of his head. As if to say, *do it.*

The empty place in her chest wrenched with a terrific ache as Jofthor patted her hand...as Boti gently but firmly took the girl away from her. The wee one continued sleeping as the older Nord woman cradled her in her arms. Nemain nearly wished she would stir, just for the excuse to take her back. To soothe her. “We’ll care for the child as our own. Good luck on your pilgrimage up the seven thousand steps.”

She swallowed. “The bairn - Iona...she likes to be held face down. With the hand supporting the...the belly and the head. So as to relieve her gas after a feeding. She doesnae like to be propped up upon the shoulder.”

“Thank you, kind stranger. I’ll be keeping that in mind. What a loving couple you both are!”

Nemain blinked, as Ulfric shifted in a creak of metal and leather behind her. “Er. We be not together.”

“Oh.” It was Boti’s turn to blink in surprise, as Jofthor chuckled. “Sorry...it just seemed so obvious. My apologies.”

“Don’t trouble yourself.” Ulfric gripped her arm to steer her, back towards the stables. “Talos guide you.”

“And may Talos guide your steps as well!” Jofthor waved, as his wife and daughter began cooing over the babe. “Mind you don’t run into any Stormcloaks on the way back down to the lowlands, Breton! They don’t take too kindly to your kind!”

“Och, those Stormcloak codgers! They be the worst!” She gleefully called out as Ulfric took a harder grip upon her; practically dragging her away at that point.

*Odd that no one recognized the Jarl of Eastmarch. Infamous leader of the Stormcloak Rebellion, person of interest.* As they trudged towards the stables in the growing light of mid-morning, she reflected that he seemed positively lax. Unworried about anyone identifying him, though surely even the Nords in this backwater mountain village might have guessed that the Nord striding down their dirt packed street was more than a mere traveling warrior. His gray hood was even down today, allowing the frigid winds to buffet the hair that that grown just long enough to ruffle with every gust.

*Notorious criminal? Wanted man? Anyone?* Squinting over at the fear thuaidh, she thought perhaps it was the shorn braids. The lack of identifying crests, perhaps...no soldiers or stolidly loyal Galmar following him about, with that mangy bear pelt armor. Revealing his status.
Scrutinizing the Nord as he exchanged heated whispers with the stablehand, Nemain snapped her fingers. It must have been the shaved off beard, for all that he bore the beginnings of new growth. Which was far redder than the more golden rusk of hair upon his head.

Though her grief over losing Iona was still prickle-sharp, she managed a weak grin at the thought. *The Redhamed Greybeard. The Bluidy Tongue. No, wait...the Ruddy Bear!* It sounds like an awful tavern song, composed by a completely flummered bard. Hah. I’ll have to tell him later. See him become all flustered and annoyed. Gods, what fun.

Ulfric stomped off all of a sudden, leaving Nemain to shake herself free from idle woolgathering. “Hey! Wait! Where be our horses?”

Taking three steps to every one of his, she listened in mounting disbelief as the Bear spat furiously. “High Hrothgar has no stables. Of course I forgot. Damn fucking traditions.” Turning to her, he maintained his relentless pace while frowning at the mincing step of her half-running jog. “We must go by foot. Our horses will be stabled in Ivarstead for the time being...along with any unnecessary weapons and dead weight. You brought your sleep roll and furs? Potions?”

“Of course.” Though her pack was far lighter after days of drinking potions and eating rations, the remaining bulk still strained her back. Readjusting the rolled up furs, Nemain shook her head at herself. She would *not* feel bereft of the sweet tiny thing, who had cuddled up inside her robes...a weight she actually missed as they fairly blew past the Fellstar homestead. *The family must have taken Iona inside. Wonder if Jofthor will be taking a trip, to retrieve the cows and other beasts from the abandoned farm?*

“We’ll be moving slower to be sure than on horseback. Why so upset?”

A freshly blustering wind arose from the river, pulling at her hair as she stepped along. Tossing the Bear’s cloak like a nondescript gray banner, the cloth nearly snapping her face as she hurried to keep up. “The Throat of the World is the highest mountain in Skyrim. So high, it has its own wind and weather patterns. Blizzards can strike at any time, anywhere along the path. It could be a sunny day here in Ivarstead, but the peak…” He grunted, stopping fully near the bridge as she crashed into him. Rubbing her chest resentfully, Nemain bit her lip as he looked down at her, face grim. “It’s going to be two days at the very least of hard mountaineering. Switchbacks, wolves and ice wraiths, and most likely a shit ton of snow. With falling rocks that we must avoid, and listen for.”

“I’ve brought rope,” Ulfric patted the satchel slung upon his belt as she sucked at her inner cheek, looking at the sloping path with newfound respect. “If there is a sudden storm, we should cling to the mountainside and tie ourselves together. Remember to walk sideways on the gravel scree that covers the higher steps. Just so there are not any accidents.”

“And if there are?”

A harsh smile split his face, as those blue eyes narrowed. “Just...try not to fall. I’d rather not explain to Arngeir that his precious Dragonborn fell to her death from a clumsy misstep on the rocks.”

“You know, Ulfric, for a Nord who walks like a clanking caravan himself you be very quick to judge! I can be downright stealthy, if needs be. Light as a feather. For sure, I’ll be fine.”

He shrugged. “Hope so.” His gaze went distant, penetrating the cloud wrapped peak with undisguised worry. “Come on. These steps aren’t going to climb themselves.”

She blew out a breath in annoyed agreement. “Cor, be there really seven thousand?”
“I tried to tally them, once. Lost count. Come on. We’d better get moving.”

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

And so they had begun to walk up the mountain path to the monastery, resting near the peak of the Throat of the World. Monahven, Mother Wind...the place where Kyne breathed life into the first of men. The cradle of humanity. So cold, the snow at its summit never melted, but stayed frozen and pure - added to continually by the swirling mists that revolved around the peak like an ouroboros. To High Hrothgar they climbed: mystical training ground of the Tongues of old; Hoag Merkiller, Talos Stormcrown, Jurgen Windcaller.

And now the destination of one heartsore Forsworn Dovahkiin, who was in a right crabbity, miserable mood. Who could have done without the honor of the seven thousand steps and seven thousand words of blather on the subject. This would have been far easier with horses!

Which brought her back to her first water break, feeling her pounding heart ease with the cessation of movement as Ulfric brooded silently a few steps beyond. Taking in the view, though it seemed to give him no pleasure. Spitting out her mouthful of milky water, she began licking at a handful of snow as she watched as Ulfric begin trudging up step one seventy six of the seven thousand steps of doom. “Oy! Bear!”

He turned, fixing her with vexed look. “What, Reachwoman? Your breath would be better saved for walking, and not speaking. That errand with the barrow has cost us time.”

She tilted her hips, adopting a challenging pose. “I’m calling in my favor. You, here - now. Carry me up the mountain.”

His lips parted incredulously. “You must be jesting.”

“‘Fraid not, Bear. This is my favor for ridding your beloved city of that Calixto bastard,” Smiling sweetly at the look of fury on his face, she waved a finger at him. “Tch tch tch, Ulfric. You promised. A favor of my choosing. After all, is not a Nord’s word bound to his honor? I thought you were fair stuffed with it.”

“Or is it -” She made her gray eyes wide and innocent, enjoying the way his jaw fairly clenched at the sound of her words, “-that you dinnae have the stamina for the climb? And with me, a slight little thing on your back. Hardly the weight of one of those warblades you’re sae fond of. I can walk...if it be too much for you.”

Which is how she found herself clinging like a limpet to the man’s broad shoulders, his hands pulling irkedly at her thighs and her feet as they dug into his waist. She was very thankful to be wearing leggings beneath her mage robes, bared as she was in this ludicrous position.
“Gah...your boots. I swear, you are trying to unman me. Not so hard!”

Resting her chin upon the grey cowl that had twisted around the man’s neck, all padded with fur over armor, she couldn’t help but giggle. Her plan had worked perfectly! Now, she could ride in style to High Hrothgar...borne on the back of Ulfric Stormcloak, no less. Where are the bards to write songs when you need them? “You be all right? Mind, I can walk if you feel yourself flagging. Wouldnae want to tire you out, after all. Give me a holler if you’re feeling all weak and wobbly.”

His deep burred voice was so close now that she could fairly feel the vibrations from his throat sink into her skin. ‘I’m not tired. You are as light as you say. But we must keep moving. I don’t want to be trapped on the steps in full dark.”

“Aye, right.” Shivering at the chill winds, Nemain burrowed her face into his neck. So warm.

“Stop that. I can feel you slobbering on my skin.”

Her nose found the sweet spot; right behind his ear where the wheat-gold hair was just a downy fuzz. Soft and warm, smelling like metal and the oils he used to treat his leathers and blades. And something else. Snowberries? “Och, does it bother you? Well, I was going to take a wee nap. But if you’re so inclined, I can always sing to keep meself occupied.”

She felt herself jerk as he began walking, bouncing with every step. Holding her legs in a solid fingerlocked grip. “Don’t you dare.”

Tightening her arms around his neck, she threaded her hands into the straps on his chest and sucked in a deep breath. “We drink to our youth, to th’ days coom and gone. For the age of aggression is just aboot done!”

He hissed, digging his fingers into her ankles. “I hate that song.”

Hah! Tis only what he deserves. I’ve suffered through this song often enough. It gave an entirely new meaning to having a captive audience, she thought with euphoric satisfaction. With extra brogue, now! ‘Elly up! “We’ll drive oot the Stormcloaks an’ restore what we own...with arra blood and arra steel we will take-a back our hooome!”

Ulfric pinched her thighs. “Stop, or I’ll throw you off the edge.”

“Och, but you be a man of your word! What will your doddering Greybeards say, when they find you have gone and kilt the Dovahkiin?”

Pushing down with her forearms, she pulled herself higher up on his back. Settling her arms around his throat, she uproariously sang. Enjoying his discomfort as he stomped up the mountain. “Doon with Ulfric! The killer of kings! On the day of your death we will drink an’ we’ll sing. Coz we’re the children of Skyrim, and we fight all our lives!”

“I swear, I’ll rip your legs off if you keep up with this shit.”

“- And when Sovngarde beckons, every one of us dies!” Lowering herself once more, she pressed her legs more securely around his sides. Dug her hands into his armor straps, as she sang directly into his ear. Simply loving how the man squirmed.
“But this land be ours and we’ll see it wiped clean! Of a-the scourge that has sullied arra hopes an’ arra dreams!”

He growled, his breaths coming in sharp, speedy huffs that bespoke his angst. “Do that again, and I mean it - I’ll throw your scrawny ass off and drag you up the mountain. By your damn braid. Since I’d be hauling you around regardless, that would keep my word of honor intact. Understood?”

“Say no more.” She’d had her fun. Besides, he was so very warm. And she could feel the ever-creeping exhaustion take hold, as she laid her head down upon his shoulder with a sigh. The rocking movement of his strides was working faster than any sleeping tree sap. “Doona mind me. Just resting my eyes for a space.”

“If you drool or snore, I’ll fill your mouth with snow.”

“You be the only one who snores, Bear.”

“Wha- I do not!”

“How would you know? You be a-sleeping whilst sawing those logs. Snahrgh!”

“Gods, I hate you.”

“You too, precious. Yaarouch! Don’t jounce your steps so roughly!”

“Sorry.” He sounded completely unrepentant. “Must have tripped over your dignity. Oh look...there it goes. No retrieving that now.”

“Like I had any to spare. Wait...I feel a chorus a-coming on...”

“No. I will drag you, I swear it. Not a tune. Nary a whistle, or a peep from you woman.”

“Pfft, you’re sounding more Forsworn by the day, fear thuaidh. Ugg! Me show woman who be man! Club me o’er the head, why don’t ye. Aye, coz that’ll prove your manhood. Stupid ballsacky cockwaddlers.”

She felt his hands tighten around the backs of her thighs, pulling her up more securely around him as he sighed. “Now that might be the worst accusation you’ve thrown yet. Being compared to a Forsworn. Just take a goddamned nap already.”

Snickering as she managed to pull her mage hood to lie more smoothly over her head, Nemain yawned. “Guess I’ll take a break from entertaining ya then. Wake me when somethin’ interesting happens.”

Ulfric did not respond. Feeling her eyelids drag down, the witch tucked her head back into the warm place; her hood cocooning around where the hot skin of his neck did not keep her toasty. And when sleep came, it dropped like a cast net upon a school of fish. Abruptly pulling her under, into the dark. Into silence complete.

************
She was in the middle of a fine dream that involved flying (and somehow, breathing fire. Was she a dragon?) when Ulfric jostled her from slumber. “Huh..wut? Ah umnae sleepin’!”

His voice rumbled in a thunderclap of worry, straight through her. “Storm’s coming. Time to find a place to bed in for the night...you’ve slept the day away. Hold fast!”

Coming more fully awake, Nemain made a face at the sour taste in her mouth. Doubtless from the nasty milk-flavored water; it had left a filmy scum upon her teeth. Readjusting her grip, she pulled herself up - only to realize that he had grabbed both of her wrists in one of his hands, presumably to keep her high upon his back.

“Did ye run into any hijinks while I napped?”

“Some wolves. Blew them off the mountain with Unrelenting Force.”

“Huh.” Nemain scooted up further from where she had settled upon his bedroll, looking around as she wiped a string of drool from her chin upon her robed shoulder. “You’d think that woulda wakened me up.”

“You were out cold. Hang on...almost there.”

“Where?” For all she could see was snow falling....powdering the worn stone steps. Ulfric hadn’t been pulling her leg, she thought in steadily increasing worry...it was a real white-out of a blizzard. The snow was rushing sideways at them; fat flakes melting upon her nose and eyelashes even as she blinked rapidly. Struggling to clear her vision as Bear strode along in a haste that rattled her teeth with every bounce.

The way was all but invisible. Nothing but the stone steps immediately before and after, the side of the mountain a dim wall that Ulfric occasionally touched, as if to reassure himself that they were not walking upon clouds. She could barely see ten paces ahead, much less the drop off that was a long, long way down. “I cannnae see anything! We should stop!”

“No!” He shouted back, tightening his grip upon her thighs. “There is a break just ahead!”

Unwilling to relinquish what vision she had (even for the warmth of his neck) Nemain stretched her head out, hood flapping as she peered at the whiteness. Nothing...nothing but stone and snow.

After what felt like a breathless eternity of that rollicking run uphill, an etched tablet came into view. Flickering in and out of sight as flurries of snow blew past, the distinctive red of snowberries shining from the white as they drew closer. Above her numb hands, she felt a warm exhale as her Nord packhorse sighed in relief. “We are here.”

“Here? You’re mad. There’s no shelter! We be sure to freeze.”

“We won’t. There is a rocky overhang where pilgrims usually make camp. Perhaps there will be some firewood left over, as well.”

“...Gods.”

As he prodded her to get off, Nemain slithered limply down his back. Cor, but she felt like a wet stocking, all formless and jellied. “Where is this sanctuary you’ve promised?” She inquired, groaning as her spine cracked and popped from bearing her own weight once more.

“Over here!” Snagging her robe’s sash, Ulfric had to shout to be heard over the shrieking gale. “Follow! Don’t get lost!”
Her boots sank into snow almost hip deep as they left the stone path. Gasping at the sheer cold of it, Nemain followed in the steps Ulfric made; placing her boots carefully in the holes his longer legs provided. It helped a fair bit - though too late to spare her the shivers. *So bloody frigid!*

She could see it now...a rocky overhang that had once been a cave. Slabs of broken rock provided a shield against the wind, as they huddled closer to the scant shelter. Not far behind was the stone plinth; another of those rocks engraved with stanzas that she had forgotten to ask about as they passed them on the way up.

Tugging at the sash Ulfric held in his grasp, she leaned over and shielded her eyes, the better to read:

\[
\textit{The fledgling spirits of Men}
\]

\[
\textit{were strong in Old Times;}
\]

\[
\textit{Unafraid to war with Dragons and their Voices;}
\]

\[
\textit{But the Dragons only shouted them down}
\]

\[
\textit{and broke their hearts.}
\]

*Depressing.* “Bear, I see n-no firewood here. And I d-doubt it would light in these conditions, even if we h-h-had some.”

In the shadows of the rock, the Nord scrubbed at his face with the back of his hand. Looking completely tuckered out, like a Greybeard in truth with snowflakes frosting his hair and the shadow of beard on his face. “Let’s just get in our sleeping furs then. We’ll have to wait out the blizzard. Get some rest while we can. Do you have any more potions for yourself?”

“N-n-no. I drank the last one before the c-climb.”

He swore, kicking the rolled up furs as she sat down on the floor. *Hard.*

“It’s n-n-not so bad.”

*Keep telling yerself that, bint!* Wrapping her hood and robe more tightly around herself, she began to unfold her own sleeping bag, the plush fur feeling like paradise between her shaking fingers. “B-be there any trees nearby, to c-cushion the ground? Keep our h-heat from d-d-draining away?”

“I don’t see any.” Quickly unbuckling his armor, Ulfric stepped out of his boots and greaves. Laying the nordic steel to the side, as he made quick work of stripping himself down to his smalls.

Nemain stared, her teeth chattering as breath puffed away in slatted clouds. The man was a giant; all pale scars and taut muscle. A dusting of reddish gold chest hair trailed down the divots of his hard-
planed stomach, disappearing into the linen underclothes. His back turned to her as he laid the rest of
his things next to the rock walls of her alcove, binding what could not be tucked away in a knapsack
with twine.

She tongued her chapped lips in shocked sympathy to see the skin there...more striped with
lashmarks and weals from elemental magicks than smooth flesh. His back was a patchwork of pain.
*Who, or what did this? These look old.* Trailing her eyes lower, a raw tinge of embarrassed curiosity
arose as she spied a long curved scar - very deep - emerge from somewhere near his groin, slashing
all the way down to his rear thigh. Almost to the knee. It would have hamstrung him, had it gone on
any further.

It felt - gods, too intimate to see these things...like she had caught him wanking off in the privy, or
spied upon him while bathing. He would not appreciate her stares, she knew...for Bear had his pride.
That he had survived half of what had been done to him spoke more of the man’s tenacity than any
honeyed political speech. *Those are not just from blades...they are spellmarks. Who...*

A sharp clapping rudely jolted her from gawking at his body. “Stop dawdling and get your clothes
off! Your lips are blue!”

“Huh?” *How long had she sat there, rubbing the furs between her fists?*

Too long. Looking down, she saw...her robes had been coated in ice crystals. Even with the rocky
slabs blocking much of the wind, snowflakes whirled into the sheltering space. Her teeth had stopped
chattering - a bad sign.

Lifting a deadened arm, she pulled off the hood crackling with frost and tossed it to the side. Her
robe followed, unwrapped like a sheet of metal more than fabric as it bent strangely - frozen to her
form. Finally she knelt, shivering in her smalls that ought to have reeked of sweat. Yet did not - small
favors, for there was nothing to smell but the sharp scent of mountain and the dirt of the rocks. She
had worn both sets of clothing interchangeably this past week on the road, but neither was truly
clean. *I cannae feel my toes.*

Dumbly, she realized Ulfric was gesturing to her. The roar of the wind was growing louder; the
wind insistently pulling upon the tangled braid of her hair. His yell could barely be heard over the
gale-force bluster. “Get in! We’ll put the knapsacks in your sleeproll, to keep the rations and
waterskins from icing over! Hurry up!”

Helping stiffly load their things into her furs, she wrapped them up and set them to the side. Ulfric
was already climbing into his sleeproll; one that was a good half again as long as hers, she noticed in
a fog of listlessness.

He held the bedroll open for her, as she ponderously stepped in, squishing the furs between her toes.
*Gods...still cannae feel anything. This is bad.* The blistering heat of him burned, as she shrugged
down into the sleepsack, darkness swallowing her whole as the man slid down with her. The fur and
his limbs cradling Nemain as though she had returned to the womb - pitch black, nothing but their
breaths and the itching, feverish fire.

“Y-y-you’re too b-blasted hot! B-back away!”

“Fuck, you are absolutely freezing. Did you even pack any furs beneath your robes, Reachwitch?
Or,” he laughed breathlessly, seeming to find their situation funny even as she ground her teeth
against trembling lips. “-is it your icy heart, killing you slowly from within?”

"Ha, ha. Using me own slurs against me...that’s low, Bear. Ooh, ouch.” Pins and needles sparked up
and down her limbs, as he furiously rubbed her down. Trying to bring her body heat back up, as she curled into a miserable little ball. Frantically striving to ignore him, to block out the undeniable fact that he surrounded her - a soul trapped in a crystalline gem. There was no way out - she could almost cry, at the knowledge of it. She’d die if she chose to lie alone this night.

Tears leaked from her eyes onto her cheeks. Liquid that she could feel, at last...for the sweltering heat was doing its work. Feeling was returning to her, and Nemain began shaking in a full body heave as life stole through her once more. Painful and irritatingly insistent.

“Ease up.” His hands pressed her against him, as her face mashed against the velvety brushed hairs of his chest. At least she thought it was his chest, for no light made its way through from the sleeproll flap. A mere draft of wind - nothing that detracted from the torrid atmosphere in this furry prison.

“Calm down. You were in shock...just calm yourself down. There.”

Taking his advice, she willed herself to calm. There was no escaping this. She would be spending the night wrapped up in his arms. Again.

*Tis necessary. Resign yourself to it, witch...remember the cave in? You were nae so against partaking of his heat then, were you?

But it had been completely different last fall. Opening her eyes wide, so that the tears would not fall and betray her, Nemain breathed unsteadily - the chest beneath her working in a foreign, far slower rhythm. One she could not match even if she tried, at this point.

A hand slid through the mass of her hair, stroking gently as she blinked back another rush of tears.

“Shh. Try and sleep some more. I have no idea why you're weeping, but I promise I won’t be taking advantage of you tonight.”

She believed him. He was a bedrock of integrity. What he said, he would do...without fail. “Aye, I know. Thank you. It’s just…too much, y’know? Too close.”

Hating herself for revealing the war raging on in her own mind, Nemain buried her face into that warmth. The chest that held a heart she was bound to pluck free; beating ever faster as she twined her legs between his. Rubbing against him, seeking further to stoke that feverish heat in herself. Thieving the very life from this man, whom she was honor bound to kill. Or love, depending on which vein of magickal tradition she would hearken to. Death and life, bound inextricably in the visions...the Sight she had seen. *What shall I do? The way is sae unclear.*

His rasping breaths were unsteady. Becoming more like gasps as she laced her fingers together behind his back and pushed...bringing them so close that not even their underclothing mattered now.

“...Nemain?”

“And what if I wanted you, Ulfric? If I chose to let you take advantage tonight?” Her voice was a breathy whisper, for she could not bring herself to say the words any louder. It was enough that she spoke them, instead of simply taking. Basking in the glorious electric light he gave; greedily soaking in this pooled lust that could tip over in the moment between breaths. Washing over them at any time. She was dying to swim in him. “Would you?”

His heart was hammering beneath her cheek, as she dragged her fingers up the thick, marred skin of his back. Testing for weakness, even as he held back. Kept himself stiff and standoffish, even in such close quarters. “You don’t want this.”

“Why would I say so, if I didnae want you? Come on, Bear. You’ve bloody teased me enough.”
She felt hot hands suddenly lift her beneath her armpits. Bringing her in a full body glide up, to bump her head against his chin. A cool tracery of air revealed that she was now closer to the opening of this cavernous sleep roll, the freshness ignored as she inhaled his scent. *Definitely snowberries.* Nearly panting, Nemain squeezed her eyes shut as his hand slid down her shoulder to her back. Caressing the indent of her waist, as he drew her even tighter against him. *I'll be taking that as a 'yes'.*

With a truly masterful erection hot and hard between her thighs, Nemain did something she had longed to do for months. Tilting her head, she licked his throat in one long, wide swipe. The salt of his sweat making her thirsty...yearning for more.

-So she licked him again. Biting down upon the cords of his neck, mouthing the dip of his collarbone; the witch raked her long nails against his back as he groaned. Hips twitching involuntarily, as she worked a knee around his hips, grinding her pelvis - slick even through her smalls - against the stiffness of him.

A hand closed suddenly around her throat. Startling her, as she rose up to catch his mouth with hers. To quench this heat that had been building between them for weeks. Months, even. *Just lust, and nothing more.* She managed to croak out an inquiry. “What, Bear?”

His breath ghosted across her lips. “Tell me who Galan is, first.”

*No. It cannot be, she had not told him.... “Where did you hear that name!??!”*

Her voice roiled with power, her Thu’um shaking them both as they turned in the bedroll. Wrestling her down, Ulfric turning to lay upon her, legs sliding against hers. Propping his weight upon his forearms as she hissed in denial. *How had he heard that goddamn name?*

“Then...then you tell me who Elenwen is, Ulfric...and why you fear her so!”

The man went completely stiff. The huge hand that held her neck in a brace tightened. Nearly cutting off her airflow, as she struggled beneath him, trying to push him away now that he had the upper hand. His own Thu’um was laced in pure hate; a bitterness she had only guessed at, once upon a cave in the buried deeps of Helgen.

“No.”

“Then we are in a deadlock, are we not?” Cor, she could have cried. For there he was, so damn hard that she wondered amidst her rage how it was, that a man such as him had not divulged himself of a woman these last few months. He was surrounded by blithering chits so often. Tittering in court, following him on Windhelm’s streets. “How...”

“You won’t bend. I won’t break. This won’t work, woman, unless we are both honest with one another. And I refuse to be the first. So tell me. What is Galan to you?”

Against her will, she began shaking. Tears budding, streaming in rivulets of pain down her cheeks as she coughed out a sob. Then another, turning her head in silent rejection as she began to cry in earnest. “No, oh no. I cant. Won’t. Nononono...”

The world tilted upon its side, as the steel band around her neck eased. She found herself wrapped tightly in her enemy’s arms, as she bawled her fool heart out. Helpless to push away the comfort he supplied, even as she loathed it. Shunned the wanting that she could not rid herself of, not even now
as his words flayed her bare. For she would not bend. He was right. She could not tell him her shame.

He would hate her forever. She hated herself.

“Shhh. Gods, witch. I think you might be the death of me after all.”

That he could laugh, even with such harshness after this...it was too much. He was stronger than she, after all. “I will be. I am your end, Ulfric! You shouldnae do this. Don’t pretend like you care! You goddamned man. Butcher! Téigh trasna focáil ort féin Nord, because that chance has passed!”

His slow, measured response had her burying her face in his neck, even as she yearned to spike him with a bolt of lightning for his temerity. “I do care. Too much. So go to sleep, woman. Sleep, before I decide that I will take you up on your earlier offer, to fuck you senseless. You’d be worthless for anything on the morrow.”

She giggled wildly at the thought. “But I wouldnae have to walk, would I? Since you be carrying me as a favor, and all.”

His chest vibrated beneath her hands. She realized - he was laughing. Twisting the furs between her toes (toes that felt, that moved without aching now) as she paused in pushing him off of her. Feeling surprised that there was anything remotely funny about any of this misserious hoopla.

Walking. After sex, with this man who apparently was as well hung as a mammoth. Gods save her from her own ill-wishing. Tis a god damned mercy they were not tupping after all.

Reluctantly seeing the humor in their plight, Nemain snorted. Then began chuckling as well, feeling his hand trail through her hair in smooth, soft movements that made her push pathetically against those fingers, scrutching her scalp with delicious friction.

Wetting her lips, she felt him breathe against her shoulder as he continued laughing. She could feel herself leaking; wetly dripping upon her own thighs as his half-hard length rubbed against her hip. “A truth for a truth, then? Not…” she sighed dejectedly. “Not about him. I cannae talk of that, yet. But something else?”

His fingers stippled the skin of her neck, making her bite back a moan as he pushed down against muscles she didn’t even know were aching. “Sure. We’ve got all night.”

Right. Damn if that didn’t feel like an eternity, now. “So. Aboot that hagraven scratch you noticed. I went and saw an old friend.”

“Mmhmm.”

“And she told me. She right confirmed...shite this is hard. I be Madanach’s daughter after all.”

His gravelly voice thundered in amusement. “I could have told you that.”

“Ugh. Well I wasnae going to take your word for it, was I? Moira has known me since I was a girl. And sure enough, she knew...could say for sure that my Mam laid with none other than Madanach before the Beltane fires preceding my birth. Not that it matters, for as I told ye - we judge royalty more by deeds than birthright. The biggest bloodiest bastard what takes the cake for his own, you ken? Though I might find meself in demand for more than I bargained for, should I return to the Reach.”

“Hmm.”
As he rolled to the side, she drew in a full breath for the first time in what felt like forever, as they lay together. Legs still entangled, which strangely did not bother her. It was peaceful, and with a slight prickle of awareness, she realized that they were breathing in sync. “So, it be your turn. Tell me a truth. Something equal to what I have just told you.”

His thumb rubbed her shoulder in little circles, tickling as it neared her armpit. She released the tiniest eep, as he laughed quietly. “I had a dog, before answering the call to be trained as a Greybeard in High Hrothgar. His name was Branch. A stupid name, I know. But as a boy, I thought ‘why not’? It was his favorite thing after all, that stupid damn branch I threw to him, over and over.”

She hit him. Smacked him in the face repeatedly, as his silent laughter became a deep, throaty chuckle. “Not fair! Not even close to equal, you miserly boorish son of a bitch!”

“Alright, alright.” Holding her hands in his (to prevent her from assaulting him any more, she supposed) Ulfric pulled her over. Spooned her back against his chest, as she felt his lips smile against her neck. Just a slight bend, and I could kiss him. He’d let me, I’m sure of it… “Perhaps I should tell you about the time I killed Torygg, not a year past.”

“Torygg? The dead High King?”

“That very one.”

The Nord’s hands smoothed down the arc of her ribs, pausing at her waist. Closing her eyes, she placed her hand upon his; moving it slightly lower. Resting his hand upon her hips. A request. Touch me.

But he did not read into her unspoken want. Instead, Ulfric began to speak. Quiet and thoughtful, the words pulled out as though he were reliving the memory instead of the here and now. Trapped in a sleeping fur with a Forsworn, high on a mountaintop. “When Istlod died, it was a foregone conclusion that Torygg would be crowned High King in his stead. Since no one in power wished to deviate from the policy that favored the Empire, Torygg ruled without fuss for roughly six years.”

He paused. “Truth, then. Torygg was a good man. But he was not a wise one. Absolutely besotted by his fair wife Elisif, the High King was more occupied in throwing lavish parties for his courtiers. To impress her, I think. For the common opinion was that she had married down, at least in matters of intellect.”

“And so, his rule was notable not for any great battles or political winnings, but in how wasteful the man was...spending Cyrodilic gold on the East Empire Trading Company rather than investing in Nord mines and businesses. The brandy and wine Torygg purchased - Shor’s beard, a month’s worth would have fed every village in Eastmarch and the Rift combined. For a year. Yet he remained blind to the people’s suffering. Their rage, at being denied justice. Our culture trod underfoot, shrines of Talos and their worshippers put to the torch. All ignored, in favor of coin...to keep the status quo.”

She listened dry mouthed as his lips moved against her skin. Guilty expectation coloring her thoughts, as she carefully traced the length of his hand on her hips with her own. “...Never vocally disapproving of the White-Gold Concordat, at times outright praising the Empire in speeches and official declarations. Which was intolerable. Everyone knew we had been bought and paid for. Only fools imagined that the peace we had wrested from the war would continue without end.”

“And so, the answer of course was to kill him?”

He barked a laugh, sardonic and short. “Hardly. He could have left with his life. Banished from court, but alive. No...the bastard had to press the issue.”
His fingers tightened nearly to the point of pain. Nearly grasping bone, as she drew in a gasp at the suddenness of it. “It is true that I used the Shout of Unrelenting Force on Torygg. Though the rumors are not entirely accurate...though I could have, I did not ‘shout’ him apart. As you know, each Thu’um may be modulated in terms of strength. I used just enough force to throw him down, clearly showing my superior will. For any Nord could learn the Way of the Voice, should he choose - given enough ambition and dedication. Shouting him to the ground proved that he had neither. Yet he would not yield. The fool.”

She forgot to breathe as Ulfric leaned closer. To whisper in her ear, like it was a secret. “And so...it was my sword piercing his heart that killed him.”

“That...isnae really a secret, Ulfric. Everyone knows you kilt him.”

“Truth?...I enjoyed it.”

Nemain nearly wished for light in the sleeproll, so she could roll her eyes and have him see the depth of her disinterest in how not-sorry he was, to have killed Torygg. “Well shit. Yer a warrior. If ye didnae enjoy fighting, you’d be a piss-poor one.”

“Hmm.”

Against all odds, she felt herself drifting back to sleep. The warmth, the closeness...the unexpected upheaval of tears would have driven her to sleep without the events of the previous week added in. She yawned, mentally reminding herself to brush her teeth with a twig of frost mirriam come the morn. *Gammy teeth, baggy breath. Sure glad I didnae kiss him with this grot. Another failing for him to tease me aboot.*

Shifting in the man’s arms, the witch sighed in weary resignation. “I still doona see why you bothered. To kill Torygg, I mean. Now you be fighting once more, against everyone - an’ not just the Empire. All the places I’ve gone - which I’ll admit has not included all the Holds - I have seen folk completely split on the issue. The common folk - they just want to eat. To farm, fight, raise bairns...tis a rare few that can see beyond the needs of the now. And the ones that be more farsighted be hardly a majority. No...I’m afraid Skyrim doesn’t belong to you, Ulfric.”

Nuzzling into the softness of the furs, all curled up and half asleep in his embrace, she nearly did not catch his soft response.

“No. But I belong to her.”

******

*High Hrothgar.*

The forbidding black spires reached to the sky, carved practically from a solid block of stone. A wide divided staircase led to twin massive double doors...stylized dragon heads topping each frame. *A warning or a welcome? Too soon to tell.*
Sliding down from the Bear’s back, she gazed up at the bleak monastery with a creeping sense of doubt. “You say that they do not speak, save one? This Arngeir?”

“Silence and isolation help the monks attune themselves to the voice of the sky. And no one but Master Arngeir speaks with any regularity, anymore.”

Standing at the cusp of the staircase, she watched as Ulfric gazed longingly up towards the dark towers. “Master Borri used to talk, once. I heard his words, few and far between as a child. But I doubt he can speak now without causing great destruction.”

Chewing upon her inner cheek, she contemplated him even as he lost himself in memories.

She had awakened alone, slightly chilled...only to find Ulfric dressed and armored. The familiar shield of cold apathy apparent in those sky blue eyes, as he used as few syllables as possible to rouse her from their shared bed. Causing the tiny flicker of hope that had risen with the dawn to sink, as he turned away from her playful smile.

Last night had been an awful mistake. A view he evidently agreed with; judging by his actions. Remaining wordless as she had climbed up on his back, they had traveled the entire day with scarcely more than a few, stilted inquiries about the other’s health. Observations about the trail, the length of the steps. All that claptrap yesterday, and now we be back to discussing the weather?!?

Awkward, dull and disappointing...how she longed to crack him open once more. To get back the sheepish, laughing Bear - instead of the sour, bitter Ulfric. It was ever so much more fun to be playful than serious.

But are they not one and the same? The Bear and the Jarl? Gods, he runs hot and cold. I cannae wrap my head around it.

“Come on.” His gruff words broke her from the strange turn her thoughts had taken. “They’ve been waiting long enough.” The Nord sighed, a cloud of warm vapor steaming before the cold winds stole it away. “No doubt Arngeir will want to bandy words with me, as well.”

As they crunched up the unbroken snowy steps towards the doors, Nemain readjusted her pack nervously. The monastery looked so much larger, this close. Dank and gloomy...a prison. If I go in, I may never come out!

“So, you left this place as a youth, aye? Which be why you’re sae nervous about returning?”

“I’m not nervous. And yes - I left to join the Imperial legion when I was sixteen. Against Arngeir’s wishes and warnings. My old Master doubtless will give me an earful, once pleasankeries have been seen to. Can’t say I’m looking forward to that.”

She frowned, eyes fixed upon the carved dragon head over the door. “That seems awful young. Didn’t the higher ups stop you from enlisting?”

“I’ve always been tall. And they needed soldiers. Spellfodder to take the heat away from other, more experienced legionnaires. Who could say no to an eager recruit?”

“Obviously not the Imperial Legion.”
Pausing before the ancient doors, Ulfric stood still for the space of a moment. Then turned, glancing down at her where she stood nearly a pace away. Noting her anxiety, those frozen lakes eyes seemed to thaw the briefest bit. *Morning Star’s ice to Rain’s Hand slush. Dinnae trust him.*

“Be honest and brave. Don’t fear them. The Masters may seem intimidating, but I think you will find them overjoyed to have one such as you to teach.”

_Bravery...not my strongest trait._ She ignored the bit about fear. *How frightening can four old men be?*

“One such as I?”

The fear thuaidh smiled dangerously. The gleam of his white teeth a weapon in and of itself, as she felt her knees grow weak, much to her chagrin. *Buck up, witch!* “Well, you are Dragonborn. Blessed of the gods, given the gift to learn Shouts as I would learn a song. With a natural, astonishing ease. I did say, didn’t I...that any Nord could learn the Way? Provided they spent years devoted to the effort.”

She felt herself strangely saddened, to see jealousy stamped so clearly upon her teacher’s face. “You said many things last night.”

Those blue eyes widened, then narrowed. Pushing the door open with a heavy creak, the Bear of Markarth ducked his head. Gesturing for her to enter before him. “Let’s go. Shouldn’t keep the Masters waiting. *Su’um ahrk morah.*”

“Breath and focus,” She whispered rotely in response, lost in wonder at the impressive surroundings she found herself in, as Ulfric closed the door behind them.

The interior of High Hrothgar resembled a temple, perhaps. Or a high vaulted palace, if palaces were hewn from mountainsides by dragon claws and similarly decorated to taste, for it was sparse and masculine. *Perfect for the ascetic hermit to freeze himself away in enlightenment.*

Huge urns of ever-burning fire lit up a stone flagged floor decorated with fading banners and a seemingly random scattering of pots. The chilly air smelt of incense, dirt grit, smoke and flame. *A shame it was not warmer, then.*


He _was_ old. They all were, as she scanned the four men who had appeared out of seemingly nowhere. Greybeards in name and appearance, solemn and wise-seeming...though Nemain knew that the path to wisdom lay not only in age, but lessons learned and taken to heart. Knowledge could be gathered, but wisdom? That had to be proved.

There were the smallest differences between them; the knotting of their beards, the expression upon their wrinkled faces. Two were absolutely blank, solemnly taking her and their former student in stride with nary a blink. The other two, including the first who had noticed their arrival, bore faces of differing shades... world weary ire and surprised welcome.

“Master Arngeir. Master Borri. It’s been many years.” Ulfric spoke, giving the slightest nod to the one who ignored him, walking beyond her to grasp shoulders with the thin, smiling Greybeard; who
nodded and clapped a shaking hand to Ulfric’s elbow in return. “Master Einarth. Master Wulfgar. I hope you are all well.”

“So. A Dragonborn appears, at this moment in the turning of the ages.”

The one who had shunned Ulfric spoke to her. Turning to face him more fully, Nemain felt his critical gaze slide over her...taking in every detail. Her travel stained robes, with frost clinging to the edges. The skeever nest of her hair, the braid bushy with flyaways floating around her head like a halo. She was sure...this was not the awe-inspiring Dovahkiin the old man had expected to see. Not a brawny Nord lad, all gumption and guts. Nor an Imperial, who could claim that the blood of Tiber Septim - a dragon - truly ran in his veins. What will they make of me?

Swallowing back her first response, which was less than complimentary, Nemain lifted her chin high. “I be answering your summons.”

A wary light shone in the Greybeard Arngeir’s eyes. “First, let us see if you truly are Dragonborn. Let us taste of your Voice.”

Do words have a taste? I have a few that probably reek with the ripe scent of flatulence for Bear, right about now. This...this was no doddering senile codger before her. Ulfric had not prepared her enough for the humming resonance of the Four. Yes, Arngeir - and the rest, she would imagine - were rawny, wrinkled and whip-cord thin. True, but yet...

They had a presence. A strange awareness, for she could feel their eyes upon her even as she breathed in tremulous arrhythmia. As though the monks could tell by her very breath that she was afraid. How out of her element she was, surrounded by men in a man’s temple; with Ulfric now joining his cold blue stare with the rest of them.

For he was one of them, wasn’t he. Judging her. Measuring with every inhalation her skill, the possibilities inherent in her birthright. This strange magicka (despite whatever Ulfric thought, the Thu’um was a magic of sorts) that gave her Words power. Blood and soul of a dragon. Dovahkiin.

No kindly gramps in his dotage was this Arngeir, she thought staring back into those pale colorless eyes, but a calculating, shrewd Elder. He reminded her of the werewolf clan alphas; the old ones mangy and scarred who had ruled by red tooth and claw just long enough that none dared to challenge them, yet would - should the were leader show any slip of weakness.

He was Alpha here. She would play along, for now.

A Thu’um swelled in her throat, heavy chested and begging for release. Turning her face at the last second, Nemain aimed the velocity of Unrelenting Force towards the pillars at her left. The wind of the passage of her Voice struck Arngeir, twisting the old Master to the side as she obeyed his command.

“Fus...Roh Dah!”

Drawing himself up with dignity, Master Arngeir walked towards her as though she had shown him a painting. Not blasted his eardrums to Oblivion. “Dragonborn. It is you. Welcome to High Hrothgar. And what shall we call you aside from Dragonborn, young lady?”

Flicking her eyes towards Ulfric who nodded imperceptibly, Nemain wet her lips. “I am called
Nemain, of Deepwood Redoubt. A witch-shaman of the Forsworn, here to learn more about the Thu’um.”

The old man stood placidly, barely shifting at her revelation of her background. “I am Master Arngeir. I speak for the Greybeards.”

“About that. See, I heard tell from your former student that the other monks dinnae speak due to the rough an’ tumble nature of their powers. Does this mean you be the weakest of them all? Or merely unfortunate to be their mouthpiece?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ulfric frantically motioning for her to shut up. Too late now. She had been wondering this ever since the Bear had explained about the eventual demise of every Tongue - a lifetime of complete and utter silence. Should a Master of the Voice complete their training (after years and years of meditation, breathing, sitting...cor, she was growing bored just thinking upon it) their voice would eventually grow too dangerous to speak in front of any random sod. Forcing them to truly live in isolation, only interacting with others of their own kind.

She shivered, remembering the lesson her teacher had imparted, up on the roof of the Palace of Kings. That though the Masters were of a peaceful order...when they chose to speak, avalanches rained down and storms spewed from the peak of the Throat of the World. The cry of Dovahkiin that had drawn her here had been heard far and wide across Skyrim. Many had remarked upon it, not only in Ivarstead, but on the road. Random travelers, farmers and peddlars.

What could they do, if they chose to be wicked? To use their voices for ill? It did not bear thinking about.

A strange humming thrummed through her, as she realized that Arngeir had not moved a muscle. Yet the sheer sonorous vibrations coming from the gaffer nearly bowled her over, as she staggered back a few steps in response to the ice in the old one’s eyes.

“Why have you come here?”

Every word stung like a dagger point. Slicing into her brain, red hot as she winced away. Recovering from the surprise, Nemain gritted her teeth and fixed her own angry glare upon him. “I wish to be finding out what it means to be Dovahkiin.”

“Ah. So you have learned some words of Dovahzul already. Well done.” She thought she detected a glint of satisfaction in Arngeir’s face. The twitch of a beard...something in those glassine eyes, perhaps. “We are here to guide you in that pursuit, just as the Greybeards have sought to guide those of the Dragon Blood that came before you. You share an illustrious lineage, Dragonborn...treading in the path of Talos Stormcrown himself.”

Taking a single step, Arngeir raised an rangy arm, the drooping grey sleeves revealing sinewy muscle tone beneath the garlic-paper skin. “Are you ready to follow the path, young woman?”

Turning to gaze upon Ulfric, Nemain felt a foreboding come over her. Almost a quickening, as she realized that Bear - Ulfric Stormcloak - had blended in almost seamlessly with the other three. The same stance. The same positioning of hands, relaxed and ready at his side. A watchful awareness that she now realized had not been instinctive, but rather had been taught.
Sucking in a deep inhale, Nemain blew out a slow stream of air. Runes appeared; coalescing in the mist of her breath in the space before herself and Arngeir.

Watching as they disappeared, Nemain watched for the elder one’s reaction. For the runes had spelled:

‘submission, student, learn.’

“I will follow the Path. I will find my Voice. Please teach me the Way, and guide me through Kynareth’s domain. Su’um ahrk morah...”

She bowed, only the barest flinch betraying her discomfort with the protocol. Lifting her gaze, she saw a strange mix of emotion flare upon the Greybeard’s face. Frustration. Contempt and curiosity. She could work with that.

Smiling a bit nastily, she added the title. Nearly as an afterthought, as she bowed her head to the Elder one.

“...Master.”

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Yay! People DO read the author's comments! Yee-freaking-haw. Sweetrolls all around.

So, note: Arngeir is considered by Ulfric to be the most powerful of the Greybeards. Which is a bone of contention among fans, since Arngeir can also speak, while the others would rip down mountains, etcetera, if they became chatty. Does that make Arngeir more powerful or less?

I'm more of a mind with Ulfric on this one - it would take a shit-ton of power to be able to speak without your words becoming a Thu'um. Dragons don't worry about it, obviously...maybe it is just mere mortals who struggle with this? I don't know. If anyone knows, enlighten me. Ohmm.

And yes...sexy times in High Hrothgar are a-coming. But Nemain gets to go through some training montages first. Whooahh.
Music for this chapter provided by Nir Shor, the song 'Stonewall District'. A fanmade tribute to Skyrim that is totes awesome.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTHWeX285LU&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&index=30

This chapter is equal parts silliness and plot. I got bored. So there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I don’t understand it any more than you do, but one thing I’ve learned is that you don’t have to understand things for them to be.”

-Madeline L’Engle, ‘A Wrinkle in Time’

“Yol Toor Shul!”

The roaring inferno blew from her lips as though she had spit an entire keg of brandy into a bonfire. The stream of flame had to be at least thirty feet long, she marvelled...smoke rising from her lips as she touched them in awe.

“Ah. Excellent. This Shout…’Fire-Inferno-Sun’ or Yol Toor Shul...is one of the most commonly used among dragons in the past.”

She eyed Arngeir askance. “Doona you mean the dovah that exist now, as well? You know...the blighters that be eating people and such. Down below, where the air be not quite so thin?”

Dragging her boot in the ash trail her Thu’um had left, Nemain bit her lip.

_I willnae scold the Master for being sae damn closemouthed. I know...I just know he is not telling me everything. Tis his affair. I be just the goddamned Dovahkiin after all. “I be convinced that this returning of dragons has something to do with me being Dragonborn.”_

The Greybeard sighed. “No doubt. The appearance of a Dragonborn at this time is not an accident. Your destiny is surely bound up with the return of the dragons. You should focus on honing your Voice, and soon your path will be made clear. Now, as for the history of this Shout...the child king Jafnhar who was burned alive by the fire of the dragon Lodunost did have this scrawled upon his epitaph...”

Feeling the singe of her Breath ache even now in her throat, Nemain yawned. “Question. You’d know this, aye? Did not Talos Stormcrown, och excuse me...Hjalti Early-Beard lead the forces of
Skyrim against the People of the Reach in the Second Era. Year eight twenty eight, was it?”

“...Or was it eight hundred thirty. I can never remember.” She mused aloud, enjoying the way her Master’s eyes slitted in suspicious rage. She was getting better at reading the Greybeard’s often blank faces. After months of deciphering the Bear, ’twas child’s play. “Anyhoo. Aye...Hjalti and his new chum Cuhlecain pushed the Reachmen back from Falkreath all the way past Old Hrol’dan...for no apparent reason than to seize our fertile lands an’ good Breton silver. And did not Hjalti - after being sae blessed with the Voice that a literal storm hovered o’er him as he Shouted the gates down - *kill* his erstwhile ally while crowning himself? Staging it to be an assassination coup...going sae far as to slit his own bastardly throat to cast off any blame?”

“Hmm.” She tapped a finger thoughtfully upon her chin, as Arngeir watched her in wary silence, those colorless eyes troubled by her questions. “Aye. That seems like a right fine leader of the Way of the Voice. Shrewd. Far-thinking...worthy of emulation, certainly. Ah!” Snapping her fingers, she bared her teeth in a fierce smile as she rounded on the Greybeard. “He also tupped that lovely Barenziah of Morrowind? Did he not? Making her quick with child, yet remaining so stone cold as to bribe a healer, to make the poor woman miscarry? So as not to cast any threat to his own heir’s dominion? Ooh, now *that* be right cold. I’d have marched back o’er and fed him his own ballsack, for doing such to me.”

Arngeir stood stock still, fingers clenched as she tsked mournfully. “Oh my. Seems I’ve learnt my history all too well, Master. Might we move on to something else? For I believe our darling Bear has already taken plenty of notes, as he seems to be following straight in his venerated man-God’s footsteps...”

“*Enough.*”

Wincing, her eyes narrowing at the force of the man’s Thu’um even as she held her ground, Nemain faced off with Arngeir as the Master calmed himself once more. She truly envied that poise, she thought in mingled jealousy and disgust. The old Nord was damn near unflappable.

But he had not been so untouched the day of their arrival - or even the following day. After the icily formal introductions, Master Arngeir and Ulfric had retired to a cloistered room. Leaving her with the other remaining mutes, somewhat at a loss as she stared at them and they gazed serenely upon her. Straining to eavesdrop while pretending to unpack her things (which had earned her a wry eyebrow from the thin Greybeard she later came to know as Master Borri) she overheard shaking rumbles. Raised voices, both of the men arguing in rising and falling tones...a discussion that from what Bear had said had been a long time in coming. *Having the hooley at one another. Whilst I be listening to them in ructions, biding me time with no flogging idea what to do next.*

“*Dragonborn.*” Arngeir’s voice had modulated itself from the thunderous growl of doom to a mildly condescending mien. *I half wish he’d just scream at me. That way, I be knowing where I stand.* “The Voice was a gift of the goddess Kynareth, at the dawn of time. She gave mortals the ability to speak as dragons do.”

“Although this gift has often been...misused.” The Nord’s mouth twisted beneath his knotted beard. “…the only correct use of the Voice is for the worship and glory of the gods. True mastery of the Voice can only be achieved when your inner spirit is in harmony with your outward actions.”
So, Bear and I be shit out of luck, then. Folding her arms in rank rebuttal to the Master’s words, Nemain seethed as he continued in a holier-than-thou voice. “In the contemplation of the sky, Kynareth’s domain, and the practice of the Voice, we strive to achieve this balance.”

“Ballocks.” She spat angrily. Where does he get off?! Saying after all those history lessons...all that jawing off about bloody Talos this and the Tongues at the Red Mountain doin’ that...

“- The whole barking concept of ‘True Need’ be a wanking mockery! Shall I flop over and die, then...when an Imperial comes at me with an axe and I be out of magickal reserves, helpless? Rather than use my Thu’um, to defend my life? Be that your fair and peaceful philosophy Arngeir? Does Kynareth in her floating haven even care, should I take a heaping shit whilst Shouting her precious Thu’um? Would she strike me doon with lightning bolts for saying so!?"

“Everything I’ve learned...all I now know - you say I shall not use it? What the fuck would I bloody learn it for, then?!?"

Feeling the rage in her rattle the very stones of High Hrothgar’s steps, Nemain forced herself to calm down. To breathe - inhale and exhale. In and out, until her heart ceased to pound out of her chest, receding back into her ribcage where it belonged.

Pressing her fingers deeply into her temples, the witch screwed up her mouth and glanced at the Greybeard, who was waiting patiently for her to get over her temperous snit. Cor, my temperament was never one of moderation, but after taking in those souls... Jutting out her chin, she managed to eke out the barest minimum of an apology.

“I am - ugh, terrible sorry for my anger...Master. I be still learning. And I seek to know why...why would we be given the chance to learn this skill, if not to use it below this mountain peak down in the real world? Where what we use it for might actually make a difference?”

Folding his arms within the wide bells of his sleeves, Arngeir shook his head gravely. “There is indeed much that we know that you do not. That does not mean that you are ready to understand it. Do not let your easy mastery of the Voice tempt you into the arrogance of power that has been the downfall of many Dragonborn before you.”

She hissed, tightening her fists around wads of robed cloth. “Arrogance?”

“Yes, arrogance. Arrogance and pride. To avoid them is a lesson my former pupil never could learn, for all his discipline. A lack of self control - regrettable, considering the high promise Ulfric once held to be the greatest Tongue in our age.”

Staring in disbelief, Nemain strove to connect the image Arngeir painted of Ulfric with the straight forward, cautiously thoughtful Bear that she knew. It hardly matched up, these conflicting paradigms. One of us must be wrong, then!

Allowing her arms to rest loosely by her side (as Arngeir had scolded her in the past week to maintain always, for it enabled the deepest breathing and awareness) Nemain shook her head in turn. “But I dinnae follow your Way, though I’ve tried to learn it well! I be a shaman, first and foremost! That be the bulk of my training as a mage - to heal and to harm. How can I live in a violent world without shedding blood in return?”
Bowing in what she hoped was meekness, she felt her braid slide over her shoulder and drag towards the ground. “Please tell me why, Master. What else must I do, to learn more of the Thu’um without offending? It be not my intent to heckle your traditions.” Much.

Peeking up, she thought she could see the wizened Nord look a tad mollified. “What you have already learned in a few days took even the most gifted of us years to achieve. The Dragonborn is an exception to all the rules — the Dragon Blood itself is a gift of the gods. If we accept one gift, how can we deny the other? As Dragonborn, you have received the ability to Shout directly from Akatosh. We therefore seek to guide you on the proper use of your gift, which transcends the restrictions which bind other mortals.”

Goody. So tis just Bear who be left out in the cold. Shunned for a youthful mistake. How nice. “Then...when might I be so fortunate to meet with your Grand Master, this Paarthurnax?”

The Reachwitch had no inordinate desire to clomp up any more of the godsforsaken mountain...to meet with what surely must be a wild-eyed Nord hermit, toothless and feral. Pissing off the summit and imagining his waters to be the golden raindrops of wisdom. But, if this Paarthurnax could teach her even further, well. She’d give it a solid go.

Arngeir’s mellow voice took on a hint of irritation. “As I have said, repeatedly...you will know you are ready when your Voice can open the path to him. Now, Dragonborn, let us recall the tale of our Founder, one Jurgen Windcaller. Listen carefully, as I will ask you to repeat back the tale as well as you are able. Ahem. The defeat of the Nord armies at Red Mountain in the First Era, year four hundred and sixteen inspired seven years of introspection and contemplation, leading—

Gods, the man does love to hear himself talk. I would too, should I be the only one around able to speak without blowing a hole in me own walls.

Listening with half an ear, Nemain licked her lips. Tasting ash, even as smoke continued to spiral from her nostrils. The Elder one had not been jesting when he had assured her of the usefulness of this particular Thu’um...Nemain was actually warm. Hot, even...the flames of Yol searing the back of her throat in a bid for freedom, even as she restrained the Shout yearning to break free.

She had learned it well. All three Words of Power, written by misted breath and flame upon rock, as was traditional. After proving to Arngeir, that first stultifying day of actual training, that she did indeed have the majority of the Dovahzul dictionary memorized (she’d have to remember to thank Bear later, when she could find where he had disappeared to. He had saved her absolute gobs of time) the Master had gifted her with the knowledge of Wuld Na Kest...Whirlwind Sprint. She had spent hours racing back and forth the empty corridors, shrieking with glee until Einarth had popped out his hoary head; that venomous glare effectively shutting her up.

Zun Haal Viik. Weapon-Hand-Defeat...the Disarm Shout certainly would come in handy, later.

And now, Yol Toor Shul. The sixth Thu’um she now knew and could wield with ease...thanks to the previous efforts of the Jarl of Eastmarch and one grueling week of study in the drafty corridors of High Hrothgar.

The burning, as the elderly one had spread his arms wide with incandescent light, had been eerily similar to the sight and sensation of absorbing a dovah soul. Inhaling as latent power rushed through her limbs, the witch had felt fairly drunk with it. Had felt indomitable - like she could take a flying leap from the tower in the courtyard and fly down to the valley, merely by flapping her arms. Like she could lift a massive boulder and fling it up the mountain... run laps around High Hrothgar until the moons rose high in the sky!
It had worn off, of course. The feeling and the fire, causing her to shiver on her hard rocky bed during the absolutely devastating nights spent alone. Tossing and turning on the polished stone, with only a few fur pelts for comfort...it often took her until the stars outside her window had shifted a quarter turn in the heavens before she drifted into slumber. And the mornings... the lofty monastery was so cold, she often awakened with frost riming her eyelashes and nose. Her very throat catching in the arid chill as she coughed and hacked and groaned...racing from the poor excuse for a bed to warm herself in the now all-too familiar grey robes. Provided for her use, as it seemed the Greybeards owned practically nothing else.

Certainly no underthings for women. She had looked...though upon later reflection she rather hoped not to find any such fripperies squirreled away in the old men’s drawers. Blech. *Hopefully this Yol Thu’um be useful for thawing meself out now in the mornings. Since Bear cannnae be found anywhere...drat that man. I swear he be avoiding me apurpose.*

*Not... she caught the errant thought, hogtied it and stowed it in the back of her mind, to be chewed upon later. Not that I want anything from the bastard fear thuaidh. Not anymore, after being sae shunned for near an entire week. What could he be doing all alone up here?*

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

One week. Seven days, eight nights, three new Shouts...yet she was quickly growing impatient with the ploddingly slow pace of life in the monastery of the Masters of the Voice.

The Reachwitch had promptly gotten the strong impression that the elderly Graybeards had not a clue what to do with a female in their midst. After being escorted to her new room (*immensely huge, with two stone beds and her very own stuffed bookshelf and flower planters!* ) they had let her be. Returning later only with a small plate of dried fish and waybread, some very fine wine that she had sipped slowly...and her own set of grey, dragonscale embroidered finery.

Trying them on that first night, she felt as though she were positively drowning. The robes were huge.

*Needle. Need a bone needle an’ thread. Surely the old bogies have summat of the kind round these parts? I shall need to hem these something fierce, unless the Dovahkiin is supposed to trail a good half-span of robe behind her at all times. Some tradition I’d be breaking, perhaps? Be this some sort of punitive measure, to make me trip and fall on me arse with every step?!? Gods.*

But the first real day of her tutelage…

She shuddered. It had gone just about as well as she had imagined. Ulfric had been a grim companion, speaking only when spoken to. Flaring into arguments with Arngeir nearly as soon as the Master opened his mouth to lecture Nemain upon what she had learned (hardly to his satisfaction) and what she had yet to learn about the Voice (everything, apparently). She did appreciate the Bear’s defense of her skills, though it soured a bit to realize that the clishmaclaver was more to the point of defending his teaching style. And not from any deeper desire to show off his star student.

And the old one would not budge either. She had sat for hours that first day with hardly a word in edgewise, listening to them debate about the return of the dragons in an increasingly fetid mood.
Ulfric insisted repeatedly that her being called as Dragonborn had something to do with their return, citing Helgen and the great black brute that may possibly have been the World Eater himself as solid proof, (note to self: look up Akatosh, First Born, Ragnarok. Better yet...ask Bear) a warp in the weave of fate that had saved them from a choppy end.

No...it had not been until the end of the first week that any true progress had been made aside from her own training in the Thu’um. Until answers long sought for were brought into the light.

She had watched sullenly as Bear (reappearing from wherever he popped off to, when not battling with the Greybeards) launched into yet another plea for more information. The man also wore his own set of dragonscale gray robes...the monk apparel merely highlighting the tension that wafted from him in a near visible cloud. Good luck boyo. I’ve been trying for days and have gotten bloody nowhere.

“...more and more rumors of these beasts by the day! Shor’s bones, Master...please tell me you know something more about this dragon scourge. Our people are dying down there!”

Arngeir had glanced towards Einarth and Borri; who nodded almost imperceptibly at their mouthpiece. Giving permission? Nay...seeking their agreement. Paarthurnax may be the Grand Master, but Arngeir be the neck that turns the head.

“Would it astonish you, Ulfric to find that these dragons are not being hatched, per say, but are in fact coming back to life?”

She and Ulfric had exchanged stunned glances at that point; their first real interaction since that (don’t think about it) night spent in the same bedroll during the blizzard. For the Jarl had been mewed up in his room nearly the entire time she had been dragged about in the courtyards and libraries. Meditating...undergoing the same strenuous breathing exercises Bear had put her through back in Windhelm. Though she was pained to even think it - he had been far easier on her than these silent Masters of the Voice. And not a word will ever grace my lips of it. Let him stew.

“Really.”

Preparing for verbal battle, Nemain began mentally picking holes in Arngeir’s theory. For it had to be mere conjecture at this point. Did the old goat go and check all the burial grounds himself? Has the Master even left High Hrothgar since his balls dropped?

“What makes you think so...Master?”

Ulfric had sneaked her a side-along glance at that delay in the honorific, even as Arngeir (who had grown accustomed to her defiance) merely sighed and waxed on. “Our last pupil since Ulfric chose to leave us was sent on his proving to recover a certain horn. The horn of Jurgen Windcaller.”

“...your great and right marvelous founder. I ken it, he be up there with Talos in your eyes - how do you know that Alduin has returned in truth?”

At the name ‘Alduin’, the three other Greybeards began humming in a resonant, increasingly loud pitch. Clapping her hands over her ears, Nemain followed Ulfric in shielding herself from the earthquaking roar of that single note.
The silence, when it was over, was deafening.

“...Do not say the World-Eater’s name so rashly, young Dovahkiin.” Arngeir sternly reprimanded her, as she shook her head at the tinny whine that remained at the outer edges of her hearing.

“For he will come, at long last, to swallow Nirm whole in the end of times. During Ragnarok, when he will swallow the world in flame. And when he does, we will cry out for all the fallen...rueing the day that those black wings unfurled. Whether that time is now or later, we cannot know. Only Father Akatosh does, as he wills it.”

“But that is not what you asked.”

“We know, because the disciple who retrieved the founder’s horn also found the body of the last remaining Blade...deep in the depths of the barrow of Ustengrav. He returned the horn and the diary of one Delphine - her last will and testament, both priceless relics - safely to our hands before expiring of his wounds.”

Trying to pop her ears to relieve the whining buzz, Nemain moved her jaw around in chomping motions, following Ulfric’s silent lead as the man also stretched his neck; making an audible click from the tension there. A wonder that neither of them had hearing loss at this point. “A blade? As in a weapon, or some sort of person?”

Arngeir pursed his lips in thought. Or perhaps it was gas...Nemain imagined it could have gone either way, for all the good this conversation was doing her. “The Blades were once the bodyguards to the Septim rulers of the Empire. Long before that task fell to them, they were once dragon hunters.”

Listening avidly, she could feel Ulfric twitch next to her as they listened to this strange explanation of events. “-replaced by the Penitus Oculatus as the Emperor’s bodyguards after the unfortunate incident during the Oblivion Crisis. And though the Blades still existed - unbound by Imperial policy and able to operate freely, this freedom proved to be their undoing. For they saw the threat that the Aldmeri Dominion posed to the Empire, yet grossly underestimated the forces that the Mer nation had arrayed against them.”

Gesturing with a sweep of robed sleeves, Arngeir’s penetrating gaze focused on both Jarl and Dragonborn equally. “Yes...the Blade’s pride in their numbers-” she imagined the Master’s eyes flicked more than once to Ulfric, “ - and skill at arms seems to have led to the utter destruction of their order. Formally disbanded by the White-Gold Concordat, this Delphine had been forced into hiding after multiple attempts upon her life. Only for it all to end as a body and a journal found in a draugr infested barrow. Truly a sad tale.”

“Yes...tis quite awful. But you were about to mention something about the dragons? And why they be wrecking everything to shite?”

Ulfric cleared his throat, causing her to suck furiously upon her inner cheek in a pique. She knew she was being impatient...but by all the Et’Ada, Arngeir could turn a byword into an epic poem. I’ll never hear the end of it unless I prod him along.

“Dragons?” She supplied hopefully.

Borri smiled reassuringly at her, even as Einarth deliberately looked away and Wulfgar snored - fast asleep despite the combative conversation. How envious she was of that rare ability to sleep
anywhere, at any time.

Arngeir sighed - a tired, worn sound. One that she was being treated to more and more often, since her arrival. “Not so hasty, Dragonborn. I am about to get to the crux of the issue. Drem - patience.”

“It seems this Delphine went and retrieved a stone tablet with detailed records thereon; listing the date and locations of every dragon burial mound in Skyrim. After some prospecting, the Blade proved her suspicions correct. For dragon mounds that had been left undisturbed for centuries now lay bare; villages burnt to ash and rumors abounding of winged lizards on the prowl.”

“The only one with such regenerative capabilities is the firstborn of Akatosh - the harbinger of the apocalypse. Al-Du-In!”

Cutting off his brother monks before they could intone that awful hummed note once again, Arngeir harrumphed before returning to lock his gaze upon Nemain. “I have no Words. No wisdom to offer you in this endeavor…to find the reason for this resurgence of dragons. Paarthurnax - wisest of us all would know. And it is to him I shall send you.”

She could have danced, for the joy of it. Finally...a meeting with the Grand Master! And less than a week left, before the return journey to Windhelm.

She thought longingly of little Aventus and Sophie. Of Iona - though she blocked out the bairn’s image with effort, replacing the child with her adopted son and daughter instead. *Dinnae yearn for what you may never have!* “When can I meet with Paarthurnax? I’m ready to learn the Clear Skies Shout! By Dibe I be ready for anything!”

Hearing the Bear cough next to her, she turned to see Arngeir chuckle merrily. *Shit.* That did not bode well. The severe old Nord never laughed, unless she was about to be put through something inordinately painful.

(Like that meditation; where she had been forced to cradle blocks of ice in both palms spread wide and out to the sides...gritting her teeth against the numbing freeze. Breathing as steadily as possible, until her hands shook with the effort.) That had lasted for eons; her hands still ached with the resulting chilblains if she thought overlong upon it.

“You have come now to the time of your Proving. We will call upon you, at sunset of the following day. Prepare yourself well, Dragonborn. For your mettle will be tested, and your quality assured by the breadth of your discipline and knowledge.”

Bowing until his cowl covered those sharp glass-grey eyes, Arngeir stood as the others stooped in turn. Bowing even as Ulfric and Nemain bowed; the mannerism by now second hand as this was the way they began and ended every meditation session. Every chant and meal and lesson began with an intonation of entreaty to the sky and a bow. She could not give greetings or farewells anymore without a slight dip of her head - a habit she looked forward to unlearning once they hit the road once more.

“Sky above, voice within. I will see you for lessons tomorrow, young lady. Sleep well while you can.”

Biting her lip, as Ulfric stood and disappeared before she could make him stay, to talk to her...Nemain uttered her own reply.

“Lok Thu’um.”
Shit. I have **got** to tail that Nord and make him tell me what the auld spider be preparing for me?!

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The following morning, Nemain found herself kneeling back in the cavernous entryway for her lessons. Unsuccessfully shielding her mouth of a great ripping yawn, as Master Arngeir lectured her upon the history of the Dovahkiin...her illustrious lineage. The sanctity of the event she was to undergo tonight, though the Nord was being curiously tight lipped about what exactly said event entailed.

By Hircine and Dibe, she hated the waiting. The goddamned waiting.

Jiggling her foot as Arngeir droned on about dragon priests, ancient tombs and the history of High Hrothgar, Nemain spied a grey hood peeking at her from a cavernous hallway. A thin gnarled hand emerged from said hall; beckoning her to come away as the Greybeard Borri smiled in encouragement.

**Finally!** As Arngeir continued the lengthy discourse as though to himself, Nemain watched avidly as Borri whispered the barest of breaths. *Fük-Lo-Sah!*

A cloudy form unfolded from the ground, a phantom of a robed figure that strode over to where the witch stood. Exchanging places with a hopskip, Nemain crept gladely over to where Borri stood, as she smothered her giggles. *Arngeir dinnae even notice! He surely does love the sound of his own voice.*

Racing down the hallway after the surprisingly fleet old codger, Nemain managed to keep her heaving gasps as silent as possible. Hearkening to Borri’s lifted finger of warning, both Greybeard and Dovahkiin snuck past the open hall where Wulfgar was reading upon a couch. Speeding up the pace only when they reached the door that led to the sparkling white courtyard...running with wild abandon into snowy freedom; hemmed in only by the light of sun, the mountainside and the brilliant blue bowl of sky.

“Whew! I thought he’d ne’er cease that prattle! You’ve right saved me again, Master Borri!”

Nemain blew a stray hair from her face, noting that the Greybeard hardly looked winded. Jerking his head towards the massive firepit that burned before the summit trail, she followed him gladly...heeding his example to cast a wide berth around the tower that Einarth usually claimed. She could hear nothing but the wind...but it paid to be cautious.

She had merrily sang ‘The Age of Aggression’ one day, turning in circles in the courtyard out of a maddened desire to hear sound...any sound, really, other than her own breathing and Arngeir’s supercilious tones. Only to be blown over by a Shout from above.

It was Einarth on his tower who had thrown her, head over heels into a snowbank. And with just a whisper of *Fus!* Glaring at her as she rubbed her sore rump; the old groucher had pointed at her throat
with a cutting motion...ensuring his warning had been received.

Right. Fine! No songs to distract ye olde Masters from their naptime up on the tall towers. Got it.

The third night of her incarceration (whoops, training!) Nemain had employed every ounce of sneakiness she possessed, in order to glide around the echoing halls of the monastery unseen. Most of the Greybeards seemed to meditate long into the night; maintaining that terribly uncomfortable kneeling pose for hours on end. Breaking only in the early morn to sleep and break their fast. To start all over again with their daily routines. Fixed and unchanging as the stars. Borri proved to be an exception, for he could be found lurking about in the oddest places. And Wulfgar...

It was during that first foray into the Master’s hallway, more out of curiosity than anything else that she had discovered a side room filled to the brim with oaken barrels, stoppered and labeled according to the year. Tapping timidly upon the giant vessels, she heard liquid sloshing within. The tangy rich scent was unmistakable. Someone here absolutely adores hitting the ol’ bottle.

Nemain felt her cheeks spread in a fond grin. The auld drunkard. Wulfgar moved through High Hrothgar as though in a constant state of a skooma dream; eyes half lidded with a secret smile on his face. She had outright pondered whether or not he was, in fact, smoking something during their first training session where the man had written upon a slate with charcoal...urging her to ‘feel the life all around her.’

What life? Staring about her at the bleak courtyard covered in freshly fallen snow, surrounded by nothing but rock and the ever-present moan of the wind, Nemain had felt her eyebrows crawl practically into her hairline. Whatever this man be on, I want some.

His secret? Snowberry wine.

Wulfgar at least made no bones about his addiction to spirits; often causing the assembled men (and woman) to either groan or exclaim in joy every night as he brought out some new vintage for them to sample. Ulfric was truly missing out, for the Jarl of Eastmarch took all meals alone somewhere in the expansive towers. Never joining them for a glass of Skingrad burgundy, Argonian Bloodwine, or Surilie white...his loss.

By Hircine’s curved horns, she thought in the dazed grip of a wine that was perfectly balanced on the cusp of sweet and tart; this monastery was a boozy sot’s dream castle.

But no jazbay grape or more garden variety of fruit seemed to enthrall Wulfgar more than the humble snowberry. She had found him the following morning, moving at a sedate pace amongst the snowberry bushes outside the living quarters. Snipping away with shears, examining each bright red berry for blemishes before storing it in his basket. Squeezing each branch gently, to test the strength of the skins and the wood.

Eschewing Arngeir’s invitations to meditate with him in the dark dismal entryway of the hall (staring at the fire burning in the urns until her eyes were positively dodgy with worbly fire-shadows, no thank you) Nemain chose instead to haunt Wulfgar’s steps every morning.

Picking berries, learning to cook jammy preserves and bottle wine was a pleasant way to start each day after their joined meditation. They would often break their fast with leathery waybread spread liberally with pulpy red jams, Nemain relaxing enough to speak at length to the sleepy, ever-smiling Graybeard.

About peaceful things, mostly...the way mist curled in whorling shapes and spirals about the peaks of Deepwood Redoubt. The tart taste of juniper berries, and how they would compare to the red fruits
they labored over. Whether or not it would snow again, or if the sun would shine in glorious brilliance over High Hrothgar...prompting a sun-bathing session away from the dreaded heavy robes. She loved those days.

But after a few hours of talking at Wulfgar, as he breathed through his mouth and smiled laxedly, Nemain grew restless. It was then that she took herself off to either Arngeir or Borri for active teaching. For lessons in fine tuned control and direction of her Thu’um. *Breath and Focus.*

-which made her heartily regret ever giving Ulfric shit about the harshness of his teachings. All that had been done on the roof of the Palace of Kings, even that bone-chilling dip into the bay of the Sea of Ghosts had been nothing. *Nothing* compared to the rigorous instruction of the Masters of the Voice.

Hours upon hours of sitting. Breathing. Holding her breath; as Arngeir and Borri supervised as she stuck her head into a tub of chilly water...holding her breath in an agony, as she felt her lungs seize and fight. Stillness and silence and stone. Before learning Yol Toor Shul, Nemain had been absolutely certain she would end up as just another icicle decorating the courtyard. A statue frozen solid; death embalmed in cold.

*Here lieth Nemain. A witch who offed herself by a-breathing too much.* The lack of activity was enough to drive a woman insane.

Every monk, she came to see, dealt with their mute solitude in different ways. Einarth was reserved and unfriendly, often spending vast amounts of time bent in meditation upon the high tower of the courtyard. He did not attend her lessons, and she rarely saw the man outside of mealtimes. Arngeir...though he was the only talkative one of the Four, she could bear his condescending company only in small stretches. Nemain much preferred to spend her time with either Borri or Wulfgar.

Borri (gods bless him) delighted in practical jokes. She wasn’t sure what she had seen, that first night when Borri had slid out a robed leg to trip Wulfgar on the way to the dining table. She had blinked in disbelief; watching as the thinnest of the Masters hid Einarth’s drinking horn and sat - guile free and blank, while the severe Graybeard looked for his cup with increasing agitation. All accomplished by sleight of Borri’s quavering wrinkled hand.

“So, what be all that about?” She had asked the Greybeard upon finding him the following day. “Doona lie...I saw it all.”

Arching an eyebrow at her inquiry, Borri had dragged his charcoal and slate towards him to write a response. It took him a few minutes, but she waited patiently (that was one good thing that had come of all this, she was far more patient after counting seven thousand inhales and exhales) as the rough charcoal scratched the silent Tongue’s thoughts into being.

Handing the slate to her with a flourish, Nemain read his tidy script in growing mirth.

*I am the youngest Greybeard in residence. Someone has to give Arngeir migraines once in a full moon. It is my calling - to bother the resident drunk and grump and know-it-all. Only so many hours*
Snickering, she erased his slate for him. Returning it, she patted her throat as Borri’s eyes took in her throat scar with a calculating appraisal. “I think I be aware of your meaning. Though I be glad to have made it here, to meet you and your brethren. This has been...an unexpected experience, to say the least.”

The Greybeard began writing again, a smile tugging at the withered lips beneath his plain, unadorned beard. Cocking her head, she read as he wrote, sighing as she leaned back after he was through.

A pleasure to meet you, young lady. Having a Dovahkiin in High Hrothgar - a woman - has caused such fits amongst my brethren. But I am enjoying the novelty while it lasts. Thank you for bringing Ulfric back with you. I have missed the lad.

“I can’t imagine why. Have you seen where he keeps himself? I’ve been looking when be not put to task, but...” Chewing her lip, she ducked her head as Borri fixed her with a thoughtful gaze. “I think...could Bear be avoiding me?”

Scratch scratch. A pause, as she read. You call him ‘Bear’. Why?

“Because. He’s...well. He’s Bear. Grr, argh. All that and more. It fits him better than his other moniker.” Nemain cleared her throat, narrowing her eyes as Borri smiled mischievously. “What?”

The pause while Borri wrote was longer this time.

I have read all about the lad and his exploits since he left 26 years ago. I know about Markarth and the Great War and Torygg. But I was unaware that he had made such a lovely friend. An unlikely ally in you.

“Oh, you be quite wrong. We hardly be friends, much less allies. Bear and I be bound by truce, to see my training in the Thu’um through to its end. Most likely we be parting ways after returning to Windhelm. Then...then...”

Staring at the stones beneath her feet, Nemain shuffled her feet in her boots. What then? Could she really take the heart of the Bear of Markarth?

You ripped out Galan’s heart at his bequest and it nearly killed you to do it. This should be a far simpler task.

The scrape of Borri’s charcoal stick was quick and decisive. I have known Ulfric since he was but a thumbsucking boy, crying at night for his Da and dog. The path he has chosen is a lonely one...far more arduous than if he had stayed here. He needs a friend. You.

She shook her head. “Whatever we have that lies between us, tis not friendship.”

Oh my. Then Einarth was right. Is my boy dipping his wick in your candle?

“Ugh!” She shoved Borri and his slate away, even as he opened his lips in a silent laugh. “That be a horrid term. Congratulations...you’ve thoroughly banjaxed the notion. Not that I was thinking it! Cor. Some pervy hermit you turned out to be.”
Scratch. Your strange turns of phrase are endearing! How about this...splitting his beard?

“Even worse. He doesnae have a beard anymore.”

Squeezing her head in her hands, she listened in abject suffering as Borri happily wrote out what appeared to be a goddamned list. Taking it with reservation, she scanned the slate as her cheeks darkened to what was surely the deepest scarlet.

Fadoodling. To join paunches. Pogue the hone. Playing at tops and bottoms. Bit of red and plum. Give the hard to the soft. Greasing the cheeks. Blowing the war horn. In the service of Dibella. Shooting twixt wind and water. Laboring over leather-

“Oh my gods, enough.” Hastily wiping his slate with her sleeve before anyone could see the scandalous paragraph, Nemain shook her head crossly at Borri. Who was shaking with laughter, the right buffoon. “I don’t think you truly be a Master, after all. There be a teenage boy somewhere inside those robes, pasted with a false beard!”

Seizing the slate away from her grasping fingers, Borri’s smile turned sad as he scribed his response. Turning it so that she could read seated next to him, she felt herself grow solemn as her eyes scanned his words.

I was married once. In Riften. Most of us had lives before coming up to study here, you know. My wife was killed in a robbery gone wrong. After - I found fishing and farming hollow and meaningless. Seeking light and knowledge brought me here, where I have remained ever since.

Wulfgar hardly speaks, but I think he begged as a child...he will eat dirt if you served it up to him on a dish. Einarth bears a similar scar to yours - the mark of the noose. He has never revealed why. And Master Arngeir your nemesis had quite the temper - much like your Bear. We all have come to High Hrothgar for our own reasons, Nemain.

-’My’ Bear? “I’m so sorry for your loss. That makes...sense.”

Reaching out to grasp his gnarled hand, she felt him pat hers in compassion. Drawing in a deep breath, Nemain felt her brow knit in thought.

Whatever she and Ulfric were to one another...at the very least, they were teacher and student. Sexually frustrated ships passing in the night. Travel companions, opponents in an eternally unsolved debate...acquaintances - no.

By the darkness that eats all things, I be lying even to meself.

Gods take her for a fool. They were friends.

“Can you show me where Bear be hiding out? I need to speak with him. Ask him something.”

Nodding vigorously, Borri raised her up to a standing position as she wiped off the charcoal residue from holding his slate. Secreting his writing materials somewhere in the voluminous folds of his
robes, Borri took two steps...then turned to wait patiently as she shook out the length of her own garb.

Fixing the Greybeard with a warning look, she lifted a finger. “I’m not seeing Bear to tup him, mind...or flog hogs, or any of those other cranked terms what you’ve stored up over your confinement here. Honestly, were you saving those for a rainy day or what?”

Borri pretended to think about it, then nodded again with a wide face splitting grin that made her laugh, despite herself.

“Figures. You’re all gobbers, you monks are. Lead on.”

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

There was grey in his beard.

Meditating in the upper divided hallways of High Hrothgar, Ulfric Stormcloak bowed his head within the grey hooded robes. And tried to push the thought of that single, silvery strand far out from the inner recesses of his mind.

He released his exhale slowly...second by second. Every wisp of breath chilled into fog that bore secrets shaped by the thoughts in his mind. Revealing, entreating him with their mysteries...the breath and the focus therein. Pushing aside thoughts of military strategy and useless worry over the war effort in favor of memory; fresh and stale. Chafing the peace he sought...ruining the serenity of his meditations.

He was running out of time.

Su’um ahrk morah. Stone flagged floor squares pushed into the very bones of his bent legs. Digging into his knees...unrelentingly firm. Immovable. Hard.

Just like Master Arngeir.

The old man had not been pleased to see Ulfric. He rather thought it might have been Borri who had sent the missive inviting him and the Dovahkiin to come, after all. Master Borri, whose dark beard and kindly eyes had gone grey and creased with the twenty six (had it really been that long?) some odd years of absence. The last time he had seen Borri, the man had been speaking in single word rumbles; laughing at a joke the younger Ulfric had told him. Something about icicles and snowberries.

A ribald jest, most likely. His teenage years had been suffocating, all mewed up in the solitude of the monastery. A small wonder he even possessed a libido, thanks to the near-constant ice baths he had been forced into; every gods damned time Arngeir or the others had caught him with his hands in his smalls. Switching him with a peeled branch when he grew too large to be forced into the bath, which had worked only for a very short while. Yet he returned - like a dog to its vomit, Arngeir’s voice harshly remanded him, even now...unable to quench the fire that burned hot inside him. Roaring inside at the walls of High Hrothgar; the sanctuary that had become a barred cage he sought to
escape.

A Greybeard is above such material desire. Concentrate harder. Use your Voice...your hands in worship of Kyne and Shor. Not in the slaking of your mortal lusts. Focus.

Only Borri, his kindly face ever laughing with good humor and patience, had indulged the frustrated young man he had been with games and distractions. Borri had challenged him to footraces around the hallways. Had spent time climbing with him upon the exposed cliffs, to gain a better view of Skyrim. And how beautiful their homeland was, spilled out more fulsome and colorful than any map below them both as they rested upon the mount of the Throat of the World. Gazing in awe at a world he was told he would never see.

Borri had been one of the few lights that had shone brightly in his youth. Ulfric was grateful to see him in his dotage, body hale and that wide smile well preserved.

His mind pinged away from the unpleasant memory of the down and out argument he had indulged in with Arngeir, that first night after the Forsworn witch had collapsed onto her stone bed. Everything from Nemain’s complete unsuitability as Dragonborn (not his fault) to Ulfric’s futile warmongering (again, not his war, though by Tsun’s hammer he’d damn well finish the fight) had come up, resulting in a brittle tension between the Master and his former pupil.

The days after had proven to be every bit as difficult as he had feared. Every interaction had become ossified; Arngeir unyielding. Ulfric unwilling to bend an inch on his views. It stung that the man he had once viewed to be more a true father than Old Hoag still held him in such ill regard.

But perhaps, Ulfric thought resignedly, you deserve this shunning. You left him. You left them all. Nothing but a letter and a map, announcing your grand plans to become a warrior as great as Ysgramor. To come back when the war was won...like some sort of fucking hero. Look at you now.

Einarth had imparted a mere nod and shrug, when asked later how he he fared. Ulfric expected little else - the most reclusive of the Greybeards had wandered off after meeting Nemain to meditate. Most likely in the courtyard...that one spot near the edge of the cliff that the Tongue haunted like a spirit. With that spectacular view…

Einarth never let Ulfric practice there as a boy. No matter how much he pleaded or cajoled. Perhaps now that he had brought them their precious Dragonborn, he thought irritably, they would let him take in the expanse below. He could go up on the tower that had so enthralled him as a boy, to practice Shouting - to blow the wind every which way, bringing raindrops to fall from the sky, or snow. Or maybe just to goddamn take the jump and put myself out of this misery.

Wulfgar had been slightly more friendly. Though the Greybeards did use the mist formed runes blown by the breath, it was far more economic (and timely) to use grey slabs of charcoal to write upon boards of slate. The Jarl of Eastmarch had carried out an entire, laborious conversation with Wulfgar in this way; inquiring after the Elder’s snowberry wine stock. Relating the most recent news from down below, what had happened that was of note (which was practically everything, as the Masters of the Voice rarely received news or missives of any sort). Wulfgar and Ulfric had parted the first night on friendly terms.

It was now the eighth day of their visit to High Hrothgar. Eight days, three new Shouts for Nemain, eleven different arguments consisting of the same tired old refrain with Arngeir. And three pranks played by Borri. He was still picking sand from his teeth, thanks to the generous dusting his puckish mentor had laid over that morning’s delivery of gruel.
The Jarl of Eastmarch sighed as he finished the last of six thousand and seven hundred inhale and exhale chains. With only three hundred more to go, he was on a roll. And he could feel it - he was just now becoming one with the bone deep silence of High Hrothgar. His consciousness attuning with the mountain, the *Monahven*. He sighed gratefully at the emptiness this peace brought.

Stillness one could almost hear; like the blood rushing through one's own ears. A seashell in reverse. A roaring sound.

*Wait.* He flinched, hearing a roar in truth.

*Gods take that woman and boil her in oil.* “Ohh, there once was a hero named Ragnar the Red! Who came ridin’ to Whiterun from ole’ Roriksteeaaaad!”

*Oh no.* Grimacing at the eruption of the Breton’s raspy, velvet voice (like honey dripping over a grindstone) Ulfric broke his trance, to cover his ears with wadded up robe fisted in his hands.

“-Aaand the braggart did swagger an’ brandish his blade, as he told of bold battles an’ gold he had maaaade!”

Her head popped out from the window; the only entrance to what had been his sanctuary within the halls. Someone had ratted him out, he thought as he gathered himself to stand upright. *Borri you bastard. You knew I wanted to be left alone.*

Other bits of Nemain appeared, piece by piece - the sly foxface followed by the dumpy grey robe...bunching about her slim form like a shroud. Doing her absolutely no favors, he thought as she nearly fell through the window. *That robe makes her look like an old marm.*

His fingers fairly itched to yank it off.

The darkly coiled braid slid from inside her hood, dangling around her waist as she struck a pose. Ignoring the heated glare he pointedly greeted her with, as she belted out the next verse with gusto.

“But then he went quiet, did Ragnar the Red. When he met the shield-maiden Matilda who said…”

“...Oh, you talk and you lie and you drink all our mead; now I think it’s high time that you lie doon an’ bleeeed!”

He folded his arms, feeling the weight of the sleeves sag down against his elbows. “Shouldn’t you be off somewhere, studying your Thu’um?”

Those lamplike grey eyes blinked up at him, as she pursed her lips. “Bo-ring. What High Hrothgar needs is a good tavern and a bard to entertain with drinking songs. Liven the place up a bit from the doldrums. Wulfgar would be fair beside himself! Even if the old blighter cannae sing...well, he could dance. Borri, too. The others be too stuffed silly with honor to let down their beards. Ahem...verse two. You may applaud afterwards.”

Continuing to sing full tilt, the tiny witch pursued as he stalked off down the hallway towards the table he had made a temporary study desk. *Wine, dried apples...damn. Need to grab more fish from*
the kitchen stores. He had forgotten just how dry and unchanging the meals were here in the monastery.

Sitting down with a silent oath, Ulfric poured himself some wine as Nemain traipsed not far behind. Dancing like an addict soaring away on a skooma high. Perish the thought. Nemain and skooma...never may the twain meet. Ugh.

“...An’ so then came a’clashing an’ slashing o’ steel, as the brave lass Matilda charged in, full of zeal! And the braggart named Ragnar was boastful no mooore, when his ugly red heid rolled aroond on the floooor!”

Arngeir had been right on one account, he forlornly reflected as Nemain flopped to the floor beside him. Women were a terrible distraction.

He hadn’t believed it, back then. When he was young and just beginning to change into a man. Sprouting hair in places that had sent him running to Borri, screaming that he was growing fungus beneath his arms, gods save him. The laughing Greybeard had explained, through short rumbling words and the charcoal-slate combination, about the change all boys endured when growing into their manhood.

And Ulfric had gone through all of it - every wretched moment of it in near silence as he aged. His voice had gone high and shrill, deviating into a bass growl when he least expected it. He had devoured his meals; no amount of victuals ever truly satisfying his appetite as he gained three stone in muscle and two inches of height in his fourteenth year.

And sex - fuck. Finding creative ways to be alone, to masturbate in the semi-privacy of his room had been a mindscrew. Ulfric laughed to himself even now, reflecting on the convoluted resentment of his teen mind. Desperately trying to picture what a woman looked like; having only the faintest imaginings gathered from blurred memories of Windhelm and the contraband novel ‘The Lusty Argonian Maid’ Borri had snuck him. Which was much lighter reading, but far less descriptive than the medical texts in High Hrothgar’s library had been.

Women - real women - were a bundle of contradictions.

Like Nemain...made up of parts hard and soft. Sweet and melting one moment, then fighting like a cornered sabrecat without warning the next. Their minds were a labyrinthian mystery; one that he normally enjoyed puzzling out. But when it concerned the Reachwitch…

Ulfric sighed to himself as Nemain poked about his room. Touching his books carefully stacked upon the shelves. Gazing at the paintings and statuary that graced the walls of his childhood domain, occasionally shooting him a backwards glance as he busied himself by studying the map spread out and pinned with camp locations and forts.

Galmar surely was overwhelmed, by now...keeping the ponderous machinery that was the Stormcloak army fed, on the move and defended. Upon his return, he’d be assaulted by an absolute barrage of paperwork and reports from all twelve outposts, he just knew it. Twirling a quill between his fingers, Ulfric tapped the feathery end upon his chin.

Too much to do, and not nearly enough time or manpower to accomplish what he wanted done.

As far as the Dragonborn went...he knew. He would get nowhere with her. Not until she was honest with herself, as well as with him. Which was as likely as finding a notice of surrender, hand
Focus on what you control; not on what is out of reach.

Her tiny hand poked one of the forts in the western wilds near Solitude. “Be that a Stormcloak camp? Cor...that be closer than I thought. You think Galmar and his minions will be fair flustered until your return, aye?”

“I cannot be away longer than two more weeks. At most, three. Galmar has shouldered my burdens for too long...even a single unplanned battle could steal back important territory.”

She politely nodded. “Hmph.”

Fixedly looking anywhere but at the woman, Ulfric began writing out a third copy of the letter he had scribed. Dipping the nib of his quill in the inkpot, he ran his tongue over his teeth as he thought about what else to add to the missive. There was the idea of listing possible advance points into enemy lines that he could divvy up between his commanders, to be utilized at their will. Ulfric still had to manage which camps should receive fresh supplies and men, and which would be grouped into reconnaissance. To be split apart, scouting ahead in Hjaalmarch and the Reach for well hidden sites to make camp and exchange raw intel for updated orders.

An army marched on its stomach. Maintaining open lines of supply could spell life or death for the Stormcloaks under his wing. He could not condone sending men and women off to starve and die; when their efforts would be better spent pushing back the Imperial soldiers from their tax collecting rounds. It had been a hard winter, and doubtless the Legion would be feeling the pinch.

He remembered the bread that had been sent his first winter as a soldier...it had been moldy. Packed with weevils and squirming maggots. More black and lumpy than anything breadlike should have been. He had eaten it, with disgust, but he had forced it down...lubricated well with sour ale. His fellow private Rikke had whispered in confidence that they had been lucky to receive such fare, for the war had caused a dearth of farmers. All available hands had been pressed into service. And with no one but the dwindling women and children left behind to harvest crops...famine had been rampant. They had been lucky to be fed at all.

Tapping the quill in repetitive pats against his cheek, Ulfric turned from thoughts of the food supply towards plans to mount an offensive strike. Small fists of Stormcloaks, that could slice incisively inward at the weakest spots in the Imperial defense. Then vanish without a trace into the trackless wilds of Skyrim, faster than the Legion could follow. Where to begin...

“We are friends, are we not?”

He had nearly forgotten Nemain. Friends? “Perhaps in the barest stretch of the word.”

She tilted her head into his line of vision, blocking his view of his letter as he hastily pulled it away from the braid, dragging across his desk. Hopefully the ink had not smeared. He would have to rewrite the entire damn thing. “What, you doona think we be friends?”
Controlling his annoyance at her interruption, Ulfric looked into her pale gray eyes, rimmed in thick dark lashes. Her face was unusually sober as she stared right back at him.

A grain of sand ground against his molars as he swallowed. Damn that Borri. “Sure. Why not.”

“If we are, fear thuaidh, then you be a shitty friend.”

Laughing at the affronted look on his face, Nemain hastened to explain.

“Look, Milord…”

“You know I dislike it when you call me that.”

“…that be why I do it. Ulfric, have you had any friends other than teachers or soldiers in your entire life? Hmm?” She made an inquisitive noise, the wheedling tone lifting into a question mark he could nearly pluck from the air.

He set his mouth in a stubborn line. “I don’t see how that pertains to-”

“Aye, it matters. Y’see, Bear…” Leaning over his lap, Nemain casually stole a handful of his dried apple slices. Crunching them jauntily, she jumped up on the stone table, swinging her legs to and fro as he pushed away books and papers with an aggrieved huff. “Back in the Redoubt, I was never alone. There be always someone hovering round me, teaching or leading meself and the other younglings in chores. Och, and the children! I wish I couldae be rid of them sometimes.”

“You tended children in the Reach?”

She rolled her eyes, taking a swig from his wine as he cleared his throat in irritation. “All children watched out for one another, as we in turn were watched by all the coven members what were not occupied with other things. Doon look at me like that. Friends share.”

Swirling his cup of wine idly in hand, Nemain continued speaking. Almost absently, as though it was of a matter of little import. “I was never alone. Truly, not even in Markarth was I left to be...the Forsworn who worked the mines and smelters and lived in the Warrens needed my aid near as much as any village in the crags.”

Leaning back, Ulfric placed the quill in its stand and folded his arms. Time to test the waters.

“Was Galan your friend?”

The witch smiled sadly. Placing the wine cup down, he felt a faint stirring of surprise as she turned to face him, her legs kicking like a child. “My very best friend. We did near everything together. Exploring caves, climbing to hunt for eggs...he was my staunchest protector and greatest confidante.”

She toyed with an apple slice, pushing it around the plate as he kept his gaze upon her shifting expressions. The delicate cheekbones gradually taking on a heated flush, as she turned away from him. “And...it was to him I lost my virginity, on one spring Beltane night.”

Huh. He quirked a brow. “Wasn’t that strange? I mean…” Ulfric backpedaled, as the witch threw him a stony frown. “I have friends that I can't say I would ever...be intimate with. Ever.”

“Och, aye? Like Galmar? Bleurgh!” She grinned mischievously. “And just how many friends do you have that be young fertile womenfolk, hmm Bear?”

She cackled as he felt his own face redden at the topic. “Thought so. See, this be what the issue is,
right here with this damn monastery. It be terribly hard to be only friends, you ken? Such as we’ve been dancing around. Can ye deny it?”

He shook his head slowly. “I can’t.”

Completely absorbed by the turn their conversation had taken, he allowed himself to soak in the beauty of her grey eyes. Aware that she looked to be pondering something more distant than him, as she wet her lips. Hesitating even as she slowly spoke.

“Tis the way the gods made us, Ulfric. Nothing wrong with that. Men and women be bound to come together...like thunder and lightning. Nought can rip that apart. I know, the Greybeards be contemplating the skies, etcetera, seeking holiness in such ways...but nothing, mark me, be more natural or right that man and woman joined flesh to flesh.”

“That's...an interesting perspective.”

“It be only truth! What greater love for life can a man and woman give, but the gift of one another? Their bodies, to create more life? That be holy. Not this...queer isolation the Masters keep to. I bet it fair drives them mad.”

You have no idea. “It drove me off, to fight. Though I find myself regretting the decision at times.”

“Hmm.” Nemain tilted her head towards him, a smile reappearing like the sun from behind a cloud. She had a dimple, he noticed. How had he never noticed before? Right there....upon her right cheek.

“Lonely, were we? Poor friendless fear thuaidh.”

“You can't imagine...or maybe you can, after spending a week here with them.”

Ulfric sighed. “If not the war, I would have left to do something else. Too restless, Arngeir always said of me, when I botched yet another meditation. Or fucked up the Words of yet another chant. I could have stayed, but then - I would have never known what it was like, down there. In the Skyrim I had only read about in books.”

He felt a strangely sheepish smile tug at the corners of his lips. “So yes. I suppose you could say I was lonely.”

“Or lusty, most like.”

Looking at her impassively, they shared a challenging stare. Until he pushed her off of the table with one solid shove, whereupon the witch landed on the stone floor with a leaden thump. “Oy!”

“Oy yourself. While you were off knocking boots with your ‘friend’ Galan, I...I was.”

-Swallowing, he closed his eyes as the words stuck in his craw.

Couldn’t. Would not...never would say the words aloud. What had been done was done! He would not dwell upon a past he could not help, any more than...than she could remove the scar that traced the stem of her neck. Scars existed for reasons better left unsaid.

He inhaled erratically, eyes still shut tight as thin, spindly arms stretched to ensnare him from behind.
“I’ll teach ye about this friendship business, seeing as how you’ve never had a real chum before.”

Her lips brushed the shell of his ear, and he felt himself tighten in response. Rigidly on edge, even as the woman hugged him gently; for once no ulterior motives apparent in the softness of her voice. The motions of her hands, pulling him tighter in a sisterly embrace.

“Friends can trust one another to keep secrets. Even…” She exhaled with a rough chuckle that was nearly a sob. Her breath smelt like apples and wine. “Even the truly bad ones. The ones we be wishing didnae exist, even to ourselves.”

“Come.” Tapping his cheek, she pulled at his arm. “I have until sunset before this great muckety-muck with the Proving occurs. Though to be fair honest, I haven’t a clue of what will be happening. Something cold, no doubt.”

Opening his eyes, he watched her carefully as she continued tugging at his hand. A playful smile hovered around her lips, even as her face remained solemn. “Friends share, remember? You can tell me all about this wicketty test they be putting me through. And in turn, I’ll help ye sneak into Wulfgar’s stores for a bottle of 150. Very good year.”

Considering the feel of her fingers, as they tightened around his own...Ulfric allowed himself to indulge in the chance that something would come of this. To see what the woman was up to. Where she would take him, with all this talk of friendship that had to conceal some other, more nefarious purpose.

Whatever it was, he would find it out. “Do you think there is any honeycomb left?”

Her eyebrows lifted almost comically. “Och! I almost forgot...the bear does need his sweets. Come on. I’m sure we can find something for you. Fish and bread are boring, day in and day out. Honestly, you should come with me in the mornings and eat snowberry jam with Wulfgar. He doesnae talk much, but I find that-”

Listening as her words washed over him in a soothing fall of syllables, Ulfric felt a faint tug of...something come alive inside him. Brightening as she continued holding his hand in hers, as they descended out of the window, creeping like naughty children past a snoring Wulfgar; all the way down the silent corridors to where the larders lay.

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Some time later, Ulfric and Nemain lazed in the quiet dark of the wine cellar sampling various ales and wines. Their mouths were now completely smeared in snowberry jam and honeycomb from their plundered snacks. Sticking his tongue to the roof of his mouth even as the world slanted pleasantly to the side, a haze of warm relaxation stealing over him as they sat together.

They were sharing a bottle of something dark and fruity. Skingrad Surilie Wines: Finest Vineyards in Colovia , the label read, rough beneath his thumb as he smoothed the torn edge back down against the glass bottle. The weight of her small form was pressed alongside his hips and legs, wedged in as they were between two massive oaken barrels. Comforting, even as it bothered him...to be so close.

Why am I here again? Taking a swig of red, he coughed, handing it back to his drinking companion.
“It’s good, isn’t it? Wulfgar has this obsession with snowberry that I dinnae understand. Though to be sure, tis much better than jazbay, am I right? But you remember. Damn, I did that to meself. How was I t’know that jazbay gives ye the runs sae bad? Oooh! Never again, hahah! Am I talking too much? Hah, who cares...not I! I havenae talked for such a stretch in weeks!”

Ulfric was watching her mouth move as she continued chattering away in that rollicking brogue, pondering how the woman’s tongue would taste after eating jam when suddenly, the wine cellar door slammed open.

Arngeir appeared like a towering monolith of grey; the very wrath of Shor himself as Nemain squealed in mock fright. Pulling at him in sharp, short jabs, forcing him to stand on wobbling feet.

“Hurry, fear thuaidh...away! Run run run! Haha ha! Quick afore he catches us!”

“Dragonborn! Where have you been? You must finish your meditations, in preparation for tonight. What are you - Nemain! Young lady!”

Practically falling all over each other, he felt her suddenly grip his arms from behind. “Hold tight! I’ll save us! Wuld-Nah-Kest!”

The hallway blurred in a sudden burst of speed, as all the spirits and victuals he had eaten suddenly prodded the lining of his esophagus. Hearing Nemain giggle, he tore himself away to fall against the wall, valiantly holding onto the contents of his stomach...leaning over in a drunken stupor as the Dragonborn continued snorting at his expense.

“Woohoo! Och, did you see!? Did ya see his stunnered face! Hahah hah! I would do that again in a heartbeat, I would! Wait...Bear. Doona throw up! No - all that luverly food an’ wine! Think solid thoughts!”

“Ughh...if I do, it will be all over you! What...what did you - urpghthf.”

Barely making it to an urn, Ulfric began heaving up everything he had eaten that day, as Nemain’s hands fluttered like butterflies around his back. Hesitantly touching him, even as her high voice trilled in consternation.

“Ack, I’m sorry! So very sorry! Oh no! Haha hah...it. Oh, it was the Whirlwind Shout. Didnae know it would affect you sae bad, Bear. The bigger you be, the harder you get scuttered when chuggin’ I suppose!”

Holding tightly to the lip of the urn, Ulfric panted harshly. “I...hate...you.”

“Awww! I hate you too. Thank Kyne’s britches an’ braids that you managed to miss your robes. Come on...let’s get you all cleaned up. Friends doona let friends drown in their sick. Come up!”

As the tiny witch butted her head up beneath his armpit, forcing him to stand, she added merrily, “An you can tell me all aboot my Proving tonight. What’s to come - any tips or tricks that might help, yeah?”

“It’s not what you think.”
“...That be it? That’s your grand help for all the kindness I’ve bestowed upon ye? Buttering ye up with honey and fine drinks? That be unfriendly, Bear. I’ll be dosing you with a bottle of 125 apple cider next time.”

If he had his way, there would be no next time. He grunted, as she plopped him onto one of the stone couches of the library, her triangular face anxious as he struggled to keep what bile remained to him safely ensconced in his stomach. Chancing a look down the hallway, Ulfric could see no other Greybeards about. Arngeir must have taken off in a huff.

*It will go worse for her later if he is in a mood.* “...Should have known you had ulterior motives, Forsworn.”

“To get you bogging drunk, y’mean. Aye, and myself with ye. That’s what friends do.”

He accepted the dry linen cloth with a dazed nod, as Nemain spun away...landing on her arse with a hoot. “Think I’m fair flummered as well. Shite. Well...nothing for it. Time for naps.”

Barely managing to sponge off his face, he nearly jerked off the seat in surprise as the Reachwoman crawled onto his lap. Laying her head on his thigh, Nemain emitted an obscenely massive yawn. He could see every molar and freckle, this close. The rope-burned scar around her neck was a rough necklace that ringed the smoother, paler skin of her exposed throat...remaining unscarred everywhere else. Skin that looked like it had been poured from cream into flesh. His hand twitched, even as he forced himself to make no move. To betray nothing, as the witch wriggled in his lap.

Yanking her braid out from under her head, she turned on her side and snuggled even closer. Grabbing his robes in a bid to reach his hand (the one not holding the puke rag) pulling his stiff fingers down to where her forehead rested against his stomach.

“Righty then. Rub me...here.”

The drink must have pickled his brains, because Ulfric found himself complying. “Don’t drink so much next time.”

“Pfft. We all need to let off some steam, sometimes. Particularly you. You’re right stoppered up. Bet you’re a right wreck when all that serious self control goes poof.” She giggled again, flickering her hands in the air. "Poof!"

He was becoming very interested in the curve of breast, peeking slightly from the snagged fold of her robes. The barest trace of pale skin, tantalizingly close. If he tilted his head just a bit more… “-And that’s what ‘friends’ also do, I suppose. To blow off steam.”

Sinuously arching beneath his hands, Nemain looked up at him with that damn dimple winking as she smiled. Pressing harder against her head, he dug his fingers into the thickness of her hair as she moaned in pleasure. “Ooh, that’s the spot. Don’t stop or I’ll shank ye. Well...mayhap I’d help a friend out in such ways. A friend I hated, for example.”

His fist tightened involuntarily at her words. “Really, Bear...such a serious face! What-”

*Splack!*

A snowball caromed out of nowhere, spattering them both in a shower of powdery white. Coughing,
as he shook his head from the surprise attack, Ulfric spied Borri making the most absurd grimace of a face he had ever seen on the old Nord. Waggling his hairy eyebrows, Borri menaced him with yet another snowball, rolled compactly in his wrinkled hands.

“Yaargh! I’m gonna getcha for that, you auld duffer! Hold still!”

Jumping up from his lap, Nemain streaked away with another Shout of that accursed Whirlwind Thu’um. Disappearing in a blur of swirling grey, she shoved past Borri on her way up the steps to the courtyard. Presumably to scoop up her own arsenal of snowballs.

Borri spared her barely a glance, his grin widening as Ulfric dropped his head back with a sigh.

“You don’t have to say it. I know.”

Splotkh!

The snow actually felt rather nice on his face. Clumps of snow began melting immediately, as he stayed where he was, all sprawled out upon the couch. His stomach burbled in growling complaint. Threatening to act up, should he budge even a bit from where he reclined. *I can’t remember the last time I got so shit-faced.*

As he carefully turned his head, he watched as the old Greybeard approached him in triumph. Doing a little jigging dance, stopping only when Ulfric cracked a grin at the sight of Nemain; skidding wildly on the stone steps, face red and eyes sparking from the cold. Carrying an armful of tightly packed projectiles, white and round that she hefted menacingly in her hand.

“Oh, this be war, Borri! Man doon! Man...doon! I’ve avenge you yet, Bear! Eee...Death to the Greybeards! Hold still!”

Snowballs whizzed back and forth, Borri catching and lobbing back Nemain’s frosted weapons as against all odds...the Jarl of Eastmarch began to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:

I read up on isolation studies done in prep for astronauts who want to go to Mars. Did you know that being cooped up (particularly in a small place, unable to talk) does crazy things to your head? Add being abstinent to that, and you've got a recipe for real kooky doodoo.

Arngeir - I hope he doesn't come across as too asshole-y. I do like him. Better than the Blades, at any rate. But the old fart is definitely set in his ways, and I'm going take the absolute silence with which the Greybeards treat their old student Ulfric as valid ground
for saying that yeah...they didn't like what he did with their ten-odd years of training.

That is a long time to spend during your formative years, with no one to talk to but yourself and one snooty Arngeir. Ugh. Poor kid.
The Proving

Chapter Notes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4u5gHYoPWI

This song - UruR, by Wardruna, is what I imagine the Greybeard's trance music sounds like. Minus the chanting, cuz of course they'd blow everyone away.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunset came and went.

The darkness closed in over the wide courtyard of High Hrothgar. Cold and silent, no moons were visible...Masser and Secunda had gone dark, hidden in the heavens where only the violet green haze of the auroras misted across the stars.

Standing naked upon the steps, Nemain was surrounded by Greybeards. All of them, including Ulfric wore the scale embroidered robes; the thick cloth sliding through the snow as they moved in a slow circle around her. A drum pounded, once. Twice, as Wulfgar lifted the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller to his lips, and blew.

The other men began to hum; a low vibrating resonance that she could feel through the soles of her feet...rising through her until her entire body shook with the atonal droning sound. The horn wailed, the thin sound of it disappearing into the wind as Ulfric beat a steady tattoo upon the drum...continuing to pound upon the skin of it with the flat of his hand until it thrummed like a heartbeat.

The drum, the horn and the sound - Nemain’s head rang with it; consciousness tapped like a bell as she licked her lips against the dry wind. Yol burned deep inside, tamed into a churning warmth that she held like a coal in her throat. Keeping her safe from the killing cold.

“We come to the moment of your Proving, Dragonborn.” Arngeir had announced earlier when the last fingers of light had sunk deep behind the western face of the Monahven. “Stand free of all encumbrment, and face the winds. We will paint you with symbols that will open your eyes and free your mind, to fly.”

“We use ‘Yol’, and fight. Stand in the storm, and live.”

Bare and vulnerable, Nemain scrunched her feet in the powder that layered the stone steps. It had taken a considerable amount of courage to disrobe before the Masters of the Voice. Before her teacher, who had -to his credit- kept his eyes upon her face the entire time. I doona care about being naked before others of my kind, but these Nords...their habits have been rubbing off upon me. And I cannnae feel alright about taunting these elderly chaste ones with the sight of my flesh - no matter how innocent.
She had walked in stately silence into the courtyard followed by the humming Greybeards. Gods. The cold - it had been like falling into a frozen well, for even the air seemed to draw the very breath away from her with its chill.

No light, but what the stars provided. No warmth but what she held inside...spilling away. Spooled like thread falling from a distaff as she stoked her internal fires. Keeping herself alive.

Borri approached her holding a stone mortar. His customary smile was absent, the laugh lines slack and loose...turning the jocular Greybeard into a stranger. Eyes that blankly looked straight through her focused for the space of a moment; sharpening as he hesitated. Fingers poised over the bluish-grey clay as he took in her nude, shivering form.

Unwilling to halt the ceremony to reassure him, she cleared her throat. Hoping someone would prompt the old Master to continue doing...whatever it was he was supposed to be doing.

Arngeir broke the lull, speaking quietly yet firmly. “We are not men and women here tonight, but Voices. Tongues seeking the Wind. Born upon the air, to find truth. Continue, Master Borri.”

_Gods, I cannae feel my legs any more._ Peering over at Ulfric, even as he continued beating the drum...she saw him grace her with a tiny smirk. The vote of confidence, no matter how small warmed her as much as any Shout.

She grabbed the old man’s wrist and nodded. _Do it._

Whatever Borri saw in her face wiped away all hesitation. Nemain closed her eyes, holding her unbound hair away from the slick wetness as he began to draw whorling spirals. Circles and stretching arcs over the valleys and hills of her. Legs, arms, torso...even her face had been streaked in coiling symbols.

She wrinkled her nose at the earth-rot scent...fungus, perhaps. Stifling a giggle as Borri lifted her arms and smeared the stuff in her armpits...making her bite back an oath as the Greybeard perfunctorily anointed her lower lips with one, heavy streak of clay.

_Awkward._ She couldn’t meet Borri’s eyes as the Greybeard shuffled away, to place the empty pot upon a stone column.

Where the blue clay touched, it tingled...revealing that it was likely no mere mud, but blended with something that gave sight. Her vision had already begun to blur. _Hmm. Mushrooms. Earth. And a cloying sweetness that hinted of nightshade._

Stumbling, she nearly fell down several times as she walked through snow that was knee deep, reaching the harder packed ground dead center in the courtyard as the Greybeards surrounded her in a wide circle. The tingling had spread from the clay paint to the furthest edges of her toes and fingers. Lighting up every nerve with a peculiar sense that she was floating; basking in a lake that ebbed and flowed. A veritable ocean of air she could now see, as she gasped in awe at the beauty of it.

Eddies and waves of wind, blowing off the root-deep strength of the mountain. Rising from the dark valley below...emanating from the Nords themselves as they hoomed in the sonorous, eternal Sound that was not a Word. All but for one, who kept himself apart.
Her heartbeat had begun to pound in time with the drums. *Da-dum da-dum, da-dum, da-dum...* a lulling percussion that the hooded man she drowsily remembered to be Ulfric Stormcloak - *Bear* - continued to beat out.

The grey robes no longer looked like robes. Blinking against the shifting light, Arngeir’s face floated before her. Pale eyes hovering over a shadow of beard, all blunted in a dark cloud that shifted and swam in a coalescing wave of black. The Master’s voice surprised her, making her jump as the growling roar of it echoed against her ears. Like they were in a cavern, not a clearing bare to the sky.

“You will see things. Things that were, that are and might be. Be prepared to let go of your preconceptions of what you are, and become open to what is.”

“Acknowledge what is real. See the truth. Hold the fire ever burning, as you prepare to face the storm. Good luck, Dragonborn.”

The Sound cut off, as the four Tongues breathed deeply. Inhaling the night, sending it back in a Shout that turned the world white.

“STRUUUN...BAAAH...QOOOHH!”

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

White.

Nothing but whiteness. All around her, everything spun in a dizzying cyclone of sharp wind and snow. Cutting like razors...so cold. Snarling her hair in a tangle that whipped against the skin of her back. Flaying her like a rope beating upon her skin, as she cried out in pain.

Her heart beat slowly, sluggishly as she turned her gaze up to see snowflakes suspended in motion. Every droplet a crystalline masterpiece, melting the edges as she reached up in wonder. Snow became feathers as she drew another breath. Felt the ventricles of her heart pulse, as old became new, and the cutting storm turned soft. Like fingers...like fur.

Hard, soft. Hot cold. Her eyeballs throbbed from the strain of taking it all in...beauty and ugliness twisted in a tangled web of white.

“...Nemain? My taisce? My treasure, where be you now?”

*Galan*?! “Galan! What...where are you? I cannae see! Gods! Take me to where you are!”

Arngeir’s voice rippled around her white prison.
“I see...I see them! All of them! Galan! Máthair! Oh...wait for me! I be coming to you!”

Gods, a thousand deaths seemed to flash by her eyes as she saw the approaching figures of her family, running towards her in great leaping strides that broke through the misty cloudbank. Reaching out her hands to the love of her life, she watched breathlessly as Galan came into view, flanked by Máthair and Seanmháthair. Her grandmam’s pointed ears were proudly displayed as the circlet of Dibe winked in the wintering light; dark braids dragging against the snow as Nemain wildly waved. Smiling so hard, her face hurt with the joy of it.

Bothela, Siobhan, Erudin and the children...everyone had come! They were coming for her! Welcoming her home!

*Remember to breathe. Yol Toor Shul! Remember the fire, else you die in truth.*

“Over here! Here...this way!”

All of them so young, with Galan’s chest unbroken and unmarred. That vibrant white smile crinkling his black eyes...making her long to kiss the face so dear. The man she had thought lost to her forever.

No longer a hagraven, Máthair reached out with both hands cast alight (human hands, unclawed) in golden streams of healing magicka, her mouth silently opening and closing, though Nemain could hear nothing of what she spoke.

“What be you saying? Galan, mo chroi, what is it? Ma?”

They did not slow as the multitude raced towards her, Máthair’s mouth yawning wide into a black chasm...tree tall that swept her inside. Hitting Nemain with the force of a rampaging herd of mammoths, as she screamed and screamed.

White became night.

*******

Safe and warm, Nemain stirred in Galan’s arms.
Somehow she knew...that the Briarheart indulged such close contact was a victory all its own. His flesh was cool, barely warmed to body temperature by her embrace. No breath left his lungs. No heart beat in his chest...but she breathed. Her heart beat for him. Just as they had promised one another, so long ago, that he would be everything to her as she would give her all to him in return.

Beloved treasure of her heart, her Galan Briarhorn.

Yet this mute lassitude could not last forever. Sighing as her man arose from their bed of furs, Nemain stretched...the bare skin of her limbs rubbing against the many-colored pelts that Galan had prowled the far expanse of Skyrim for, to dress their marriage bed.

Fingering one very soft white fur, she marvelled at the silky texture. The fineness of the hairs. He was truly an excellent hunter, to have procured so many exotic pelts. To amass such a collection of heads, carefully cut and preserved in blessed cedar oil. *He truly was her match, in ambition, wealth and power.* In every way.

Silhouetted by the fire that burned low in the unfamiliar hearth, Galan leaned over to rock a cradle. Also finely made...nothing but the best for the High King Madanach’s daughter, the Dragonborn. Bone woven with treated eldergleam branches, glazed with resin and stained black.

She breathed a tired sigh. Unwilling to move, to change anything about this moment. “He still sleeps?”

“Aye. Dinnae fear, he sleeps. And yet we must away, my heart. Come. Rise up. They be awaiting us.”

Slipping on a velvety furred tunic that dragged behind her feet, Nemain picked up the sleeping babe and followed Galan as he perused the shelves stacked with hexagonal boxes of tightly jointed juniper wood. Each one carefully labelled and dated, for the oil within had to be exchanged yearly...else the heads within would rot and be ruined.

“They are ready, then? For the tribute?”

Hmming in confirmation, Galan’s hands traced the borders of the most ornate box. Seizing it, he placed it atop another, less decorated container. “Take him and we shall go.”

Babe in arms, Nemain moved...hardly rushing, for she knew. They would wait.

She was the Dragonborn, after all. Savior of the Reach. Master of the terrifying power of the Thu’um, with which she had broken down the very walls of Windhelm itself. Despite her parentage and all the manipulations of her father (and the proddings of Melka her mother, to take the next step in her priestly duties) Nemain was confident in the power of her position. None of this would have been possible without her, after all.

The Blue Palace was filled to the brim tonight. The milling crowds of every race of Mer, Imperials and Khajiit parted for them, as hollow cheeked Nords scurried about serving drinks. Eyes kept low and on the ground.
A Breton man stood, facing his throne. Turning, she saw the same face that cast its reflection in her mirror every day. Melded into the gender of a man. Madanach.

“Father.”

“Daughter.” His voice was deep and strong, despite the apparent age of those heavy set dark eyes hooded in grey whiskers and curling brows. “You have come.”

Turning to his right, he dipped his head. Making the sign of respect. “Two heads. As requested.”

Galan approached, leaving her to watch in silence as the group of black robed Altmer stood waiting near the WitchKing. Bowing low, he placed the two boxes of juniper wood before Madanach.

“Ard Rí.”

“Rise, my loyal one. Némain, approach the throne.”

She did so, gazing up the strange elves in mild interest. A she-elf of advanced years gestured, as one of her subordinates lifted the boxes chest high; the better to view their contents. “Daughter, this be Elenwen. First Emissary and Ambassador of the Aldmeri Dominion. She has come for what has been promised...as well as to oversee her interests here in the newest province of the Empire of Alinor.”

“I be greatly charmed to meet your fine acquaintance.”

Bowing to one another, Némain looked over to the tables that normally would have groaned beneath the weight of festival foods and fine drink. Now cleared of all decoration and covering, Mother Melka sat in state along with her sister hagravens. A ruffling of pinioned arms was the only sound apart from the ever-increasing murmurs from the onlookers that dared stay. Stay to listen.

Stay to watch.

She could see Moira, Petra, Drascua...countless witches and their attending Briarhearts standing expectantly. A dead skeever lay upon one end of the table, joined by an empty black soul gem that gleamed dully in the candlelight.

Walking to her side, Galan’s chest twitched as the briarheart within glowed faintly...a rich bronze scaled red. Responding to the magic Némain exuded in her stress, linked as they were. His hand traced the fat cheek of her bairn. “Dearest, tis for the best.”

“Indeed.” The one Madanach had named Elenwen lifted the lid on the very ornate container. Lifting the head by its shock of blonde hair, the thin slash of her lips curved smugly as she perused the head that had cost Némain nearly her life. And ever so much more.

“Your craft is the finest I’ve seen of its ilk, WitchKing. The features are marvellously preserved.”

The head of Ulfric Stormcloak stared sightless back at the Ambassador, as she turned it to view the trophy from every angle. Madanach made a pleased sound.

“The head of his highest general, Galmar Stone-Fist, be in the other box. Our shamans have
practiced the art of head-keeping for centuries, Mistress Elenwen. It is our honor to give such a weighty prize to our most stalwart ally. Now that the peace of the just be upon us all, and the war to end all wars be brought to a most satisfying end.”

The she-elf nodded absently, almond amber eyes still fixed to the head dripping with oil. “Flatterer. You have not made out so badly yourself.”

“Nemain...Dragonborn. Do come here a moment.”

Her feet moved of their own accord, stepping closer despite a strange screaming in the back of her skull. Lifting the babe for Elenwen’s inspection, Nemain waited in endless patience as the Altmer woman pulled a moue of disgust. Releasing the Stormcloak leader’s head to spill in a splash of heady cedar scent, the Mer handed the box off with a brush of irritable hands to her nearest attendant.

“Ugh. It looks like him. Your father tells me you are of a quadroon’s worth elven blood. Yes?”

“Nay. That be my Máthair who hath a quarter of Mer blood, Mistress.”

“Hmph. A pity. The blood of the Reach has been diluted near to the point of obsolescence. Still, it seems this...thing is not entirely wasted flesh.” Snapping her fingers, Elenwen gestured to a Thalmor attendant.

“Make careful notes of this. I want all the fabled traditions of the Reach to be fully recorded and archived in the libraries of Lillandril. We do not have a complete grimoire quite yet. And I wish to survey this ceremony with utmost attention.”

“Yes, madam.”

Placing a hand around her shoulders, Galan escorted Nemain to stand near the chair set aside for her at the table. Taking the babe from her arms, he placed it reverently upon the austere surface between the skeever and soul gem.

The Briarheart’s dead eyes held a spark of triumph. “Not long now, my taisce, and all we have ever dreamed of will be proved true. Sit, and take your rightful place at the head of the coven. Rise again a handmaid of Hircine...filled with unholy power and might! None will dare to molest or make afraid, once you have ascended!”

She watched, a strange burning at the back of her throat tickling. Bothering her from the numb apathy she was currently gliding in as the child moved. Toothless gums yawned as the boy bunched in on himself...the swaddled bunting opened further with every movement. Baring the lad to the cool air.

How she wished to cover him from such greedy eyes. To hide him away. Take him somewhere far...far from what she knew must be done.

“Must it be so?”

Mother Melka creaked to her side. Talon tips clicking as the beaked chin bobbed in a parody of a smile. “It must, daughter dear. For our allies will suffer none of the fear thuaidh blood to flourish. A
mere generation left for them to be eradicated, mo chroi, and then - the heartland and much else besides will be ours. Forever and for all time!”

Melka seemed not to like the expression in her eyes as she gazed back down upon the bairn. “Be it not worthy of a bit of sacrifice? To bring Red Eagle’s promise anew? Think upon it, Nemain...the Reach! Expanded from Markarth to Riften. Solitude to Windhelm - one grand land under us for the taking. Wealth and renown unimaginable...och, the bards will be singing songs of this for centuries, mo chroi. All nearly ours...once you do this last, simple task.”

A heated stirring in her chest joined the prickly in her throat as Aunt Petra brandished a jagged knife. Lovingly polished, the bird-crone offered it with both hands open.

As she took the knife in hand, Petra and Melka flanked her. Pushing her closer to where the babe lay. Galan stood near, watching intently. Unbreathing, as the briarheart within him burned in time to the beat of her own heart. Matching every pulse with the pressure inside her own ribcage. She was his heart. He was her soul. They were one.

*The fire. Burning. Yol...what have I forgotten?*


Drums were beaten and boldas scraped, as the coven began chanting an eerie dirge. The babe began to fuss, whimpering fretfully as it waved plump limbs into the air.

“Now, mo chroi...dinae let me see you cry. You know what I think of whinging crybabies what despoil the offerings of the gods.”

Clucking, Melka guided her to the table. “You be Dragonborn, yet this be but the first step towards true power...the likes of which you cannæ grasps. Kill him. Kill the child, and take his life for your own!”

“Drip the blood upon Galan’s member,” suggested Petra with a lewd giggle. “The blood be the life. He’ll then give ye more bairns, for the transition be slow from witch to hagraven. T’will renew what life remains in him. I be convinced...we may renew this spell as needs be, for many sacrifices must be made. What be one half Nord child for a legion more of bonny Reach brats?”

“Kill it.” Her feet dragged forward, as the high yipping chants and drums stole through her senses. Bludgeoning her brain against the sudden choking; the heat that seemed to roar from somewhere deep inside even as she raised the knife, to strike. “Kill the child of the fear thuaidh! The Butcher! Redeem yourself for laying with such filth, and to be sure, the gods will not strike you down on your passing to the Fair Lands!”

Madanach gave her a frown for her reluctance, Elenwen tapping long fingers upon the boxed head at his side as Nemain scanned the room. Dunmer from House Redoran and House Telvanni spoke quietly as they sipped their sujamma. Khajiit representatives of the Mane jingled their golden earrings as they curiously looked back at her. Someone played a tune of the Summerset Isles, the melody plaintive and wrong. So wrong, in the Blue Palace that still bore the runes of a conquered people. Doomed to an early death. *Something be wrong. Didnae the Nords fight back tenfold, after the massacre at Saarthal? What am I doing?!*
Petra sank a clawed hand into her shoulder, releasing only when Nemain turned back in a sudden rush of temper. Hissing, even as Melka smiled menacingly. “Show you no longer bear a weak heart, Dragon of the Redoubt! Take back your place...unweeping and unbowed!”

“Kill kill kill!”

Her babe opened his eyes; bright blue eyes fixing upon her. So like him. Like Bear.

Nemain held little mercy left, but for his child...she would grant the same end. Quick and painless; even as she plunged the electricity laced knife into the child’s heart. Ending him as she screamed, the world tearing like wet parchment as her hands sparked white.

Drowning out all else as the Shout of Fire erupted from her sore, scarred throat.

YolToorShulYolToorShulYolToorShulYolToorShulYolToorShulgods -

This isnae real. It cannæ be real.

.WAKEUP.

*******

She awakened to a room filled with clouds.

Steaming, moist warmth caressed her. Coaxing movement into the chilled flesh of her bared limbs, soaking its way from her extremities all the way to her core. Blessed, life giving heat.

Turning her head painfully, for her neck muscles felt absolutely wrenched...Nemain saw that she was alone but for Master Einarth, who poured another cupful of water upon the roasting rocks of the fire. Another sauna. Just her luck.

Lifting a shaky arm, she saw that the hallucinogenic mud had been rubbed off so thoroughly, so harshly...gods, her red skin looked as though a tanner had scraped it raw. “- Is it over? What...what happened? Where are the others?”

The old Tongue looked her over with narrowing eyes. Pulling out the dreaded charcoal and slate writing board, the Nord began writing in sharp, swift strokes...the charcoal nearly stabbing into the rock square.

Taking it from him with trembling hands, Nemain read.
The others have retired to High Hrothgar, to nurse their wounds. You injured many during your Proving, Dragonborn. You lack control.

Shoving the slate back at Einarth, she began coughing. Roughly hacking, as she gripped her throat in pain. “Not...my fault. How be I supposed to know you were even there? I was caught in the grips of a...a...”

-Placing one long fingered hand over her mouth, the Greybeard shushed her before she could speak. Scratching more words upon the slate, she read with stunned incredulity.

Do not speak of what you saw. It is for your own eyes alone. That you survived bears record of your skill in the Thu'um. Your Proving is over. You are indeed the Dragonborn.

Like that was ever bloody in doubt. “Skill, eh? Skill yet nae control?”

Not enough. You hurt Arngeir and Ulfric - wounding them to the point of passing out. I believe you owe them both an apology.

“Ugh, damnation.”

Letting her head hit the stone floor in resigned acrimony, Nemain let her eyes wander. She had seen the sauna before, of course. Never used it, or ventured near...her last trip to a sauna had proved her weaknesses easily enough. What was it about heat that always did her in? She thought crossly. Time to move to Hammerfell. Or Elseweyr. I do hear they have some damn fine beach property.

Watching Einarth as the Greybeard continued to write what was surely an almighty scolding, listing her flaws at length...Nemain looked him over in curiosity. She had never seen him - any of the Greybeards, really - without those godsawful robes. In only a loincloth, the Reachwitch could see far more of what the legendary Masters of the Voice appeared to hide. Swathed in those curtains of stenchy wool.

Einarth was thin and wrinkled, but cored with stringy muscle. His beard lay unknotted to his chest, tangled with the lank locks of greying white hair. As the Nord wrote, scritching his charcoal against the slate with a ponderous jut of chin, she froze to see a tattoo upon his shoulder of a weighted scale. Faded, in blue.

A weighted scale bearing a brick of grey - silver. Crossed by a miner’s pick and a sword. The Silver-Blood crest.

Tearing her gaze away from the telltale mark, she saw that Einarth had noticed. Turning away, the Greybeard made some minor changes in his slate. Then presented it to her, standing with a silent groan to nab the knapsack hanging upon a nail on the door.

She read:
Far better to wield more control than sheer power, Dragonborn. May this experience teach you well.

You do not hide your feelings. You should learn. An open face is another weapon in the enemy’s arsenal. Endangering what you care for. Making them a weakness to be exploited against you.

I see the way you look at one another. No doubt Borri has gained your ear and your sympathies. Be wary of that one. Men from the Rift cannot be trusted.

You will regret I was a Silver-Blood noble before joining the monastery. I know not how you obtained your hanging scar, or how you escaped. But mine, ah. Love is pain, Dragonborn. And long was I scarred with it, long before I tried jumping from Dibella’s Temple to take my own life.

As a youth, I loved a man. A Reachman near my age. You may laugh, but at one point I was deeply smitten. To the point where I would have proposed a union to this young man, damn all naysayers. For what could be more right and true than love?

Naturally the patriarch of my clan disapproved - I was meant for marriage to some Nord maiden, to further the interests of the Silver-Bloods. Not to indulge in what many still considered base and unclean acts.

Dearthir was found after being reported missing for weeks, his body caught in the mill wheel. Barely recognizable, but for my ring that I had gifted him a month prior. My grief, you can imagine Dragonborn, could only be drowned out by my hate. I mounted a one-man vendetta, to discover the identity of my lover’s murderer. It turned out to be the parents of my betrothed. Some Wind-Rime pirates that hailed from the east, far too long gone by longship to enact any satisfying sort of revenge.

After my subsequent depression and attempt to end my life, I awakened in the inn of Old Hrol’dan. A ghost came to sit by my bedside. Guided me to walk the long path to High Hrothgar. And here I have remained - a peace I never thought I would know granting me clarity, after all these years. Eating myself alive in guilt and rage - a depression that still strikes from time to time.

Lifting her head up to frown at Einarth, she saw him watching her with an unreadable look in his eyes. “Sad, to be sure...you Silver-Blood son of a bitch. You knew. You know even now what it would mean tae me...to know of your kin.”

Still warily watching her, the Greybeard nodded once. She handed him his writing slate back.

“Why? Why pour your auld pickled heart out to me, Einarth?” Blowing out a breath, Nemain coughed again, covering her mouth with a closed fist as she struggled to relax. To breathe in the medicated mist that hung heavy with elves ear and blisterwort. A scent he added to even now, as he pulled a tincture from the knapsack and sprinkled it liberally over the hot coals.

“For I’ll be telling ye right now, I am not similarly inclined. My...my thoughts be my own.”

Scratch -idge scratch , went the charcoal upon the slate.

I tell you this not to elicit sympathy, for I know you bear me ill will. Which is understandable...I’ve worked hard to be alone. To train by myself, these many years upon the Monahven.
I see your face - do not make the mistake of thinking you have unlimited time on Nirn to act in your best interests. I may be mute by choice, but I am not blind.

Grunting in labored breaths, Nemain wiped his slate clean with a damp forearm. Damn ...her skin still sparked with whatever had been in that noxious mud. Shaking her, heart and soul with the memory of the vision that was not a dream...but a possible future. Gods. “I do not know what you be referring to, Greybeard. If you wish me to stay in this arsecrack of a sauna, you’ll be making sense. Right now.”

Do you think me a simpleton? You and Ulfric - your combined bahlok. Hunger. I see it. Everyone else sees it. Borri will tease you mercilessly, and Arngeir will disapprove. Wulfgar only noticed that you drained a good weeks worth of wine from his stores today and will not cease wilting in a mood over it. Not for a month, after which I wager he will regain his previous good nature.

Yet you will be long gone. Tread carefully, else he slips you vinegar instead of cider in your next meal.

“Gee, thanks for the warning. I’ll make sure Bear taste tests all my drinks aforehand.”

Einarth looked at her for a good minute after her rude response. His wrinkled lips curled in an almost-snarl, as he rasped the charcoal over the board.

Leave! Leave this mountain before you drag Ulfric and the rest of us in the wake of your wreckage!

Several smears and smudged letters later, Nemain picked up the tail end of what he had written. The message making her snap her jaw shut, even as she felt an unpleasant twinge of regret coil deep inside her.

Dragons live to rape and ruin. To conquer new territory and take prey for their own. As Dragonborn you are no different - look to the histories of Talos Stormcrown. The only thing that stayed solvent was his Empire...and that only for just so long. All his many lovers were spurned and cast off into the flames of his legacy. What could Barenziah have been, had Tiber Septim taken her to wife upon killing her husband? Yet he chose a darker path.

I see much Talos in you. And to a lesser extent, in Ulfric. Though at least the lad has the grace to accept it.

I see you - I can feel with every breath you take how you lie, little she-drake. Leave, before my student discovers your duplicity and either ends you, or suffers my fate. Heal the wounds you have caused tonight.

Whatever you choose - GO. You will learn nothing more until your mind has been opened and truth has laid you bare.
Unable to speak past the mingling fury and guilt, Nemain nodded in curt acceptance. Then turning, she threw the slate board with all her might...smashing it against the stone wall of the sauna.

She relished the look of shock that flitted, like a flash of light, across Einarth’s features. The spray of shattered shards rattling across the floor, chaotic. Noisy. Utterly childish. Scratching her upon the leg where the ricocheting rocks hit her, as she rubbed away a stain of blood. Red like snowberries. Red like the open mouth of her dream child, screaming his last. Dead by her hand. Nonono...

“Thank you for your truths, Einarth. I will hold them close. Now fuck off.”

The cold felt good on her feet, as she escaped the sauna in a pilfered towel to run...ragged and blurry eyed, all the way to her isolated rooms. To fight back seeping tears that wet her furs. Swelling her cheeks and causing her to swallow against the soreness of her throat (rape and ruin!) as she dwelt moodily upon the words of the Greybeard. Dawn, when it came, brought no further light than what could be seen by the naked eye.

I hurt him. I hurt Arngeir. Didnae know what I was doing, yeah, but still all the same...

Fucking Talos. I will not - cannot...ugh. Gods. I cannae even think it, without the cursed vision springing afresh in me mind. Honestly - what kind of mother would hurt her own child for gain?

A sudden flash of Máthair emerged, picture perfect. The Nord girl twisting helplessly in her ropes, life fading from her eyes as Máthair’s blade tore through her throat. Sending a warm wash of blood over the attending witches, even as their cries culminated in one uproarious shout as the Change happened.

Where once had stood Máthair, beautiful and dark...there now stood a cawing, bloodthirsty hagraven. Humanity stolen away, and for what? A powerful array of spells. Unnatural long life...though it was a shame that beauty was not part of the pact, though many witches have tried to alter the spell. To their lack.

It was not the way, she thought as she forced herself from her bed. The ways of her people were harsh, to be sure, but not unduly cruel. Children were rare and wondrous things. Only the darkest of powers, at the uttermost end of need ever chose to sacrifice the young and innocent. She remembered only a bare handful of human sacrifices - of cannibal meals undertaken to serve the Gods.

For a price was taken that most would not stand to bear in such an exchange. Rarely fair - often gruelling in exacting payment. Always the cost would be something that one could scarce to live without. It was all about need. Or was it?

Aventus. Sophie. Iona...the precious little pips! Could I ever cut out and eat their hearts? For power? Spells? The vainglorious seeking of beauty eternal?
I am not my mother. I am not Talos...nor a ruiner of lives.

I am not what he says.

Chapter End Notes

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyoscyamus_niger

Henbane, also known as black henbane or stinking nightshade, is a psychohallucinogenic drug that was actually used by European witches to give the sensation of flight. You know those charming pictures of witches flying naked on brooms? Apparently henbane was toxic when ingested, but if it was smeared in the armpits or in the thin lining of skin, say...ON YOUR COOCH. Then it prompted spiritual visions of flying and funky stuff.

Sorry if I offend anyone who does this for religious purposes. You have to admit, it's pretty far out. But then, I spent part of my youth smack dab next to a Lakota Sioux reservation. From what I've heard about their medicine vision sweat lodge experiences, having a proper guide to watch you (and make sure you're not about to croak from whatever they dosed you with, plus the sweats) is integral to the experience. You've got to admit, my way is so much cooler than the stodgy Greybeards sending the Dragonborn off to Ustengrav.

And yes...Scandinavian countries also did a sort of coming of age ritual. Actually it could be used for a number of things, but typically it would be testing oneself against the environment. Setting out to live alone in the woods or the tundra; living off the land and receiving signs from the animals, the weather...in dreams of what your life holds and where you should be. Cool stuff. Not just for Native Americans, nope.

Yep. Witches smeared henbane goop on brooms and 'rode' them. Damn. Truth really is stranger than fiction.

As always, read and review.
The Honest Truth

Chapter Notes

The song Nemain sings is a Scottish Jacobite love song. So sweet and lovely. Really...I recommend listening to it. Just to get a feel for the rhythm and melody while you read the lyrics. Sung by the incomparable Connie Dover.

https://m.youtube.com/watch?list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&v=yGl2iHD1qXA

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Long has the Storm Crown languished with no worthy brow to sit upon. By our breath we bestow it now to you in the name of Kyne, in the name of Shor, and in the name of Atmora of Old. You are Ysmir now, the Dragon of the North. Hearken to it.”

-Pronouncement of the Greybeards upon naming the Dovahkiin, Fourth Era Year 202

The combined voices of the Greybeards rolled around the walls of High Hrothgar, agitating the ancient stone flagged floors. Making the armor and weapons Ulfric was readying for the journey home rattle fitfully.

And though he clasped hands over his ears, to block the painful echoes of the Master’s Thu’um...he could still hear it.


As the words dissipated into the hush of High Hrothgar, Ulfric shook his head. Then shook it once more, grimacing at the pain in his head that compounded the aches of his newest wounds. Courtesy of the Dragonborn, batshit crazy from whatever slop the Masters had put in that clay to give her the sight.

...Not that the woman needed further addling, he mused to himself. Should have let the old beards know she was already sensitive to foretellings and portents. It bothered him; to know he could have saved Nemain (and himself) a cartload of unnecessary pain. Arngeir had informed him that it had taken the woman well into the next morning to sweat out the last of the poison; ridding herself of the fly amanita and nightshade concoction.

The woman had come at him out of the blinding snowstorm like some vengeful wraith, pupils blown wide and painted in that swirling woad. Had lit him up with hands of electricity and fire, unrelenting and wild. Not ceasing until Arngeir had grabbed and thrown her to the ground, earning a singed set of burns all his own for his pains.
Should check my chest once more. Delicately peeling back his robes, he noted that the bandage had soaked through again. Yellowish pus from the electrical burns mixed with a tracery of blood...blackened and rank. Damn!

A full day and a half with little improvement. The skin had to heal, else wearing his armor would be like a penance - wool scratching the tenderly healing skin like a hair-shirt. But he feared he would be worse off mentally, if he took the Reachwoman up on her offer to heal him. It would do well enough with a bit more time and salve...better than having her touch him. Not even to heal. Not again...distracting him from his true purpose. Giving flight to fanciful notions of friendship with a Forsworn.

Fucking mages. His chest throbbed, the bruises born upon his arms and throat purpling from where the woman had beat upon him with her fists. Fists that had sparked incandescent with flame and lightning.

No, he resolved within himself. He would not accept her healing. She had been the cause of all this, after all.

As he changed the bandages, carefully smearing in blisterwort and elves ear before wrapping the clean linen around his chest, he thought of other things.

The witch had been curiously silent since her proving. Speaking to no one, disappearing from meals and training. Ulfric had questioned Borri for her whereabouts. Not Borri, nor Wulfgar knew where she had taken herself off to...even Arngeir was stumped.

Einarth had simply looked at him, eyes narrowed and lips tight. And had pointed to the tower in the courtyard, where he had eventually found the woman meditating. Curls of smoke emerging from nostrils as she breathed slowly and evenly. Truly, she had grasped her lessons well.

Pulling on a clean tunic, the Jarl reflected upon the response she had given him, when he asked her point blank what she had endured in her vision. What had driven her up and away from the other Greybeards, casting such desperation into her eyes. What had turned the garrulous Breton into a silent shadow.

She had looked at him, as though seeking answers in the careful scrutiny of him. Which had caused him to shift from foot to foot, suddenly awkward as the woman’s face drew tightly in upon itself. Before he could rephrase his question (should know better to pry, can’t help it) Nemain practically spat her words, as though he was to blame for whatever she had seen. What had she seen?

“Everything I ever wanted. That be what I saw, Bear. Now leave me alone, please.”

A day and a half later, and the woman had been just as reclusive...appearing only at the behest of Arngeir for some sort of initiation speech. He had been ushered upstairs (like a naughty child, he thought in resentment) while the Greybeards performed a ritual naming. A commemoration of the Dragonborn’s official status.

And he could not be a part of it. Oh, he understood perfectly...the force of the combined Master’s Thu’ums would have ripped him apart. Undoubtedly. And though he did not favor dying of internal hemorrhage, it still rankled to be shunned from the interaction.

But he would endure the isolation, as with everything else Shor saw fit to test him with. He was no
Greybeard, despite his discovery of the previous week when he had caught sight of himself, passing a mirrored glass. One of few that dotted the keep, for glass was dear.

This one had bubbled imperfections that perhaps had dropped the cost. He had seen Borri use it to bounce light into Arngeir’s face while meditating. Casting a pinprick of bright light upon the elder Master’s eyes, until Arngeir would open his eyes with a huff...looking for the culprit who would have long since fled. Mirror in hand.

Three more gray hairs in his beard. Probably brought on by some combination of the Reachwoman’s meddling presence and day after day of silent meditation in High Hrothgar’s halls. It was enough to drive one to undue haste, were Ulfric to think overlong upon it. *Dragons reborn from their mounds, attacking. Tullius pushing back from the western front, nothing but silence from my spies in Markarth. Elisif dines in state upon the High throne, feasting while Nords starve and suffer. A Forsworn mage is my travel companion and now...I’m running out of time.*

He was in the middle of checking his blades for any signs of rust spotting when the floor heaved under his feet. Throwing him sharply against the wall, where he clung to the stone as another earthquake rumbled through the monastery.

A ripping scream was carried in by the wind. *Dovahzul!?* Grabbing his sword and unsheathing it with unsteady hands, Ulfric leaned his head out of the window.

Snow was whipped up in a torrential windstorm in the courtyard. Fanned by the uproarious Thu’ums of not one, but three - *three fucking dragons!*

“*Boh Nah Gut, strangers! Begone from my strunmah!*”

“*Kren Sosaal, traitor! Alduin returns! Ok mulaag unslaad!*”

“*Fo Krah Diin!*”

*They must have been drawn to High Hrothgar upon hearing the announcement of the Dragonborn. All of Tamriel must have heard that racket. Shit.*

He dimly recognized one as the Greybeard’s mentor. *Paarthurnax*. The elderly dovah was trying - and failing - to drive the younger, more braw twin dragons away from the towering hulk of High Hrothgar.

Ulfric remembered meeting the Grand Master of the Order once or twice; the great beast dropping down in the courtyard like a battered flag. Barely more than a child, he remembered little but the scaly wedge shaped head turned askew; one filmy black eye looking him over as a deep voice (like father Hoag’s bassy grumble) boomed through his being. Proclaiming him a worthy student of the Voice when he had been a mere lad.

As Ulfric hurriedly pulled on his nordic breastplate and gauntlets, only bothering to strip the robes that would trip him, to fasten the minimum of straps and ties... his abused eardrums were pierced by a high female shriek.

Gripping his stone desk as the forces outside shook the towers once more, he chanced to see a breath of fire arcing towards Paarthurnax. A Shout - erupting from Nemain. Causing the old one to screech in agony, even as one of the attackers breathed ice in a fulsome cloud of cold. *Gods damn it, woman.*
“Don’t attack the old one! He’s a friend! Paarthurnax! Stop!” Ulfric yelled out of the window. Preparing to jump, even as the closest dovah lifted one scaly head to catch sight of him. Eyeballs the size of dinner plates rolling with fury in their ridged eye sockets.

He glared back, readying himself for what was surely a foolhardy move. But it would pay off...if he just could ground at least one of the beasts. Keep them from flying out of range. Gods that’s a long ways down.

“What?” Nemain hollered shrilly, robes flapping about her slight form as she continued hurling fingers of ice and fire at the other two dovah. “Why in bloody fecking Oblivion did no one tell me Paarthurnax was a damn dragon!”

“It never came up! Just...hold on!”

He could see Arngeir join the Dragonborn...Shouting what must have been Frost Breath at the fire breathing assailant. His breathborn plume of ice was huge; crashing like an avalanche against the fire serpent. Causing the frost serpent to land in defense of his fellow dovah...clumsily waddling closer to the far side of the halls where Ulfric lay in wait. Half in and half out of the window.

Where were the others?

Just the two of them; Nemain leaving the Shouts to the Master Tongue, as lightning sparked from her hands to the sky. Adding to the swirling maelstrom of wind that had turned grey from flying earth and rock; pulling at him even as he gritted his teeth. A war of words...battering forces clashing in unseen strikes. Only the aftereffects visible; as ancient crenellations tore apart like wet parchment...crumbling down in a near constant stream of rockfall.

Even as Ulfric watched, the tall tower Einarth so favored broke in half like a reed. A few stones glanced off the scaled armor of the firebreathing dovah, snagging one wing as the drake screamed. Slowed under the weight of the stone that had pinned it to the ground, the dragon crawled for the wide open doors of the courtyard - doors that led into the halls of High Hrothgar itself.

Sucking in three quick breaths, Ulfric forced himself to think of nothing. And flung himself from the window, sword brandished high...landing upon the frost breathing dovah’s massive back, blade ripping cleanly through one leathery wing. Landing with a crash to the ground, where he immediately rolled; barely escaping a crushing three toed foot as he stabbed upwards.

Again and again, piercing the softer, striated belly of the beast. Feeling more than hearing the cough-scream of the dragon as it shuddered at his blows. Black blood splattered his face like it had been thrown by the bucketful, making him gag - yet he did not dare move. Could not chance being smashed underfoot...despite the upwelling panic that threatened to take over his limbs as he held himself still. Can’t see!

Blinking rapidly against the sour metal burn of blood, Ulfric saw a wide stretch of white emerge. And took the chance...rolling like a madman for the bare patch of ground free of the dragon’s trumpeting bulk.

Crawling away as best he could with his slick sword still clasped in one hand, the Nord caught his breath in fits and starts, seeing the frost dragon curl up and collapse while bugling a mournful cry. Finally dying of its wounds - for he could see other burn marks now upon the snout that he had not noticed before.

Ripping his gaze away from the death throes of the beast, he looked over to where Nemain and Arngeir stood. Still alive . Where’s Borri? Einarth? There she is.
The fire breather had landed a mighty blow upon Paarthurnax. The Elder One was clinging to the mountainside, limp and frail. Helpless to assist the two very small figures who held their ground, sending their combined flashstorm of lightning and railing wind to push back the advancing dragon.

Spitting blood from his mouth, he could feel saliva pool where he panted. Running at a breakneck speed to help, to harm the flying invader.

*Gods.* He wasn’t going to make it. He watched in stunned disbelief as both Arngeir and Nemain split ways - giving the dragon two different opponents to blast with flames instead of one. His teacher took to the mountain, closing in on the injured Paarthurnax like an unstoppable force.

-Leaving Nemain to disappear inside the tall stone doors of the monastery, where the long scaled neck and toothy head soon followed. “Nemain!”

‘*YOL TOOR SHUL!*’ He heard the dovah roar. Screaming and a rumbling noise; more like a galeforce wind than anything animal. Boots crunching through the hard packed snow, Ulfric was nearly there…

So close, as Einarth suddenly appeared. Shoving both Nemain and a heavily singed Wulfgar - robes brightly aflame - out of the far door, as the dragon’s tail whipped wildly. Another roar, as the dragon shrieked in defiant rage. Caught... the giant horn-tipped shoulders now wedged firmly inside the great double doors of Hrothgar’s halls.

Ignoring his frantic gestures to get the fuck away from the walls, Nemain laid golden wreathed hands of healing upon a wheezing Wulfgar. “Einarth! Einarth dinnae go back in there! We’ve near caught him, I be sure!”

The old Tongue merely shook his head, wrinkled face pulled in an expression Ulfric could not for the life of him understand. A sort of lingering regret mixed with wrath. Superiority and chastisement, as the old one gazed upon Nemain. And opened aged lips to raspingly Speak, a terrible pain wrenching Ulfric’s gut as he felt the words slam into him. Shaking the very steps beneath their feet, as Wulfgar moaned and Nemain screamed.

“*Dov wahlaan fah rel, Dovahkiin. VEN...GAAR...NOS!*”

As Ulfric fell flat to the snowy ground, stunned...the very walls of High Hrothgar came tumbling down.

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

He saw it as though in short bursts.

*Flash.*

The massive doors broken asunder; huge stone blocks crumbling like cake from the indomitable
force of Einarth’s Voice.

Flash.

Pushing Nemain out of the way as she stumbled, Wulfgar fell beneath the collapsing stones.

Flash.

The dragon’s back legs clawed furiously against the steps, struggling to free itself from the collapse. Eventually ceasing to fight, as the spiked tail straightened...then thumped the ground. Not to move again, as the cloud of dust settled. Buried - killed by the cascading rubble from the breaking of the tower of High Hrothgar’s main hall.

“No! Bear, doon just sit there like a ninny, come here and help! I cannae lift this myself!”

Shaking himself from his stupor, Ulfric allowed the dripping sword to lie where his hand released it. His loose armor clattered and banged against itself as he flopped down to where Wulfgar shallowly gasped his life away. Trapped from the chest down beneath a rockfall that seemed mammoth high, smaller rocks and pebbles rolling over him and the Dragonborn both as he shuffled over to where she struggled to free him.

Even as Nemain tugged at the Greybeard’s arms, Ulfric could see fresh blood run red down from Wulfgar’s mouth onto grey-dusted cheeks. Could see it through the fog of numbness that had taken hold of him; see more streams of red flow from the ears. Running in rivulets from the kindly creased eyes that blinked dumbly, even as the man’s mouth opened and closed. It was too late.

“...Nemain.”

Her boots slipped in the red streaked muck of dirt and snow-grit. “Help! Lift it! Get him out...I cannae lift this myself!” The witch’s voice was a hoarse sob. “Einarth be dead and the dovah with him, but I can do this. Gods take you and...and string you up like a plucked hen! Get Wulfgar free! Now!”

A hand closed around Ulfric’s forearm. Nearly swatting down whatever had taken hold of him, Ulfric swallowed and retracted his blow when he saw that it was Arngeir. The man’s knotted beard was filthy, robes caked in a mixture of snow and gore. But those cold blue eyes were as sharp as ever. “Put your back to the rock, and I will help the Dragonborn pull Wulfgar free.”

Nodding, he did as his teacher asked. Squatting low to the ground, he felt his fingertips barely reach beneath the exposed lip of the base of the rock. There.

Listening to Wulfgar’s weakening rasp as he struggled to gain a better grip, Ulfric inhaled. Then pushed - shoving with all his might. His back bowed with the strain, legs shaking as the ponderous mass of rock moved. Creaking ever so slightly; giving just enough space for the old one to be dragged out. Jerked away from under the boulder with a horrible croaking gasp from Wulfgar, as Ulfric took one bitingly painful breath after another, after another -

-until he could hold up the weight of the rock no more. And allowed it to slam down, sliding back to the ground even as stars spun before his eyes.
“Shhh...it be okay. Borri, dinnae cry. No no no, I can try. Try to heal him! Will ye cease your caterwauling and let me think!”

At some point during the time between lifting the rock, releasing it and sitting in a daze, Borri had appeared from the far end of the courtyard. Bearing what appeared to be a small fat-bellied jug of alcohol that Ulfric recognized as snowberry wine. The thin Greybeard looked as though he had been liberally rolled in ash and dirt. Clean lines betrayed the tears that even now slid down quivering cheeks, as Borri hastily uncapped the wine and carefully lifted it to a breathless Wulfgar’s lips.

Ulfric placed a hand upon Arngeir’s shoulder as they watched the dying man take one small swallow. And smile wearily back at Borri...his peaceful face turning still and slack beneath Nemain’s questing fingers. *Dead*. Even as she summoned golden light, again and again. Her dirt streaked face was screwed up in furious concentration; spellglow reflecting in grey eyes filled with pain as she cast over and over. Striving to heal what could not be healed.

Folding nearly in half, Borri collapsed over the unbreathing body of Wulfgar. And was promptly shoved off by Nemain, the tiny witch hissing as one hand pulsed with electric light...the other hand still pushing gold light into the grey, matted locks no longer hooded. Stained with a slowly growing pool of blood which spattered as she thumped her hand upon his chest. Sending crackles of lightning through the unbeating heart. “Damnation! Gods take you for a fool, Borri! Stop crying and let me work!”

*That is enough.* “Let the man cry. What harm could it do, Nemain? What?”

Looking up in shock, Nemain reared back as Ulfric’s hands move of their own accord. Grasping Borri in a tight hug, he rocked back and forth as the older man’s chest heaved silently with grief. Tears wet his neck beneath the armor twisted all askew. A strap had been broken at some point during the fight. He’d fix it later. *Easier to think of the small things, now.* “His friend lies dead...should he sit in silence, unmoved?”

Nemain stared back wide eyed as he fixed her with a reproachful glare. “Einarth and...and Wulfgar - they are gone. There’s nothing you can do. Nothing wrong with crying for that.”

The Reachwoman continued looking at him for the space of a moment, expression unreadable. Turning on her heel, she shook her head...muttering grumbled oaths beneath her breath as she stalked towards Paarthurnax.

Moving as though burdened by a great weight, Arngeir firmly grasped Borri and Ulfric’s shoulders. Then left to treat with the last remaining dovah. He heard the conversation as though it were filtered through a fog. Dim and meaningless, as he reached out with bloodstained fingers to close Wulfgar’s eyes.

“...*Drem Yol Lok*. Greetings, *wunduniik*. I am Paarthurnax.”

"I think you already know who I be."

“Yes. *Vahzah*. You speak true, Dovahkiin. Forgive me. It has been long since I held *tinvaak* with a stranger. I am inclined to give in to temptation to prolong our speech...despite your warm welcome.” The dragon rumbled in dry amusement.

Nemain’s voice rose in annoyed exhaustion. “Why live at the top of a gammy bodging mountain, if you crave conversation?”
"Evenaar Bahlok. There are many hungers it is better to deny than to feed. Dreh ni nahkip. Discipline against the lesser aids in qahnaar … denial of the greater."

"Pfft. I be hungering to clobber ye over yore great scaly head for yammering on so. If you haven’t noticed, Grey Scales, two of the Tongues be dead."

"Krosis. So they are. The final end of all joore. Hmmm."

Prodding Borri, Ulfric gestured to the hall that remained standing, still. If they could get Wulfgar inside…they could hold a proper wake. Could light the candles…tend to the body. And Einarth they would mourn as well. What was left of him. He was too tired to contemplate shifting the mountain of rock that surely shielded the other Greybeard. Later, perhaps.

Gathering the old Nord’s crushed form in his arms, Ulfric desperately tried to ignore the mashed, liquidy pulp…the odd feeling of things floating inside the old one’s chest cavity as he carried him inside to the library. Laid him upon a stone table hastily cleared by Borri.

Nearly every single book in the vast library had been knocked off the shelves. Stored potions ripped from their cabinets had been smashed; sour sludge mashing up what food had been flung onto the walls and the floor that was covered in broken furnishings and ripped banners. The entire area was a wreck.

Leaving Borri sitting forlornly by the body, Ulfric trudged back outside.

Catching only snatches of their conversation…Ulfric listened in increasing weariness as Arngeir argued in brisk, clipped tones accompanied by Nemain’s brogue. The odd mixture was punctuated by the deep, carefully enunciated gravelled roil of the dragon speaking. Seemingly at a loss for whatever it was the Greybeard and Dovahkiin were arguing for.

“Hmm. You have not answered my question: Why do you need to learn this Thu’um?"

"I like this world, dragon. I dinnae want it to end."

"Pruzah. As good a reason as any. There are many who feel as you do, although not all. 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?"

“This Shout was used once before, was it not? And yet here we are again. Have you considered that Alduin was not meant to be defeated?”

Nemain glared at Arngeir. “I dinnae believe that. You be corked if y’think that’s all this whole clusterfuck be amounting to…Master.”

Arngeir folded his arms, dirty robed sleeves flapping in the wind. “Those who overthrew him in ancient times only postponed the day of reckoning. They did not stop it.”

“If the world is meant to end, so be it. Let it end and be reborn.”

The witch made a disgusted sound. Ulfric wordlessly agreed as she harrumphed in response. “The next world will be having to take care of itself. I find I be rather invested in living in this one. Saying we should just roll over n’ die…you’re barking mad…both of ye!”
Opening his wings, Paarthurnax flapped them idly. Causing flurries of snow to dance in the sky, making Ulfric blink and cough as the cold air hit the back of his throat. "Paaz. A fair answer. Rofus... maybe you only balance the forces that work to quicken the end of this world. Even we who ride the currents of Time cannot see past Time's end... Wuldsedtiiid los tahrodiis. Those who try to hasten the end, may delay it. Those who work to delay the end, may bring it closer."

A sigh. “Well, there be that. Destiny is ever elusive, I suppose. Where might I find one of these Elder Scrolls?”

Arngeir waved his hand, as though to sweep away her words. “Such blasphemies are the calling of mages, not followers of the Way. Take your question to the College of Winterhold. They may be able to help you.”

“Great. Thanks. Since I be a blasphemer meself it should be easy as a dream. What do I do with this Elder Scroll when I find it?”

Paarthurnax lifted a forelimb and with a blunt dewclaw scratched his head. The movement was oddly human. “Return it here, to the Tiid-Ahraan. The Time-Wound. Then... kelle vomindok. Nothing is certain with such things... But I believe the Scroll's bond with the Tiid-Ahraan will allow you a... a seeing, a vision of the moment of its creation. Then you will feel – know – Dragonrend, in the power of its first expression. You will learn the Shout that will wrestle my brother down. And perhaps teach him humility in the end. Pruzah. ”

“Thanks bunches. I’ll be getting right on that, then.”

With a start, he realized Nemain was looking at him from somewhere high above. How had he ended up sitting in the snow?

Grimy hands clasped his head. Holding it still even as he winced away, feeling the burning itch of the healing hands spell course through him. A heaviness that had been welling deep in his gut eased; the headache that had been pounding away ever since the Shouting had started also vanished.

A small hand slid inside his. Lifting him with surprising strength to stand, as he wavered. Leaning upon her as she began walking towards the parts of High Hrothgar that were still whole, helping him along. He watched in disinterest as Arngeir bid Paarthurnax one last farewell; the dovah taking to the air. Ragged wings flapping against the gusting updraft, taking him back to the summit where he became a mere black dot...finally vanishing into the clouds as he struggled mightily not to yawn.

“You were bleeding out again, Bear. By stock and bone, man. Can ye perhaps avoid getting mashed up in the process of being all balls out braw?”

He found himself grinning, despite everything, at her description of his earlier antics. The woman made a poor crutch...her head butted into his armpit with every step. He found himself gingerly stepping around her flapping robe, straining not to trip her as they walked together. “...’Balls’ out?”

“Well. Whatever that was, when you jumped from a two story window onto a dragon’s back...verrah braw. And stupid. Thought you were a goner for sure, when I saw ye roll beneath the beast. Dinnae do it again.”

Swallowing back what he had been about to say, Ulfric cleared his throat. Twice. “I’ll try to avoid it in the future.”

“See that ye do.”
“Dragonborn, stop that.”

Arm thrust completely into the rocks, Nemain pulled her arm out from trying to grasp Einarth’s corpse. Her fingertips now coated in blood, the Reachwoman looked at her hand quizzically. Then licked a fingertip clean.

A rumble of wrath rolled over from where Borri sat, next to Ulfric. Arngeir had just finished speaking the closing rites over Wulfgar and Einarth’s mortal remains. The candles had been lit, and a solemn hush pervaded the ruins of High Hrothgar as the men sat silently. Holding a wake for their departed friends. Contemplating death and all its mysteries.

All of them except for the witch, it seemed. “What...why would you do that?”

Casting a grey glance back at Ulfric, the witch seemed amused. “To taste his heart’s blood, why else?”

At the look of repulsion he felt tightening his face, the ire rising from Borri like a visible cloud...Ulfric watched as Nemain hastened to explain. Having cleaned up since taking a survey of the damage the dragon attack had done, he could still see her hands where the soap had not reached; ash and blood ground deeply into her palms and under fingernails. Her hands flitted about now, gesturing as she spoke in a rasping drawl.

“Master Arngeir’s wee speech was quite fine, and all...but it mentioned nothing of what the men were truly like. How sweet and peaceful dear yon Wulfgar was, tending to his snowberry bushes like they be bairns of his own. And Einarth had a lover once...did you know that? A Reachman called Dearthir, whose death drove him here. It be important we remember this of him...sour old screw that he was. Write it down, aye?”

Seemingly frozen at her words, Arngeir nodded slowly. “I...will do so, Dragonborn. It will be written in the histories. This, I did not know.”

Next to him, Borri sighed. Drooping in his robes, the Greybeard looked as though he had aged a decade in a day. Patting him on the back, Ulfric swallowed. He had been choking upon that acidic dragon’s blood damn near all day. And the deaths...the loss of these two men that he had known practically his entire life was not helping. “It will be well. We will get help from Ivarstead. Rebuild...you’ll see. Not all is lost.”

Plink-plink. “To be sure. Eventually, things will get better. Or they won’t. Cor, what be the right peg for C sharp? I can ne'er remember.”

Flames guttered in the Master’s heavy exhale as Arngeir spoke. “What are you doing now, Nemain?”

The woman had dragged in a lute from somewhere. Ulfric didn’t even know the monks had owned a lute. “Tuning this monstrosity. It’s been a while...but I think...there! Got it.”

Fastening an unusually sober gaze upon them all, Nemain held out a hand. Blood from where she
had touched Einarth was drying. Staining her fingertips red. “You’ve given them a good send off in the Nord way. Allow me to give them my own farewell, aye?”

Looking down at the newly tightened strings, Nemain wet her lips. “The blood of Einarth was bitter. Bitter and cold. He was sore disappointed in love and life, unlike Wulfgar with the auld one’s love for the calm life. Him with his wines and brews. I will sing to Einarth’s shade. Send him home to his man with a peaceful tune. Then perhaps...his ghost willnae haunt ye here.”

Ulfric felt his eyebrows raise nearly up to his hairline. Superstitious nonsense. Souls went straight to the afterlife upon death. If they did linger, no mere song would chase them back.

But the silence that greeted her proclamation did not seem to dissuade Nemain. Not waiting for the small nod of approval Arngeir bestowed, she plucked at the lute. The slightly scratchy strings thrummed in chord, as her low Burr of a voice rose and fell.

He felt himself sink into contemplation as she sang softly; a wistful melody.

“Long have we parted been, laddie, my dearie...now we have met again, laddie, lie near me. Long have I sought thee, thy face to cheer me...”

“...Dear has it cost me - laddie, lie near me.”

A gentle smile floated over Borri’s features, as she continued on. The lute echoed through the crumbled keep, bouncing back with the chorus.

“Near me, near me,
Laddie, lie near me!
Now we have met again
Laddie, lie near me.”

Bloodstained fingertips danced across the lute fretboard. Moving with skill, a melody that had to have been memorized for the ease in which she played.

As a veritable storm of conflicting emotions passed over the woman’s face, Ulfric watched in rapt attention. Feeling a twinge of something stir deep in his heart. A private melancholy all his own, growing only stronger as he listened to her sing and play.

“Here in the firelight, what joy to see thee! All the long winter night, laddie, lie near me. All that I have endured, laddie, my dearie...here in thy arms is cured, laddie, lie near me.”

With the last strain, Nemain’s face twisted in pain. Yet her eyes remained dry...untouched by tears as
her small-boned fingers trembled against the strings.

“My heart will never stray, never deceive thee...delight shall drive care away.”

“Laddie...lie near me.”

As the last notes faded away, Borri slowly creaked to a standing position. Shuffling over, he grasped Nemain in a tight embrace. Holding her close as he rocked the woman still holding the lute.

Across the room, her grey eyes snapped up to catch Ulfric’s own. A gaze he could not break...would not, until her face turned. Buried itself in Borri’s shoulder, as she let go of the lute and gave him a backbreaking hug in return. A curl of unpleasantness rippled through him. Envy, perhaps.

Which was a fool thing to feel...he had lost two men who had been friends. But Borri had lost more than that. The Greybeards were the only family any of them had. *Don’t be a churl.*

Arngeir cleared his throat. The old bastard was sniffing, Ulfric realized in muted mirth. She had brought near all of them to weep. Not that they needed much help. *Gods. What a mess.* “Is...is that a Breton melody, young lady?”

“Perhaps.” Breaking free from Borri, Nemain rubbed at her face. Leaving a smear of dirt across her nose. “I learnt it in Markarth, so tis possible. I learned it for a lark. May they rest in the splendour of all the peace that the grave brings. Free from their worldly cares.”

Leaning down to touch the stone rubble, Nemain touched her forefinger to lips. The touched the stone. “Beannachd dia dhuit...all the blessings of the gods go with ye, Einarth.”

Bending at the waist, she also placed a kiss upon the forehead of the Greybeard laid out upon the stone table. “An’ to you, Wulfgar. Rest in peace.”

Leveling one last considering look at Ulfric, Nemain tilted her head. “Still so silent. This heap of rocks could do with some more noise, I think.” Walking away from them all, Nemain did not look back as she disappeared into the gloom where her old room lay.

“Well.” Ulfric stood, brushing off his pants. Even that small movement sent shoots of pain up and down his spine. Something had been bruised during the battle. “We should all get some sleep.”

Arngeir stood, walking over to Borri. “Breath and Focus, Ulfric. You will be taking your rest in the outer chambers once more?”

Feeling his shoulders ache, the Jarl rolled them experimentally. *Huh. Not a sprain. Still hurts.* “Think I’ll go to the pantry first. I’ll sleep better with a full stomach. And possibly a bottle of Wulfgar’s oldest stock.” *More like medicine. But if it knocks me out cold, I’ll take it with a smile.* “You want something?”

“No.” Arngeir made a dry huff. Nearly a choking sound, as Borri walked as though he were drugged to the Greybeard’s rooms. “I think I shall not sleep well, no matter what I may do tonight.”

Nodding in silent agreement, Ulfric padded off to the pantry. And tried very hard not to think
overlong upon the Reachwoman’s doleful tune.

*Here in the firelight,*
what joy to see thee!

*All the long winter night,*

*Laddie, lie near me.*

*All that I have endured,*

*Laddie, my dearie,*

*Here in thy arms is cured,*

*Laddie, lie near me.*

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

He had become fully occupied blowing smoke rings when Nemain crept into the pantry.

The sweet-char smell of skooma smoke puffed out in a cough as the woman eyed him askance. “You’re smoking. I didnae know you smoked.”

Brushing off an ashy ember from where it had fallen upon his bare chest, Ulfric righted the bandage there and gave her a lazy nod.

He rarely smoked anymore...not after developing an addiction to nerve deadening potions after the War had let out. Skooma had been a more cost effective (and all around easier) alternative than the potions...or the pain. Pain from memories and slowly healing wounds both. And the Khajiiti sugar when smoked was far less potently mind altering than the liquid or vaporized version.

Though he reasoned...he didn’t need more than an occasional pipeful, every month or so. He surely needed it now. “There’s more, if you want some.”

“Erm, no thanks. That shite gives me the croak.” Kicking over the empty bottles of mead and eyeing the one half-filled jug of rum he had been steadily draining over the last two hours, Nemain nudged his foot. “Seems you’ve beat me to the punch. How much have you had?”

Head spinning pleasantly, he began counting. And swiftly lost count. “After the dried fish, the chicken, mm...some bread and cheese to soak up the spirits. Er. Three meads? Maybe four. Plus this.”

He lazily lifted the dark bulbous bottle and waved it to her. *Whoa...two witches, blurring in his vision. Nope. Just one. Thank all the Divines watching.*

“Well, you’re carrying it well. I think I’d be off my head if I tried downing all that.”
He laughed, feeling nearly as light as the smoke drifting ceilingward. *Shit, this is the good stuff.* “You weigh, what? Eight or nine stone? I’d like to see you try without retching it all up.”

“You weigh, what? Eight or nine stone? I’d like to see you try without retching it all up.”

“Doona test me, Bear. I’d then be forced to give it a go. And then I’d be blarfing all over ye during the trip down the mountain. T’would be mighty unpleasant for you.”

“Hmm.”

Shoving away the scattered crumbs and plates of the food he had devoured, Nemain sat down next to him. Wedging herself in the space between the stone cupboards and the table. Taking the jug of rum away, she lifted it to her lips...draining nearly a third of what remained and pulling a terrible face. “Woo...that burns! Ugh!”

He took another drag upon the stem of his pipe. Sweetish smoke washed through mouth, nose and throat...making the room tilt and whirl. “It’s practically medicinal at this point. I think Wulfgar put it away when he first arrived here. Stros M’kai rum, from Hammerfell. It’ll give you hair on your chest and fucking moss on your teeth.”

She coughed sharply. “Think I see what y’mean.” Leaning her head on his shoulder, the Reachwitch hesitated...then bravely took another sip. “Blurghh!”

“Told you. Any moment now...those flat valleys you call tits will start sprouting a winter coat.”

“Ugh! Foul words!” Pounding his thigh with her fist, Nemain giggled. “And they be not valleys. I have a fair size for my kind, I’ll be having you know.”

“Must be why those Forsworn men all look half-crazed. They’re goddamn desperate for breasts that aren’t the size of chicken eggs.”

“Ooh, take it back!” Practically falling upon him, Nemain began smacking his face with the open flat of her hand. It barely registered...he was more occupied with the sudden surge of pain that had sparked as her hand pressed down upon his bandaged chest wound. “Ugh. Stop that, woman.”

“What...oh! Did not this heal along with the other bleeding gashes earlier? Huh. Odd.”

“I said stop!” Pulling away in annoyance, Ulfric pushed her off as her fingers began prodding at his chest wound. Partially ripping off the bandage he had just rewrapped it with.

“By the Nine, leave it alone. You’ve done enough. Unless you’ve not finished attempting to kill me, as you did your Galan.”

Small hands stilled. Fingers spread out, lying flat upon his chest as she breathed deeply. He couldn’t see her face, bowed as it was, covered by the length of her hair. Noticing that his pipe had nearly burnt out, Ulfric took a long drag.

“You saw that?”

Breathing smoke, he smiled vengefully. “More like heard...you kept screaming about doing so at the end of your Proving, while firing off thunderbolts every which way.”

Feeling his thoughts coalesce into a somewhat more lucid state, Ulfric used his pipe to lift the woman’s chin. To make her face him straight on. “Why? Why kill Galan? Thought he was your best friend.”
“Because he asked me to, fear thuaidh.” The witch was practically sitting on his lap. Her throat bobbed, swallowing even as he lifted her face even higher. Wanting to see the look in her eyes, as she spoke of this conundrum. The mysterious workings of her mind...how he longed to tease them out.

Lay them flat and bare, open to his view. Thoughts. Thinking of her thoughts. Not her breasts.

“Galan wanted the power of the Briarheart...thought it was necessary, to protect our People. To protect me. And so I did slay him, to my shame. And now he be dead.”

“Are not Briarhearts still living? I fought two before, they seemed alive enough.” Till my blade tore them asunder.

“I’m a necromancer, Ulfric. I can sense death - know when dead bodies lie about. Tis why I’m here...I could feel poor Einarth being pressed into paste from the weight of those auld rocks in the other room. Can sense Wulfgar growing colder, even now. And I along with them. It...never mind.”

Shaking her head decisively, Nemain raised a hand and plucked the pipe from his nerveless fingers. “Galan was a dying man after my knife carved out his heart. He became undead when the briarheart I sewed shut in his chest took its place.”

Looking at his ivory carved pipe, Nemain sat back. Her weight pressed comfortably on his thighs. Ulfric found himself holding tightly to the stone floor, as Nemain settled. Getting more comfortable, while he became far from it. “...and the Galan I knew? He was gone...nought but a stranger wearing his face. A shell of the man he once was.”

Pressing the stem of the pipe to her lips, Nemain’s eyes fluttered closed as she took a sharp puff. And coughed, hacking and blowing as she shoved the pipe back in his hands as he chuckled. “Ugh...cor, this stuff is awful. He be dead. I did it...and poorly but a stranger wearing his face. A shell of the man he once was.”

Placing the pipe higher upon the table top, Ulfric kept his eyes open. Forbidding them to succumb to the heavy drugging weight that even now threatened to take him under. This was important. “You mentioned something of the kind, earlier at Windhelm. Something to do with cutting out my heart, and why you can’t go home, yes?”

Pinprick pain, like needles digging into his skin made him draw a sharp inhale; his breath becoming erratic as her hands dug into the half-healed bruises on his chest. “I could take it now.”

He laughed once more. “Well, here it is. You tenderized it earlier. Just needs...salt. And maybe some leeks for garnish.”

Her fingers traced over the bandages. Leaving streaks of warmth where they passed, drawing slow and sinuous lines as her hands lingered. Placing them flat, he felt his stomach jerk at her touch. “Yech. I’d never garnish heart with a leek. Hearts be more suited to a wine and cheese plate, Bear.”

Avoiding the question. Though I suppose I offered a fair distraction. “Good to know.”

She was now biting her lip. “Arnegir says...you lack discipline. And control of your Thu’um, among other things. What say you to that?”

“Control. Self discipline? What the fuck makes you think I lack any of that?” The coiling spring of lust that had been slowly tightening with every delicate touch soured. Turning away from the little witch, he took another drink of rum. Wishing the alcohol would hasten the oblivion of a dreamless
sleep...sparing him from another fruitless conversation with her.

"Pshh, Bear. You're one of the most tightly wound men I know."

He gritted his teeth as her fingers began to play with the drawstring of his pants. “I was asking what you think. And, if you like...I’ll tell ye what I think too. You could do with a bit less discipline and a damned lot more fun."

His hands were crushing the mortar between the tiles of the pantry floor. Pulverizing smaller rocks into dust, as he fought himself down. Taking pains to be slow, careful. Controlled, as his hands slid up from the floor to grasp her hips. Pressing in tightly; every finger standing out apart from the others, as he heard her gasp.

"You want to see some fucking control?"

_**Slow. Smooth. Do not rush.**_ “You didn’t know, did you...the other benefit of studying the Thu’um is that every breath is a tell tale sign. I know from your breathing pattern - the slightest inhale, every time your voice catches...even when you hold back from speaking entirely - I know what it means. I can tell when you’re lying, Reachwoman. When you’re upset, or happy, or sad.”

Her breath had become a sob as Ulfric’s hands crept higher. Allowing his thumbs to rub the bridge of her ribcage, he dared to go further. And swiped them directly over the tightly darted nipples. Relishing the way she struggled to conceal her reactions.

“Fuck, witch...I know, alright? I know when you want me. What your body says, when your lips pull tight against the words. Your desires are laid bare, all too clearly. Betrayed by your very Thu’um unknowingly born in your breath.”

Lifting her head from where dark locks shrouded her face, Nemain settled her knees on either side of his legs. And though he could feel her chest spasm with every quickening inhale, her face was tolerably composed.

“A truth for a truth, then.”

Nodding mutely, Ulfric raised one of his hands to span the thickness of her throat. “Don’t lie to me. I’ll know.”

The smooth column beneath his fingers pushed against him as she leaned forward. “I’m counting on it. Ulfric...why be you not married? Is it because of what this Elenwen did to you?”

Of all the questions he had expected, this was not one of them. Frankly he had been counting on her asking for or about something else. For he was getting hard, and the repetitive way that her fingers were stroking his chest still was only stirring the flames. He didn’t want to think of Elenwen.

“What?”

“Most Nords your age be married, with a passel of bairns. You be in your fourth decade, yes? So...”

One of her hands lifted to his throat. The thin fingers pressed down upon his pulse, and he felt caught. Trapped, as those pale eyes seemed to see right through him. “Why stay unmated, then? Unless it be for some deeper reason. I’ve heard the rumors that you be a lover of men, or a eunuch. I don’t think either are the truth, though.”

The hand eased away as her face changed. Going almost tender, as she moved her fingers up to touch his beard. “You’ve a bit of grey, there. Did you know?”
“I know.” An awful realization hit him, as her soft hand moved to trace his lips.

For, he now knew, he had never really been touched by anyone who cared beyond a crude exchange of lustful want - sadistic or not. His first experiences had taught him that pleasure was pain. Had ruined him for other, more innocent encounters that he could count on one hand. Even fewer of which had ended in actual tupping. But as Nemain’s hands caressed him; cupping his chin in her hand as his own grip faltered upon her throat…

Mage hands. Flashing with stinging, burning shock and cold. Shoved beneath his balls as he was brought to completion by a smooth long fingered hand, even as he denied it. Denied her, even as Ulfric screamed into the she-elf’s mouth. Because he wanted it, gods help him, even as it hurt. What was it like, without the pain? The magic that had scarred him so deeply that the first thing other lovers saw and could not look away from was the veritable patchwork of scars on his goddamn cock?

Bravery made him angry. Truth kept him cold.

“I had no Galan, witch. No one to protect me from the world. Who would have trusted me with their heart in my hands.”

Feeling a fury swamp the apathy he had nearly brought himself to; even with the drink and the skooma and the distractions...he brought both hands up to her face. And pressed his thumbs tightly against her pointed chin. Touching her quivering lips with his thumbs - digging in until her head was firmly locked in place. Those wide grey eyes unblinking and solemn, as she stared right back at his livid countenance.

“During the Great War, I was taken prisoner along with countless others in the Legion. Starved, belittled and tortured like all the rest, I gained her attentions by my right of birth. She took especial care to show me all the ways one could be hurt with aetherial powers. With fucking magic. So no. I have very little experience in wooing women. Think I can count on one hand exactly how many times I’ve even had a woman.”

Soldiering on, he continued to bare the truth to her curiously blank face. Even as some part of him begged him to stop. To quit while he was ahead. “Shor take me for a fool, I haven’t allowed myself the distraction of dragging some other bitch down with me until I finish this gods cursed fight!”

Shaking his head at the strange look upon Nemain’s face, he felt his lips curl into snarl. Even as his hands fisted themselves in her hair. “I can’t. And I won’t!”

“Then don’t.”

Slowly, giving him every chance in Nirn to pull back...Nemain’s lips found his own.

Holding still, he felt a strange sense of wonder as the woman’s mouth delicately pressed against his. Not seeking, not taking anything but this...this soft touch. Little more than a kiss between siblings...passionless and caring.

Keeping his mouth from following her with effort as she pulled away, he saw her eyes burn bright with some unnamed emotion. A dimple flared in her right cheek as she smiled sadly.

“Well, Elenwen sounds like a right bitch and I be sorry you ever crossed paths with her. I willnae pry
any more, Ulfric. I have some idea of what it took you to tell me. And...may the Et’Ada save me, but I respect you far too much to lie anymore. Not that you didn’t already know, it seems, but.”

Too many words, swimming in meaningless clouds around his head. He trembled to think upon the import of them, so enraged and filled with grief and...and... no more talk!

He stopped her mouth with his own, ending the painful discourse with a feeling of finality. Good or ill, he would take this...this strange kindness from the woman who avowed herself to be his enemy. Who cooked his meals, taunted and teased. Healed his wounds body and soul, taking no thought of reward.

He could give her this much, at least in return for the truth. For as his tongue thrust inside her mouth, eating up her gasps of shock, he thought it might have been the most goddamn honest conversation they had ever had.

**********

The Bear tasted like smoke and sweetness. Rum and skooma, tinged with something darker. Rust...salt and fire. Dragonsblood.

Her reasoning must be on vacation somewhere, because her mouth busily drank him down. Taking in all the tastes of him with a rising hunger, sucking upon his tongue as his hands pulled her head back almost painfully...yanking her down to lie flat upon the pantry floor.

Nemain stiffened as she felt something...a pan or plate crack beneath her weight. Ouch. One of the hands holding her so harshly swept out. Clearing the obstruction as she sighed against his mouth in relief as that tight pressure returned...this time to her hip as he ground against her. Nothing but the floor, and her between him and it.

Abruptly, she had trouble drawing breath as the Nord crushed her beneath his greater weight. Moving his hand from its death grip grasp on her hair to her chin, Ulfric held her immobile. Plundering her mouth at his leisure even as she shuddered in his scorching embrace.

Nemain moaned to feel him; overwhelmed by the drag of their bodies, the surge of heat that never failed to spark as they came together. The jut of him hard and wanting, even as she opened her hips; gliding and hooking a leg behind his knee to push them even closer together. She was thrilling to it, aching with it, pulse tripping and breath coming in little pants as their tongues slicked together. More.

His hand was making helpless little circles around the fabric bunched up against her hip. Like he didn’t quite know what to do with himself. Where to put his hands, as his mouth devoured hers.

The man had found precious little resistance earlier, when his thumbs had boldly caressed her nipples. Perhaps he just needed a wee bit of encouragement?

Seizing his hand from her hip, Nemain moved a bit. Lifting his fingers she brought the Nord’s hands up to cup the weight of her (admittedly) small chest, as he froze.

Breathily she spoke, “Hope y’don’t mind that they be...erm, chicken eggs. Someone - a man recently told me that I be undesirable, though I think...” she clicked her tongue.
“...That he may have overestimated his ploy for me favor. Clearly, I be not easy to bed at all.” With that, Nemain wriggled...a full bodied writhe beneath him.

Her robes gave a tearing rip, as all of a sudden she could take in a lungful of air - only to moan, embarrassingly loud as hot lips and tongue closed around the bare skin of her left tit.

Gathering as much of her as he could in one mouthful, Bear grasped her other breast with his spare hand. Making her squirm, even as she dug her fingers into his scalp. Commanding him without words to continue, by gods or else!

The tight suction, scratch of his beard...all combined to fuel a delicious torture all its own. Unsatisfied, squirming beneath his iron grasp, Nemain could feel a fine tremor wracking his frame as he fought to hold back.

All that control...still held tight. When will you break? She pulled him away and up; just enough to kiss his chin, down his jaw, scraping her teeth across the heavy stubble. Making him moan, even as she purred to feel him thrust helplessly...hips twitching in unconsciously demanding urgency.

That moan. The sound shot straight through her. She was aching.

“Nemain.” His brusque voice sounded uncertain. It wasn’t like him. She didn’t like it. Giving into the temptation to swipe her tongue up the column of his throat, Nemain smiled to feel his hands clenching spasmodically when she sucked at the thrumming pulse.

“I want you to touch me. And if you stop...I willnae be held responsible for what I do.”

Shifting, he seemed to take her word at face value. For his own mouth was suddenly very busy—tracing scalding hot designs against her thundering pulse in return, down to the delicate wings of her collarbone. Cor, she was coming out of her skin; moving restlessly...hips shifting in helpless circles, searching for...For...

“So beautiful,” Her Bear was murmuring, thumb dragging over and over across the tight pucker of her nipple. He shifted, deliberately dragging his thigh along her cunt through layers and layers of robes...stupid robes! She wanted them off, and she wanted them off now.

Feeling a desperate whine rise in her throat, Nemain twined her arms around his neck. Readjusted her lower half, and pushed up with all her might.

Ulfric gave a muffled shout, blue eyes going wide. Both hands jerked to her waist, gripping hard, and she would have asked if she had pushed too far…but the way he arched toward her, hips bucking, dragging his cock along the slick seam of her smalls, gods it sent all thought flying from her mind.

By Hircine he was hard, hot, and when she shifted instinctively toward him, she could feel him press tight against the folds of her cunt.

“Off! Get these things off!” she gasped, hips snapping forward against her will. He rode out the unsubtle grind with a buck of his own hips, driving up against her hard enough that she saw stars.
Her breath was coming in ragged pants all at once, echoed by his own uneven rasp. Their eyes were locked together: heated, wanting...stunned.

Their combined breath fogged up the cold pantry air, and with a shiver of delight she realized they were breathing in perfect sync. As one...“Please take them - the robes. Off! I cannae…”

He dug his nails into the yielding prison of her clothing and dragged her against him. Wrapping the robes around his fist as he pushed up with his other hand; the better to keep the bulk of himself from stealing her air. The pressure was intense, perfect, the near-painful hardness of her nipples rasping against his chest.

Nemain dropped her head back, fighting to swallow the little helpless noises that kept trying to rise out of her. She tightened her thighs around his hips, still constrained by the strangling robes...and rode the delicious bucking writhe of his body. “I want— What can I—”

Nemain panted, *robes still too tight!* Her flesh hot and greedy. “Anything!” she said, truly meaning it. “Anything you wan-”

Silencing her with the seal of his lips, she groaned into him. Tearing her head away to gasp for breath, she took in quick, sharply inhaled huffs as his hot tongue trailed across her skin, sending delicious shudders wracking her flesh. And when he closed his teeth over her earlobe and tugged, she nearly combusted. Then and there.

“If you’re no gonna do anything like undress me, Bear, so help me…”

He chuckled against the skin of her neck. “Don’t curse me just yet, witch.”

And then he dove down, hands scraping down her sides as he attacked her chest once more. She was dissolving, need an impossible tight coil in her belly, tied by some internal string straight to her breasts. Each tug of his mouth, each scalding stroke of his tongue over her just wound her tighter and tighter and tighter until she swore she was about to come flying apart. She sucked in air harsh and fast; riding each delicious pull of his mouth, fingers gripping his hair.

The Nord was going to kill her. This slow, methodical torture that he obviously had learned somehow was going to make her fly apart. And he hadn’t even touched her properly yet. “...Please!”

He turned his face with a drunken sound, stubble rasping across sensitive flesh. When he took her other nipple into his mouth, Nemain keened...shudders wracking her body. Completely helpless to this unexpected onslaught. She was losing what little mind she had left, barely able to swallow back the desperate cries in time. Who cared, *who fucking cared*, if Borri or Arngeir would hear her? Who cared if they would know she was hidden here in the trash strewn pantry being unmade by him?

She was nothing but endless waves of need, clit throbbing in time with her pulse, muscles going tight as she rode the rhythmic buck of his hips.

And then one of his hands dropped to part her suffocatingly wadded-up robes. Rough fingers calloused from years of swordplay were pushing between them, dragging over the sopping wet of her smalls. Pushing inside. Swirling his thumb with a delicious, perfect pressure right over the begging, needy nub that made her thrust up wantonly.

She felt him smile against her skin, the superior bastard, as suddenly his fingers began working inside of her. Gliding more deep with every pass, as she practically ripped out the hair from his scalp in her delight.

And when his other hand traced down the curve of her hip to tease the soft inner flesh of her thigh,
his fingers pumping within her all the while-

-She did cry out this time, far too loud. Ulfric became stiff as a board above her. Trapped, her core pulsing pathetically around his fingers...they both listened in breathless caution for any warning that the other residents of High Hrothgar had heard.

Nothing but the silence. Ulfric lifted his head with a hissed exhale, curling his forefinger inside her up and back...touching... oh gods.

“Fuck,” Nemain managed to murmur instead of yell. She felt shocky, trembling all over. “Where did you learn this you…you lying son of a bitch. You said you had nae experience!”

“I didn’t say that. I said I had very little.” He whispered, the words tickling her as she moved. Fought to reassert herself in this battle of wills - for make no mistake. It was a battle. One that he had won, so far. But she came with her own finely honed weapons. And a knowledge of how to wield them just as well; if not more skillfully than the surprisingly nimble fingers of Bear.

All the times she had brought herself off after that awkward midnight kiss. Enduring weeks...months of no touch other than cursory glancing brushes. Perfunctory swipes of a cleaning cloth. Gods. Her own hands never thrilled her this way. Could not hold a candle to the way she felt now, thrumming with pleasure, hyperaware of his desire for her, wanting—

Ulfric’s other hand slid down her hip, rough fingertips teasing along the folds of her sex as he sat back. Pulling out his other hand to grasp her neck and slowly - so very carefully, drag her to sit upright upon his bent knees. He kissed her once, hard, before his hands began sliding down her body again. And when he hooked her thigh over his elbow and spread her wide open - bare to his questing fingers, all she could do was writhe toward him with harsh, breathy gasps.

“Please...don’t...stop!”

She was begging, she was—she was dissolving at each strong pump of his fingers. His thumbs teased along her folds and his thumb -that treacherous, wonderful digit - rubbed over her clit, falling into that rhythm - spiraling up from deep inside her. *Fuck, she was spread open, she was aching, she was so close,* so close, so—

His voice was a rasping growl. “...Still think I lack self control, woman? Do I lack discipline?”

Her mouth parted as she was literally unable to answer. Completely caught up in the tidal rush of feeling -pleasure, unlooked for yet so satisfying...if he would only...just-

The man’s Thu’um ripped through her as their foreheads knocked together. Completely limp in his grip but for her iron grasp of his biceps, Nemain shallowly panted into his open mouth as he Spoke. Telling her in no uncertain terms what he wanted, at last.

“Show me what you look like in this, Nemain. Gods...come for me, woman!”

Nemain arched off his lap with a shocked cry as she complied, her entire body drawn tight as a bowstring. She felt the hard clench of it followed by a cascade of undulating pleasure. It rippled through her over and over and over again, chased by the heat of his mouth against her own and the clever flick of his thumb. It felt like she was flying above her own body; her lungs filled with ragged breath.

“...Dragonborn? Ulfric? Are you two in here?”

*Couldn’t stop.* She was still coming; clenching around his hand as her hips made helpless little jerks.
Even as Nemain pulled back her head oh-so-slightly in concern to see the bastard fear thuaidh wear a look of incredibly smug arrogance - he didn't stop. Continued teasing her to a second high, one even stronger than the last as the door to the pantry creaked open and they...oh no…

“-too late. I tell you, Borri, I heard a noise and - oh blessed Akatosh.”

And the two remaining Greybeards Arngeir and Borri watched in respective disgust and bemused shock. As Nemain -Dragonborn - rode Ulfric Stormcloak’s lap while crying out with orgasmic bliss. High, mewling and completely out of control as she had an unwilling audience to the best sex she’d ever had in her life.

Limp and boneless, she buried her head in his neck, just listening to him breath harshly as the two Greybeards remained silent. Struck dumb, most like.

“...Ah. I suppose…”

“We’re just fine, Master Arngeir. Please.” Bear’s deep voice held a throaty glee.

“Close the door on the way out. It's drafty in here.”

Feeling him begin to chuckle merrily as the door closed with a solid bang, Nemain moaned in abject horror.

“Oh no.”

“ Oh, yes.”

Chapter End Notes

*what Einarth says to Nemain roughly translates to 'Dragons are meant for domination.' Essentially repeating his warning from he sauna.

All other Dovahzul is drawn from the game and these nifty websites.

https://www.thuum.org/learn/practice/phrases.php
https://www.thuum.org/translate-legacy.php

Please read and review. It feeds my ego and maketh me joyously inclined to write ever more smut.
The Aftertaste

Chapter Notes

Yes, there is actual plot amidst the wild citrus blooms of my imagination. Never fear - death and gore is always somewhere round the corner. But this was too good.

Chapter theme music: Wardruna's Solringen. Just oh so beaaootiful.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rEeEKYbVX8&list=LLG- HL7kxL8qmdqzzaLpxQ6w&index=3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was bound.

Entrapped, held fast by a ponderous chain that kept her from drawing deeply of lifegiving breath. Hidden deep in a yawning chasm that lacked any light whatsoever. The chain emitted its own light, dark and dull red.

“What…I cannae move...”

A sigh, rushing through the darkness as Máthair showed herself from the gloaming dark. She stared in fear. No, not Máthair…

_Melka the Hagraven._

Feathers rustled and snapped as an elongated claw reached out and tapped Nemain upon the nose. “Hbrbrbrbr...overreacting again, my little morsel? Be you about to complain once more, after all the love an’ the care I’ve taken with ye, all these years? Cor! That for the gratitude of a child! Yet you deny the blessings I’ve taken such pains to give ye!”

A caw of cackling laughter. “An’ still ye wonder why I cast ye off!”

She whimpered. “...Máthair?”

“Ain’ ye wonder why I cast ye off?”

She whimpered. “…Máthair?”

“Dinnae Máthair me!” Melka screeched, slashing at Nemains face with her clawed hands. “All these years, an’ this be the thanks I get? A snivelling, weeping brat! You be no child o’ mine!”

Shaking in shock, Nemain turned her face. Unable to escape the attacking talons that struck, over and over, until she felt the skin of her cheeks peel to ribbons. Hanging down in stripes even as she choked upon the blood pouring, stinging raw from her wounds.
Twisting, trying to break free, Nemain felt the links of the chain bite into her skin. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she shooked her head. Snapping it from side to side, willing herself to awaken.

*This be not real! Tis a vision...a dream?* What was, what could be...she could not rightly know. *Gods.*

“I don’t...what? Who be there?”

Galan strode out of the shadows upon her right. “You know me. Aren’t I your Galan?”

No! A sob crept into her throat as she watched him approach in despair. A glowing briarheart pushed its way through the skin of his chest, sinew knitting it in place as Galan’s dark eyes grew dead and cold. Skin bleaching as blood ran red, darkening as it dripped from the heart hole into a river that rushed towards her. *Should it touch her skin...*

“You cannæ be him! I…” Casting about with her senses, Nemain realized she was the only living thing in this shadowed, torturous plane. “You’re nae real! No no no!”

“Och aye, I am.” Blood hit her, ice cold and strangling as the chain tightened. Links scraping with a metallic *tink tink tink.*, as she gasped for air. “You did this. My taisce, beloved of my heart.”

“Only-” his laugh was a reedy, evil thing, as Nemain bent backwards at the neck away from the creeping, slithering thing that had been Galan. “I have you to thank for it. Truly...for I was sore afraid. It hurt - like the jaws of Hircine’s hounds, your knife cut into me though I didnae scream. Wouldnae dishonor the gods…”

A cruel laugh. “...though you could not be bothered in turn.”

Nemain managed to huff in short, sharp bursts. She could feel her face going numb from the damage done to it. A stray thought raced across the dumbing fog of her delusions... *breathe.*

*Yol.* She breathed fire. The chain loosened.

“Still. I must thank ye. For now, I be beyond all fears. All thanks to you...beloved.”

“I’m not your beloved, pretender! Dead thing!” she spit at the Briarheart. Seeing the shadow of the horned headdress appearing even now, as the sawed blade of his office appeared. Held high in his hand, as he advanced with a crazed grin.

“A heart for a heart?” He crooned, grabbing her torn face with his free hand. Forcing her to look into those cloudy corpse eyes even as she jerked away.

“Give me your heart, for I’ve given ye mine. And we’ll be together forever, my taisce...once you ascend. Become the hag crone; Night Queen! Come back to us, beloved, and we will return the Reach to its rightful glory. Our waterfalls will run red with the blood of the Nords! We will feast on their flesh, even as we rip the very silver they have raped from our mines away from their fat fingers and jowly necks! Join me! Make Red Eagle rise proud, once again!”

“No! This isnae real! You’re dead! Dead dead dead! I’ve killed ye, you walking rotsack, doona y
think a necromancer would know?! You’re nae alive! Go away!"

“A heart for a heart.” Melka crawled towards Nemain, beady black eyes calculating and cruel. “Give us your heart, little morsel! And I promise...me word, mo chroi...that ye may return to Deepwood Redoubt. Och, with all your friends and family. All the wee little babbies an’ younglings you sae love...to bring up right and proper in the Old Way. But first...give me your heart. The heart!”

“You’re nae my mother!” Nemain cried. “What mother would do such to her own child? My little pips...I’d sooner feed them my very legs than throw them to the wolves! Why! Ochone, why? Why did ye forsake me so!”

Standing together, the figures of Galan and Melka blurred and trembled. Mouths moving in unity.

Where is the one who calls, who calls?

The briarheart born in the night!

Who is the one who calls, who calls?

The wicker sacrifice alight!

When will the one be called, be called?

At the feast when the beast does bite!

What do we call, and who do we call?

The Briarheart and Witch to fight!

“Nooo! I’ve fought for ye all me life, an’ for what!? For you to cast me forth like sae much offal! I serve the Gods, I do...and no tears could ever - EVER change that!”

They loomed, growing tree tall even as she struggled to escape the chains. Through the fear, Nemain heard a man speak quietly. Calmly. A familiar voice. Where had she heard it -

Our paths are not written in any stars. Only a coward, unsatisfied by his condition...unwilling to fight for what he wants will choose the easy way. Say that it cannot be helped. That fate has stuck him in the hole he could easily climb out of, if he would but apply himself to the task.

“You know what...FUCK IT. I forsake you! I curse you right back with a sore curse!”

The chain expanded, glowing molten red-gold as Nemain cried out at the burning heat of her prison. Breathing flame, even as Galan and Melka continued chanting the dirge that was so much mush in her ears. Ceaseless, unending as the words battered away...near drowning that still, quiet voice. I willnae listen! Gods grant me freedom!

“I hex you! I curse you that all your plans may be fouled, your path unclear! Go! Go away and taunt me nae more!”
A howling swirled round her in the darkness, ripped from her lips. Screaming, fighting...too little, all too late. For as the chain melted, merging into Nemain’s nakedness as her hands pulled free - becoming vicious claws.

Red hot pain arced through every nerve as her nose and mouth elongated into a draconic muzzle; leathery wings sprouting. Pulling free from the stretching agony of ribs bent backwards... changing.

The vision was truth, she felt it in her bones. Gods...this. This was what she truly was!

“Aid! Nii nis kos! Zu'u los ni dovah, ruth hi! Vos zey bo!”

***********

“Nemain. Wake up.”

The world went askew. She was falling...falling- Thunk!

Coldwetheavy oofph. Snow?

Blinking tiredly, the witch sat up. She was indeed sitting hip deep in a snowdrift. Her hands fairly tingled with power; heat that was twin to the fire burning from Yol in her throat. Even now she struggled to hold it back. To constrain the destructive Thu‘um that roiled within her chest. Ready to blast forth. To maim, to kill...

Dov wahlaan fah reh. Dragons were born to dominate. A truth Einarth had sought to impress upon her; even during death. She saw it ever more clearly now, with the shiny brightness of two new dovah souls humming within her. Seeping into her spirit, poisoning her rest after the ill-fated attack upon High Hrothgar...had it been only yesterday?

A rich, bass voice broke through the snarl of her confused thoughts.

“...Still sleeping, then?”

“Well. I be properly awake now, thanks to you throwing me arse over kettle.”

Brushing off her mage robes (much lighter than those hideous Greybeard shrouds, yet not nearly so warm) Nemain gladly took Ulfric’s proffered hand and wrenched herself to a wobbling standstill. Snow fell in clumps from her rear end and thighs as she shivered, rubbing her arms.

That was some nightmare. “So, what then? Did ye suddenly faint like a wee lassie and dump me to save your skin? Or be this yet another chance to take in the spectacular view?” Flippantly waving her arms at the dense fog that shrouded the valley below, Nemain paused for Bear’s response.
She didn’t have long to wait. His breath added to the clouds swirling in drifting strands. “Figured the snow would wake you up, since you were literally breathing fire.”

Letting her hands fall to her sides, Nemain finally noticed the raw redness that was creeping from the back of Ulfric’s neck to his front. The florid brightness set off the fear thuaidh’s clear blue eyes, resting so thoughtfully upon her as she swallowed. Well, dig a hole and throw me in. Shit.

“...Er. Right. Sorry...let me heal tha-”

“Mmm-mm.” Still watching her closely, the Nord shook his head.

“I think not. For all I know, this is just another ploy to make us stop again.”

“Now, that be unfair...” Nemain complained as she began trailing behind him. It was no longer snowing, but the thick cloud cover they were currently walking through misted everything it touched. Hardly any better than being pelted by snow, in her opinion. She was fair soaked all the same...only Yol and her beast of burden were keeping her warm. And to be deprived of a source of heat, now? In this weather?

“I was sleeping! And you’re no getting out of carrying me sae easily! A favor is a favor, and you be bound by bloody honor to haul this Forsworn arse both up ‘and’ down the Monahven!”

“This favor never mentioned being roasted alive. Also...you talk in your sleep.”

“I doona sleeptalk!” Do I? Oh dear.

Practically jogging to keep up with Bear’s long, tireless strides, Nemain huffed. “Like you didnae like being stopped for breaks.” A sly tone crept into her voice, as she watched his shoulders go rigid at her words. “In fact, I be thinking you’re fair ramped up to crash soon, aye? I could help ye with that. Were we to stop longer than it takes to draw five breaths, for once.”

Dragonborn and rebel Jarl had left the ruins of High Hrothgar before dawn. Bidding a very awkward farewell to a stiffy disapproving Master Arngeir, while Master Borri...

She blushed, thinking of the list the Greybeard had slipped into her hand with a nod and a wink. The old lecher had rewritten a master list of slang words used to describe...well. Fornication. ‘To be used at your liberal discretion, Dragonborn.’ He had written; a hug and an amulet of Talos rounding out his gifts at their parting.

Read this to Bear? Not likely. He’d have to wrench the stick out of his arse, first. For since being hefted aboard his back for the return to Ivarstead the Nord had been uncommonly quiet.

Mentally heaving a frustrated sigh, Nemain watched as her recalcitrant companion stomped further down the seven thousand steps. Oh, he responded when she prodded, but otherwise acted as though it were business as usual. As though he had not completely blown her mind the previous night. Had not laid waste to her reservations of joining with him (which had not happened yet, damn him for awakening her expectations) with his talented tongue and surprisingly skillful hands.

In fact...the fear thuaidh had treated her this day as consistently as he had the entire time she had known him. In an offhand, polite manner that dipped occasionally into mirth or ire, depending on the subject of their conversation.

Where was that tentative, little-boy smile? She missed hearing him laugh.
Perhaps reading out a list of naughty terms would have lightened the mood a bit. As it was, the Reachwoman had found a newfound source of endless amusement while riding bearback: tormenting Ulfric.

Every time she whispered into his ear that she needed to stop off, to relieve herself or to beg a drink of water...she’d slither down, touching as much of the heavily muscled Nord under his armor as could possibly be managed. She knew...having worn robes nearly all her life, that the wind and wet tended to plaster the cloth against her legs and hips. Turning it from a modest garment into something unexpectedly quite revealing…

Yes. That bitten-back gasp when she had bent over at the waist, scooping up snow to melt in her waterskin...hah! It had brought a cunning smile to her lips, to know...to sense that she was slowly wearing away the steel-clad resolve of the man’s resistance. His unyielding rebuttal to being seduced.

Och, and it was all flowers and sunshine when it be me all heaving and panting like a ninny. With an audience no less, Nemain thought smugly. But Ulfric...he had been stalwart in refusing her advances. Had kept her from reaching down his pants, after they had woken wrapped up together all langered from drinking...holding her hands back with a shake of his head, even as she seethed silently.

No...he wouldn’t let her see or touch him, for some reason. Which simply would not do.

Ergo, Nemain had insisted upon breaks in the hike down the mountain. Every stop on their journey (a trip that would lead to an inevitable parting of ways, did he not realize this) she teased him just a bit more. Flashed a tad more skin, knowingly seeing him stiffen as he glared right back. Those full lips twisted piquantly as she talked of how much she was looking forward to spring. To bathing in a clear running body of water once more...naked. Washing clothing - half dressed. Hauling drinking water in buckets...only to spill the stuff all over her thin gown, nipples standing turgid and hard out from the white cloth -

“-Haven’t you run out of things to describe doing in a river, woman?” His rumbling voice had sounded fair strangled, as she finished elucidating (with unseemly glee) how her coven ritually cavorted naked in the light of the full moon. Splashing each other, laughing, throwing mud…

“Ysmir’s shorthairs, you’d think you enjoyed being wet and cold.”

“Arra, not the cold part perhaps. But being wet? Freed from the damn nuisance that is clothing?” She had tongued his ear, loving his bitten back oath as the man tightened his grip on her legs. That’ll likely leave a bruise.

“I’d trounce round starkers all the time, were it not for this damnable snow. But perhaps a spell could solve that-”

“NO. No spells. No fire, no Shouts. Just...go to sleep. We’re still too far from the halfway rest stop.”

Grinning in triumph, Nemain had curled around him to coo into the ear she had just licked. Whispering in a sultry, low tone as she enjoyed feeling him squirm. “If that be what you want.”

In for a septim, out for a soul gem.
Hmph. Never mind that what she wanted was more of what they had shared last night. Though he seemed less than inclined to accept what she was practically shoving at him. Rolling her eyes at herself, Nemain wondered if perhaps she was laying it on a bit too thick. Though it certainly was fun.

The man was utterly paranoid. Likely, he thought she was entrapping him into the marriage bed with her womanly wiles.

Gods...she shuddered. *Death first.* Just because she stupidly liked the man didn’t mean that she could see herself tied to him for the rest of her life. Bearing his wee bear cubs, all blue eyes and wispy blonde fuzz. Looking beseechingly up at her as she stabbed stabbed stabbed - *NODINNAETHINKOFIT.*

*So. Covert warfare it shall be.*

Though, as she looked at the burnt, peeling skin on the man’s neck she could understand his dimmed mood for such things. “Really, Milord, just a moment and I could—”

“No. And stop calling me that.”

“But it looks as though it be painful to—”

“NO.”

She stamped her foot in the snow, nearly slipping upon the switchback they were currently rounding. With no view in sight - only gloomy fog, far as the eye could see. *So depressing.* “Will ye stop being sae willful? I did it. I be willing to heal it. What be wrong with that?”

Halting his walk, she could hear the Nord sigh. “If I let you heal my neck, could you possibly contain yourself?”

Popping her hip to the side, she flashed him a saucy grin as that steely blue stare fixed upon her over the man’s fur wrapped shoulder. “Why, whatever do you be referring to?”

At his irritated growl in response, she held up her hands in surrender. “Fine, fine. Not a peep. Though…” she added while reaching up on tiptoe to grasp his neck, making him wince.

“You *could* be a wee bit friendlier. I said was sorry, you ken? T’was a bad dream.”

As his skin slowly morphed from bright red back to its previous pallor, she kept her gaze trained upon him. She could see his jaw compress; feel the cords in his throat work as her hands delicately stroked the bare space there while casting to heal. Stifling a chuckle at the feel of his hair standing on end at her touch, Nemain cleared her throat and made her face severe.

“One *might* think you be averse to spells, fear thuidh.”

“Ugh, that be so impractical. You dinnae always have potions of the right sort or in sufficient quantity whilst traveling. Why not use all at one’s disposal?”

His lips twitched. “Because. It itches.”

She gave him an all-knowing leer. “That means it be working. Here...almost done.”

As she started to pull her hands away, he stopped her. Holding her hands, Ulfric prevented her from stepping away as he continued to stare down at her in that pensive manner. “What did you dream about?”

She rather doubted that the Bear wanted a rehash of her sordid family issues. “I dreamed of Sheogorath Mad-God. He called me a useless bag of dung. Then, we braided each other’s hair and played skip-rope with his chamberlain’s entrails.”

“Oh, really.” His fingers tightened against her palms, as she smiled winningly. “Is that so.”

“Och, so verrah true. Then I stole all the cheese in Windhelm and made a rather darling statue of Talos.” Appreciating just how very bonny the man was, even staring down dubiously at her while she jabbered on, Nemain lifted her foot and dragged it down his inner calf.

“...and lit it on fire. With a torch made from burning mammoth cheese, to even out the taste.”

“-Rank stuff, y'know. Singes the nostrils. Can't imagine how the giants abide it.”

Seconds ticked past as Ulfric continued staring at her, completely blank. “That’s a rather outlandish lie.”

“No, really. Sheogorath requested that I call him ‘Ann Marie.’ Though I’d say the bloke be more of a ‘Cordelia’, since we’re being ‘sae honest’ with each other.” Chew on that, you cold bastard.

“I must have sampled some of Talos’ Holy Cheese Effigy in my sleep,” Nemain sighed, biting back a laugh as she could see - was that a smirk? Hah...holey cheese. Holy - yep, he got it.

“Alas, it is your horrid luck that my breath of fire emerged whilst being carried by yoooo-”

Trapped in a paroxysm of giggles as Ulfric’s hands shot up to her armpits, Nemain felt her stomach lurch as he lifted her up in the air. Staggering closer to the mountainside with her in tow, she snickered in victory; lacing her legs around his waist even as he fell backwards against the cold stone.

“You know, that was probably the most creative lie I’ve ever heard. Which is a fucking miracle, considering the years I’ve spent holding court for all the degenerates of Eastmarch.”

Preoccupied with the hands currently kneading her backside, she peeked up to the lofty height of his face. Which remained solemn; only a twinkle in his eye revealing any emotion whatsoever.
“Now that I cannae believe. Surely you’ve - look out!”

Hisses wafted through the air as she leaned back; hurling a fireball at the two ice wraiths that dodged and twirled. Spiralling through the fog, ephemeral and deadly.

“Dammit Nemain!”

The Jarl nearly dropped her, as her arms pinwheeled in wild circles. Fighting to keep them in her sights, Nemain squeezed his hips with all the strength her legs possessed. “No Bear! Just...aim me at’em! Not- argh!”

“Sorry.” He spoke, with a definite inflection of not-sorry as her teeth nearly splintered from being ground together. A metallic shimmer joined the sibilant cries of the wraiths as Ulfric drew his sword and advanced past the mage he had unceremoniously dumped upon the steps.

Ducking as one wraith spit subzero poison, Nemain managed to stop her eyes from spinning in her head long enough to send a mighty gout of flame from her free hand. Consuming the ice wraith in a howl, as Ulfric’s sword slashed the one currently facing him into a spattering explosion of frosty goop.

Ack! Nemain scrabbled for handfuls of snow to wipe away the stinging splash of ice wraith essence from her face. It had landed everywhere...freezing her braid, her legs...

“My feet!”

Trying to stand, as Ulfric hurriedly raised her to a standing position...ice crackled as the leather of her boots snapped and popped. Giving him an evil glare for his pains, Bear shrugged in response. “It’s a good thing you’re not walking.”

“Hmph. Hoped I’d be riding something by this time of day.” Tossing her braid behind her, she heard an exasperated huff as he muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath.

Point to the witch. Nord, zero. Well...alright. I be fair. One for the Nord as well.

Squinting, she looked around them to be sure nothing else was about to attack as they gathered what things had been tossed loose by the sudden fight. Ulfric kicked a dead goat that had slithered down from wherever the wraiths had appeared. “Huh. Think it’s fresh?”

Hobbling over, Nemain reached out her hand and spread her fingers, concentrating. “Feels newly dead…” Straightening, she folded her arms and smiled with a fervor to match his, Thank Dibe, Hircine and the God of small miracles. Hardtack and dried fish have been crumping me guts.

“Hello, dinner. I’ve got some splendid recipes for goat. Aye - let’s make a meal of it.”

Lifting the dead beast over his elbow, Ulfric spared her a wry glance. “Should I be terrified to sample Forsworn cuisine?”

Nemain hopskipped over to him. With a hitch and a leap, she managed to jump up on his back as the man laughed breathlessly beneath her weight. “Uh-uh. I shall render the goat roast just the way
Mother used to make it. Be a dear, and pick up some of that bush for kindling while you be at it?"

A stick clouted her in the face, making her snort. “Eyy!?”

“Whoops. Had to store it somewhere.”

“I’ll be storing wood in your britches if you doona mind your manners!”

“...Too late. Already got plenty of wood there. No room for more.”

A delighted gasp. “Wha... *Bear!*”

**********

“You’re not serious.”

The Jarl of Eastmarch smiled lazily where he was sprawled out behind their fire. The flames were low, yet enough cheer and warmth emitted from the tiny source of light that he loathed to put it out just yet. They were lying upon their flattened sleep rolls, the furs cushioning against the cold snow as they digested the unfortunate goat; washed down with a shared bottle of mead and dried apple slices. Just enough victuals for them to be pleasantly full, but not overstuffed.

Scrubbing at his teeth, he paused from chewing the snowberry branch to speak. “No, I’m not jesting. The nobility in Solitude wipe their arses with squares cut from linen wraps. And...”

He smothered a chuckle as peals of laughter soared from where Nemain sat. “...they carry small sachets and pomanders filled with spices and scents.” He waved a hand airily. “To well, you know. Clear the air.”

“Gods! What prissy ponces! Be moss and leaves not good enough for their royal cheeks? Wait...”

Picking through the remains of the goat, Nemain lifted a morsel of meat to her mouth and sucked it away. Her grey eyes fastened upon him playfully. “Ugh. I cannae believe I be asking this. Do they... reuse these linen wraps? For that be quite wasteful, tossing good cloth down a privy.”

He nodded, mesmerized as that finger slid further between her lips. Licking busily, Nemain repeated the action with her other fingers. Ostensibly to get every trace of fat and salt off of them, though he rather wished she had washed her hands in the snow, instead. A tightness curled in his belly at the sound of her last finger, popping free. Damn. Don’t think about it. “Some unfortunate laundress does a horrible sort of mop-up every week. Boils the shit-rags in a cauldron with, erm, lye. Very strong lye.”

“Woof. Disgusting. An’ I thought I had a ridiculous job, being Dragonborn and all.”

"I suspect the laundress would prefer to kill dragons over performing her task as well."

Night had fallen, taking away the last of the cloud cover with the sun. A starry expanse surrounded the small rocky alcove they had taken shelter in...rather cozy, now that a snowstorm was not
concealing the tidy rock arch.

The small fire was burnt nearly to ash and coal, throwing shadows upon both their faces. Too many shadows...the Breton looked nearly as wild as she had in the Proving. All covered in swirls of smoke - painted in flickers of light instead of woad. Grey eyes glittered in the dark as the witch nibbled idly on her own stick. Apparently done cleaning her teeth, she tossed it into the fire; that piercing stare poring over him in sudden seriousness.

“Erm...you’ll be sure to check up on Aventus and Sofie for me, aye? I have no place to put them as of yet. But this Kel - the Elder Scroll - or at least its whereabouts might be known at the College of Mages. And I dinnae think they’d look too kindly upon a lad and lassie tagging along after me. Tis dangerous upon the road.”

He blinked. What an absurd question. “Of course I’ll check on them. Hatti and Skjora are probably having the time of their lives, pampering the children. You may return to find them rather unwilling to be deprived of a steady diet of honey nut clusters and sweetrolls.”

She laughed. “That be a lovely picture. Fattening them up right well and good, the sweet little pips. Remind me to thank the auld ladies when I return.”

Kicking a log that had fallen further into the coals, Ulfric cleared his throat. There was a joke there, just waiting to be told about fattening up children for a cannibal cookfire. But she looked so worried. I’ll save the jest for later. “And as far as lodgings are concerned...I’ve been meaning to ask if you’d consider staying at court.”

Taking in her start of surprise, he smiled. “Training to be Wuunferth’s replacement, I mean. After the old rascal kicks the bucket, we will be needing a new court mage. You’ve proven yourself quite adept at handling his obstinate mannerisms. And the last two apprentices quit within weeks, claiming they could not handle his workload.”

"Truly, you’d be doing me a favor.”

She hmmed. “Wuunferth be a hardy auld boor. You may be waiting a long while, fear thuaidh.”

Flicking a piece of ash from his trousers, Ulfric graced her with a droll stare. “Come on. Don’t look at me like that. It would provide a viable source of income for you and your adopted children. Besides...how were you planning on providing for yourself on the path to Winterhold?”

The tiny witch licked her lips, appearing troubled. “I hadnae thought that far, to be honest. Live off the land, mayhap? Surely it be spring down below the mountain.”

“Early spring. Nothing to eat but green shoots of grass, mud and insects. You’ll end up dinner yourself, should you become weak from hunger. Here.”

Reaching inside his knapsack, Ulfric rooted around for the small, sewn bag that he usually kept tucked away in the inner lining. “Take this, as a down payment for your services.”

Catching it in midair, she shot him another considering glance before opening the bag. Shaking it carefully over her hand, the woman gasped as freshwater pearls poured into her hand. A spill of milky spheres; pink and silver and cream. “This...this be too much, Bear. You be attempting to buy me!”
“Robes are expensive. Particularly the enchanted ones. Not to mention all the books you’ll be reading- and the bribes you’ll undoubtedly need to purchase, to seek your Elder Scroll.” Wincing as his tunic scraped against the half-healed chest wound, Ulfric tossed a smaller bag filled with septims to join its partner upon the Reachwitch’s lap.

“Spend it cautiously. Pearls will not excite as much attention as other, more precious cut gems would. But both will run out faster than you think...I’ve seen the prices that mages charge in Winterhold for their services.”

The bag of septims came hurtling back, smacking him in the face. “What-”

“I will not be bought, Ulfric.” Her voice was unusually stern. Rubbing his cheek in irritation, he looked over to where she sat, busily replacing the pearls back in their small sack.

Hefting it in one hand, she shoved it towards him. Eyes narrowed and chin set, as the pearls joined the septims thrown somewhere near his knapsack. He could hear them clatter harshly against the stone steps.

“I doon need your pity. Nor your charity. Take it back.”

He bit his lip. Hard. Stubborn witch. “It’s not charity. You think this is too much? I’ve seen dogs at the courts of the western Holds decorated with more wealth upon their collars than what I’ve given you.”

“Are you calling me your bitch, fear thuaidh...”

“No.” Shit, this had gone south faster than he would have planned. For the woman was well and truly angered, he could see that now. High spots of color burned upon her cheeks as her mouth worked, puckering in unspoken wrath.

He could feel the rumbling power of her Thu’um, trapped by her willpower alone. The flames guttered in the wake of the vibrations emanating from where she sat, crouched. As though she were ready to spring-

Casually sliding his hand down his side, Ulfric did not remove his eyes from the Dragonborn. If he could just reach his belt knife...just in case...

-Damn! Thwarted, his hand was trapped beneath her knee in his pursuit of arms as she clambered atop him. Shit he was in agony, those soft thighs bared beneath her robes gliding against his stomach as his tunic rode higher; even as he pushed with his hands to toss her off. Bringing to the forefront of his awareness all the unslaked lust he had done his damndest to rid himself of, despite her efforts.

With a rip-tear of air being displaced, Nemain’s hands lit up with a sinister greenish spell...prominently displaying the fury in her features. Too close...whatever she aggressively held up to his face fairly spat the reek of magic. Foul and familiar - striking like a sparkstone upon his nerves.

Tilting her head, Nemain blew into his face. Making him jump. “You think...that because you’ve
lulled me intae submission with your clever hands that I be your plaything, Bear? Give the lass a tumble an’ a bag of pearls for her finer qualities?”

He felt his heart stutter as a glowing green hand flattened against his chest. “Be that the way of things, hmm?”

Clenching his jaw, Ulfric glared right back at her. Manfully ignoring the fear that crept like meltwater through him at the touch of the spell. He could almost hear it - a sheening song that fought for dominance against the pounding of his heart in his throat. *Magic!*

“That’s not what I said. Nor what I meant - and well you know it!”

“Oh, I doon think that I do.” Wisps of green slithered over his face, nearly causing him to hyperventilate as he struggled not to move, to breathe… “Though you show it in strange ways. You didnae even take any pleasure for yourself, you strange man. Though I’ve been more than willing. Why do you persist in self torment?”

His back bowed as small fingers delved beneath his trousers. Cupping his manhood in warm hands, even as he pulled away. Tracing over the thick welted scars.

“Don’t.”

Her fists tightened around his cock. “Dinnae buy me off, Butcher.”

“I’m not. Get off.” Her grey eyes had taken on a warm gleam from the dying fire; turning nearly amber gold. *Elf eyes.*

“I said...get off of me!”

The Thu’um infused demand worked. Her spell suddenly flared out, leaving him gasping as Nemain sat back upon his thighs and pulled her hands free.

As she was no longer straddling his waist, it was but the work of a moment to flip her over. To take charge; the rapid-fire tattoo of his heart lessening somewhat as he ended up on top. *Not on the bottom. Never under anyone, ever again!*

Hearing her squeak in shock, Ulfric gripped her hands hard and thrust them up above her head. Holding her trapped in turn, as he felt her breathing quicken. Testing the air with a quivering lungful, he closed his eyes tightly as the small woman’s emotions pounded into his brain with every pant. *Anger. Lust. Sorrow. Worry.*

“Never,” he ground out through his teeth, “Do that. Again.”

“I won’t.” Her voice was hushed. “Did a number on you, didn’t she. I forgot.”

*Such weakness!* “I do NOT want to talk about it.”

A laugh, cut off with a choked inhale as he crushed her fingers in his hands. Tightening where they threaded through his. “Then don’t.”
And before he could scold her for such foolishness her lips molded to his, blanking out any plans he
might have made. To teach her a damn lesson. To reclaim what manhood remained to him, after
trembling (like a child) beneath the threat of her cursed magic.

Only, he was having increasing difficulty concentrating. Thoughts slipped elusively away with the
warm glide of her tongue against the border of his lower lip. Nearly making him groan as she sucked
upon it, biting his mouth gently. Firmly reclaiming him, even as he gave back in renewed anger and
passion mixed. Thrusting his own tongue inside, to trace the hot mystery of her mouth even as she
played him in turn with quick, hot licks.

Little bites, that made him grind helplessly against her as she lifted a leg -bereft of any robes- and slid
it stealthily up the back of his thigh.

_Fucking minx._

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

Kissing Nemain was like nothing he could would have imagined, months before when the faintest
idea of it had floated into his considerations.

Ulfric knew _-he wasn’t entirely_ without experience. Woeful few as such had been. Last night had
proved it - all the bawdy boasting he had eavesdropped upon...the books he had laboriously studied
had paid off massive dividends in the gasping cries...the _feeling_ of that tight velvet cunt pulsing round
his fingers. Not since killing Torygg had he felt such satisfaction.

He had been too proud to hire a prostitute. Too wary to trust a smiling face at court, after multiple
assassination attempts. Back in his younger years, though...he had not been so reserved. The vast
stretches of Eastmarch had provided one or two other women who had managed to turn his head:

-A young acolyte of Talos who had kissed him behind the altar, who then immediately went out of
her way to ignore him until she was transferred to a new shrine. A visiting young noblewoman who
during trade meetings (he’d never look at the term ‘private negotiations’ the same way again) had lost
her prim tact in a moment of excitement; skirts spilling around them as he caught her up in a
breathless, forbidden embrace in the shadowed hallway. And that beautiful maid from the farmhouse
- she who had born some very exotic tastes she had introduced him to, after that first wild fucking.

_Who else..._ A fellow fighter - the flame-haired older shieldmaiden who had cupped his face with both
sword-hardened hands and shown him how to tilt his head for it; how to stroke his tongue slow and
hot and sweet. That had been the longest of his all-too-brief encounters, meeting every night for three
days in Candlehearth Hall before the warrior woman left. Nothing, not a note or a farewell to
remember the woman by.

_Shor’s beard, why was he thinking of that now?_

He dug his fingers into the back of Nemain’s shoulders, raking them up into her loosening hair as she
twined their tongues together. His body was thrumming with pleasure; the slight weight of the witch
beneath him was just enough to make him feel grounded to the earth, safe. Light enough that he felt
confident of his ability to repel her advances at any given moment should he choose.
But, his mind generously reminded him, this woman is not her. She is no Elenwen. What was it about this particular mage that made him feel so damn good?

“Bear.” Her voice was a hoarse rasp. “Let me…”

“No!” He cried out, pissed beyond measure at himself and at her. For here she was, after one full fucking night and day of torture, beneath him. Open and willing…yet he couldn’t.

He quaked at the thought of magic - her magic being brought against him, hands casting. Hurting. A sick misery dragging him down as he imagined Nemain beholding his scars laid bare, should he risk it. Laughing, seeing his shame…

“Bear. Get up. Just for a second, aye?”

Resting his head against the ground, Ulfric counted to three. Then let go…rolling over to sprawl on the snow packed ground near his sleeproll. You dense motherfucker.

Of course she won’t want anything to do with you now. You practically crushed her, and…she must have felt it. His scars were too obvious for her fingers to have not felt. Tight as her hands had been, caressing him like that. A guilty flush crept up from his chest, as he selfishly considered asking. Just once, if she could touch him again. And let that be it. For he had learned painfully to his detriment that women would stop to stare in fear (or worse, pity) to make some piss poor excuse to get away. Once they saw his scars.

Feeling Nemain prod him with something hard, he turned upon his side. Steeling his courage for the question that surged to his lips even now…

-Only to be stalled by her fingers on his lips. “Shut up and listen, you glorious idiot.” Light nearly blinded him, as he involuntarily shielded with his hands against the ball of dancing brightness conjured by her hand.

"-and take this." He felt her fist shove something firm and smooth into the cage of his fingers. Lifting it closer, to see as his eyes began to adjust…he saw it was a knife. His bootknife, to be exact.

“I think you’ll be feeling safer holding it. Now scoot back upon the furs. On your side, if you please. It be too cold to lie in the snow. Pfft. Daft git.”

The familiar insults, along with the comforting hard weight of his knife, eased him down somewhat from his anxiety. He began to breathe once again, realizing he had stopped for so long, his heart was fairly hammering in his chest.

The purse of septims and the smaller sack of pearls danced beckoningly before his face, as Nemain laid down next to him. He realized with a sudden flood of instant, carnal lust that she had divested
herself of all clothing. Something primitive deep inside him rejoiced in libidinous exaltation. *Naked!*

“I’ll take these on one condition. That it be a loan; nothing more. I’ll repay you every coin and pearl. Be that clear? Bear??”

The small rosy aureolas of her nipples stood out tight against the cold, brightly lit in magelight and he remembered. Could practically taste their silken firmness once more, feeling the gelid quiver of breasts in his hands. Fulsome and enticing, goddamn it they are *right there*-

A laugh reached his ears, deprecatingly mirthful. “By the grove, you are a lost cause. Ulfric. Cease ogling my teats and look up at my face, aye? For I would have honest words with you.”

“I'm listening…”

“So I see. Note my complete and utter nudity, Bear, whilst we discuss certain matters that apparently cannot wait any longer. I'll be needing your full attention for this. Bear look at me.”

He was caught, focused entirely on the gentle curve of her hip that dipped down into a concave stomach. He wanted to bury his face in the smooth flesh of her belly. Touch the indent of her belly button with the tip of his tongue, dragging it downward to the downy patch of soft hair that curled between her thighs. *See just how she would taste…*

“I'm listening. Intently.”

“Alright. Not that I believe you, but we must be moving on. Now answer me honestly, or this will nae work at all...Does it hurt when I touch you?”

Dragging his eyes up to where her face was set, he pondered the seemingly casual question. He found no pity in her face. Only sharp awareness. He tasted the air, for ah - he hadn’t been wrong. *Humor. Respect. Lust.* ...“No.”

“How much can you feel? That be quite a lot of scar tissue I felt, and I want to know if I must be avoiding any specific areas. I dinnae want to be causing you any pain.”

*Wait, what was she…*  “Uh, no. Just...no magic.”

“You’ll be missing out, but if that be a preference, fine. Anything else you cannae stand?”

Closing his eyes against the unforgiving light, Ulfric prayed that this meant what he thought it would mean. Though he could barely stand it, as her hands began to slide the top of his pants down the ridge of his hips…  “Don't. Gods - don't lie on top of me or tie me down.”

“Hmm. A fair request.”

Keeping his eyes tightly shut, Ulfric grabbed his head with both hands, still grasping tightly to his knife as he felt the Reachwoman slide down his chest. As she pushed his pants over the swelling
bulge in his smalls, a cold draft revealed that she was taking those off as well. Revealing him entirely to her gaze, as he felt strands of her hair - the thickness that was surely her braid - rub against his stomach.

Something hot and wet laved over the length of his cock. Making him muffle a moan into the furs, as her fist gave him a languid pump.

Insensate to anything beyond the immediate rush of blood roaring through his ears, Ulfric dimly realized she was speaking to him. Her breath hovered over his knees as she finished stripping him of boots, pants, smalls... jerking the garments off of him with sudden velocity.

Her words, when they came, made his eyes pop wide.

“You...stubborn...damn...fool. Just - keep in mind, you bonny braw man, that we be friends, Bear. And friends don't let friends stay gloomy or wroth. Nor do they let them nurse an absolute murder of a dry spell such as you've endured.”

Her crooked teeth shone white in the light of the magelight as she smiled sitting up over him; dimple flaring as he found himself gawking up at the witch. Like a yokel on market day.

“Nemain.” He cleared his throat, feeling oddly shy. “Friends don't do this.”

“Honestly, fear thuaidh…” That husky voice was cross, though he could see nothing but avid interest in her face. “Didn't you ever simply... cor. Y’know... kiss a lass? Just for the fun of it? Even if you couldn't tup her?”

He shook his head slowly. “Mmm. No. Can't say that that was a suggested pasttime.”

“Tell me why not.”

As she lowered herself slowly, braid coiling upon his stomach like something alive, Ulfric swallowed a shallow pant. “Right now?” He questioned, somewhat at a loss for why words had to be involved; as he certainly bore a mighty impediment to clear thinking at the current time.

He could feel her hands slide down the vee of his hips as he involuntarily jerked. Thrusting himself into her hand, as her breath moistened the tip of him. Licking, tasting his precum with a feminine sigh. Like she enjoyed it. Swirling her tongue around the knob of his tip as he grabbed her hair in his fists. As though he was some sort of treat to be devoured, and not a man at all. Ohmyfuckinggodsdamnitall.

“Yes. Right now.”

Far be it from him to disappoint a lady. “After leaving High Hrothgar and enlisting in the Imperial Legion, I was either too busy fighting or starving. No time for women, though mingling with the fairer sex was quite an eye opener after so long upon the mountain. Most of the camp followers who trailed after the armies were a sorry sight to see anyways... women and boys crawling with lice and dying of pox.”
A slow chuckle. “I seem to remember giving you lice, after staying in your dungeon.”

Chancing to look down, he quickly regretted it. Those shrewd lips were pulled back in a wicked smile; both hands drifting idly around his nethers. Occasionally rewarding him with a languorous pump when he hastened to talk once again. The sight of her, all pale skin and the friction -

“Yes. The Bloodworks seems aptly named after all. What...what is it you wanted to discuss?”

Rubbing her face along his length, she looked up his body in an appreciative glower as he panted like an idiot. “The reason for your lack of romance in your life, fear thuaidh. Continue.”

_This witch was going to kill him._ “Unh...after being imprisoned twice - gods, ease up. Only to be saddled with the responsibilities of a Jarldom...that all changed, as well you can imagine. Suddenly every marriageable Nord maiden - and many more that were neither - thrust themselves into my court to gain favor. I didn't dare play games...didn't want to end up married to some gold-hungry spinster what wanted a title to go with it...”

“Hmm. Be your aim for me to make an honest man out of you, Bear? I suspected such last night, you know. Though I’ll say...” she lowered her head to take a long, slow lick at him. “Though I’m not in the market for a man, you do make a solid case for yourself.”

“Holy fucking Talos,” he hissed, heels digging hard into his bedroll as Nemain pressed her knuckle up behind his sac. He felt her chuckle vibrate all the way down to his toes, as she spread him upon his own furs like some sort of raunchy sacrifice. Picking up speed with her hand grasping him tight, presumably to speak, which he found he cared very little for unless it was to utter filthy promises. He nearly reached down to shove her back onto him; so absolutely lost he was to this fascinating new sensation of small feminine hands, everywhere. Fingers touching, teasing parts of him that had him digging fingers into the snow on either side of his bedroll, arching his neck...

“Tis all a moot point after all. I doubt I could afford your hand in marriage fear thuaidh. Poor septim-less Forsworn, remember?

_Oh, this was all such a very bad idea. She would regret it come morning, he just knew it. It would ruin everything - their free and easy banter. The burgeoning trust that had been slowly growing over months of training and traveling together. Dragonborn. It was the bloody Dragonborn (no, Nemain! His mind assiduously reminded him) who had him literally by the shorthairs. His errant pupil and strangely cheery companion whose face was flushed all pretty and pink. All the way from her sharp cheekbones to her clavicles; down that pertly delectable chest all the way to the slit soaking through his pants where she straddled his legs. Ulfric felt his mouth go very dry, very fast. This...this was not good._

Giving pleasure was one thing, but to be so bared, open and vulnerable - “Nemain. You should stop. It’s...too late and - _gods fucking dammit._”

Her hands worked him in a steady, maddening rhythm. “Mmm...not tired.” It was...oh _shit_, it was a very dirty smirk. “Your concern be terribly heart-warming. I willnae hurt you, you know.”

“But before tonight be through, I _am_ going to make you beg.”

The undeniable jut of his erection pressed against her hands, so very hot. He wanted - oh he wanted!
“...It’s...not going to take much...to make me beg,” Ulfric admitted; his voice so rough, he barely recognized it. “Shor and Kyne take me, I want you so badly.”

Grey eyes flared wide; her mouth parting in shock. Then, gracing him with the most gorgeous smile he had ever seen...Nemain pulled away her hands. Nearly making him cry, as he watched her untie her braid and fingercomb out the mass of waving dark hair. It fell around him like a sheet of shadow made silk, sliding across his skin in an oddly pleasant way.

“Then it appears I be doing something right.”

He watched with bated breath as she lowered her head down to his stomach, still keeping eye contact with him. Leisurely dragging her head down to his groin, that foxface disappeared beneath a sea of dark locks. Blocking his view, even as the knife fell out of his nerveless fingers…

The hot, liquid glide of her tongue, the way she gripped his hips tight, the noise she made deep in her throat, as if she wanted this as much as he did…

Ulfric dug his hands into the mass of her hair, panting and riding the strokes of her clever, maddening mouth...the perfect, near too-tight suction that pulled with every jerk of his hips. He could feel the warning tightness building deep inside his balls; a warning sense that - Ysmir - he was going to come utterly undone at any moment.

He turned his face away to drag in a serrated breath, hips pushing forward again, then helpless to resist, he thrust once more. Nemain whined deep in her throat and tightened her grip on him. Gods, he’d already brought her to orgasm with his hands, but he wanted…

He wanted to be inside her. Wanted those slender legs wrapped round him, to be buried deep within this woman like nothing he had ever wanted before.

“Is this where I start to beg?” He managed to breathe, feeling her muffled giggle against his flesh as she pulled off and away.

“Fear thuaidh,” She murmured, the epithet more an audible caress than an insult this time. He shuddered to hear her speak, the cold causing his heated skin to - oh shit, he was literally giving off steam as she rubbed up against him. Lying near his side as her hands danced down his stomach. Making his abdominals twitch as she grasped his hardness once more. “I...willnae lay with you here and now. It be not the right time. This - right here? - It be about other things. Just...feel.”

Mouthing the shell of his ear, Nemain continued speaking...the words so much garbled mush yet so goddamn bell clear. Magic ...how could fingers that he knew for certain bore no spellwork feel so amazingly transformative? As though he were being altered - molded into some masterpiece of cascading heat and light with every gliding stroke. Every press of her palm against him, as he tightly pulled her nakedness against his side.

“Feel pleasure, a rúnsearc.” Her voice was a pleading whimper, muffled as his arm embraced her even closer. “For once, dinnae fear. Feel my breath on your body. My touch...upon your skin. Want
to see you...by the Dark, let go!”

He complied as the whole world took the opportunity to go a brilliant, blinding white. All new, tight and focused perfectly upon only her; a shout that was half groan, half yell buried in her neck as she laughed breathily.

*Confident. Happy. Victorious.* Her Thu’um was a marvel of revelations that he wondered at her for displaying so freely.

“Sleep, Bear.”

Fingers traced his cheeks as he fought to slow down his breathing. Closing his eyelids as a sudden heaviness took hold. Causing him to sink bonelessly onto the bedroll, even as he felt Nemain pull up her sleeping furs to toss over them both.

“Rest. And dream of me...nothing else dour or dismal. I promise...I willnae hurt you.” Half gone already, he grumbled as her lips took violent possession of his mouth. Making him wrinkle his nose as she laughed, a bit wildly. “Not if I can help it. Gods, what a clusterfuck we be together, aye?”

Fingers walked along the bridge of his nose, sliding smoothly down his lips as oblivion rose up and took him down.

“Sleep.”

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

Ulfric woke up blissfully content.

To be sure, his muscles were lax and unresponsive despite his better efforts to sit straight and blink dumbly at his solitary situation. For he was, he found, quite alone up here upon the mountainside. A slight aftertaste of mead, apples and - gods help him - her made him wonder just what she had done, to ensure his continued slumber this far into the morning. He never slept in this late.

He was still buck naked; smalls tangled in the bunched up pants that made him snort, as he bent his knees. His back had a twinge that might cripple the distance-eating stride that would be necessary later today. And his cock -

-Fuck, it was so damn sensitive a stray breeze could have made him cry out. *Pants on, thoughts diverted. Better get a move on - she probably is halfway to Winterhold by now.*

Yet, he found somehow that he was indelibly pleased with himself. And frankly in awe of the tiny woman who had somehow wrapped him neatly round her finger. All without an ounce of magic.

She had remembered. Had listened to his unguarded request.
There was something she had said, there at the end. *Willnae hurt you. Hurt me?*

*Healed, more like. Feels like a new beginning in truth.* Swallowing back a yawn, his hand brushed against a piece of paper weighted down by a rock. Lifting the parchment closer to his eyes, Ulfric felt his lips curve into a stupid grin as he perused the very odd note.

He felt his chest warm as he realized she had left it specifically for him. Judging by the tiny crown she had scribbled over what was most likely a crudely illustrated bear on the top fold of the parchment. Right next to what was undoubtedly a thistle bloom. He'd have to ask her about that later.

And...he laughed. A pair of tits, winking next to her signed name down at the end of this bizarre, fantastic list.

**~Terms Concerning Copulation~**

*(To be used at your liberal discretion, Dragonborn.)*

-Mssr. B


*Your turn to add one to the list, Bear! And it had better be good. See you in Windhelm in Rain’s Hand. (hug my pips for me.)*

*I WILL pay you back.*

~ Nemain

The entire affair was littered with inkblots. Her handwriting was crabbed and spiky, barely legible. How the sight of it made him smile.

Folding the letter carefully and sliding it into his knapsack’s flap pocket, Ulfric tended to the day’s tasks with unusual good cheer. Reflecting on the very fine joy a pair of soft hands and wicked lips could bring, as he set a measured pace down the steps towards Ivarstead.

*What would fit that hasn’t been put on the list. Brota a maga (romp on her belly)? Too coarse. She might like it, though. Hvíluthrong...crowding the bed. At skemmta ser...to amuse oneself...*

He felt himself grow half-hard at the memory of her lips speaking such honest, lascivious things so boldly into his ear. Those soft, surprisingly strong hands. That mouth.
Ah. He knew the perfect term to add, to describe what the woman was, in this.

_**Njota - I enjoy you.**_

_Perfect._

Chapter End Notes

Nid! Nii nis kos! Zu'u los ni dovah, ruth hi! Vos zey bo! No! It cannot be! I'm not a dragon, damn you! Let me go!

“A rúnsearc” (uh ROON-shark): Literally means “secret love” — a very passionate way of saying “beloved.”

Sex slang terms came from this website. It cracks me up the Internet has this, though I guess I shouldn't be too surprised.

http://mentalfloss.com/article/57872/31-adorable-slang-terms-sexual-intercourse-last-600-years

Ulfric's charming terms for doing it came from this handy and super informative website. Ughh...*shakes self*. To 'enjoy' each other. That is so goddamned romantic.


Read and review for more amaaaazing action. And not just bedplay, either. C'mon, they have to do other stuff. At least once in a while.
"The power of ignorance can shatter ebony like glass."

-Celarus the Loremaster, 'The Old Ways'

"Nords are so serious about beards. So many beards. M'aiq thinks they wish they had glorious manes like Khajiit."

Nemain cast an ornery glance at the strange catman who glided alongside her horse. “Not even you shall be ruining my fine mood, furshanks. And beards can be done right. I’ve seen...well. A few Nords who manage to look verrah bonny in them.”

Clicking at her mare, she pulled at the reins to keep the horse from pulling up mouthfuls of new spring grass. “Almost like fur, I s’pose. Though not nearly sae soft.”

M’aiq pulled at the neckline of his butter-yellow robes with a guarded hiss. She wondered when the strange beastman would leave her alone. He’d been following her horse since high noon, and the sun now touched the western horizon. She would stop soon, for the night. And I doon fancy a meowling companion to share my fire. No offense to Khajiit - but all the ones I’ve met have been right numpty reprobates.

"Nords' armor has lots of fur. This...sometimes makes M'aiq nervous."

“That doesnae surprise me. Now, enough of this rot. Do you recall which way be quickest to Winterhold?”

M’aiq huffed a whiskery snort. “Travelling to the College, eh Dragonborn? How does anyone know there was a city of Winterhold? M'aiq did not see it with his eyes. Will you?”

She certainly hoped so. This was the eve of her third day of travelling after leaving Ulfric in a spellbound sleep. She had left him fairly swaddled in wards before reluctantly parting from the Nord, gazing upon him in conflicted affection.

Whatever this was (and surely she did not know, despite the events of the last night and the many hours she had already brooded upon the subject) it did not bear upon her immediate future.

Nemain had an Elder Scroll to find, after all.

It would have been a simpler task for Paarthurnax to ask for the name of an honest businessman in Riften.

Nae use fussing about the sabrecat in the woods when the wolf be at your door. And speaking of
wolves, upon killing three of the rib-revealing scavengers as well as an ice wraith, Nemain was starting to feel rather chipper. Passing through Ivarstead had also granted her the boon of scaring away a huckster salesman. Peddling pendants for everything under Wilhelm’s grim gaze; from immunity to plague to promises of stellar bedplay...cor. It had not taken her long to ascertain that the fraud was selling shoddy iron pendants upon leather thongs. Unenchanted shoddy iron pendants.

That lad wouldnae have lived long, should one of them hulking Nord farmhands lay hands on him after being cheated. Yes...after booting the brigand from Ivarstead (and convince the Fellstar farmers to allow her to hold wee Iona one last time) the Breton witch felt confident in the future. And certain that her slumbering travel companion would have a swift, safe journey back to Windhelm.

If only I could be sure that the way I chose be correct. The constellations and the moons were pointing her north, but being unfamiliar with the terrain had led her to get lost amidst the trails made by elk, deer and other woodland creatures more than once. The way was often trackless...one route had actually taken her to a majestic waterfall that had brought her to her knees.

Resting for the space of a full hour, just watching the mighty waters cascade down...at least three hundred feet of thundering waters and spray. Feeling something inside her ease at the incredible beauty of the natural world, Nemain basked in the peace that had sunk into her soul since High Hrothgar.

Happiness tempered by grief for Einarth and Wulfgar; sadness that was slowly wearing away like candy sucked clean. All around and under and over her. Beauty in everything.

Look at you...sae whimsical. Dancing aboot like a prancing bard after getting all skuddy and tanned with Bear.

Huh... Standing and stretching, the Breton witch flexed her arms and wrists, smiling as a rainbow floated ephemerally transparent over the misty falls. Truly, she had never felt so relaxed. Being well winched and fingered does ye good. Should do it more often...wonder if he’s added a new term to the list...

No...not until she had finally reached the ruined remnants of the Imperial trade roads did Nemain feel once again reassured in her set course. And though there were precious few travellers on the road these days that were not bandits or soldiers, she managed to obtain directions - a Dunmer seeking Azura’s shrine had kept her from meandering off on a fork in the road that would have led east. Hard to say, with the thick forests and streams diverting every which way.

And now, she travelled with this M’aiq bloke. Who had upon being asked stroked his long, elegantly waxed whiskers and demurred that the College of Winterhold lay as far north as one could walk before reaching the seas.

Which I could have discovered by meself, without any more chunnering rot from this glaikit catman. Barring any unforeseen obstacles, she hoped to make it to Winterhold in three to four days with a hard push and few stops. Her rations, tough and tasteless, were running low.

And Bear had been right; there was nought but a few eggs and fish to find yet, for spring was in its infancy. Though what food there was became more plentiful the further down the mountain she went.

The light was leaving fast here where the roots of the mountains dug deep. Ignoring for a second the Khajiit who currently was musing upon the whereabouts of something called calipers, Nemain stood up in her stirrups.
A rush of sound...there. A gleam of silver, the susurrus of a great deal of water. The White River? Almost near the tundra, then. An ancient bridge and tower were oh-so-faintly visible in the distance. Unlikely that it would be uninhabited. She’d find out soon enough, once her tree cover ran out.

She had to find a good, safe space to camp in the forest. And soon. To build a fire, to set her wards - and keep whatever beings had settled the distant tower from noticing her until she was too far on her way for them to bother. “So, you’ve heard some rumors that I be Dragonborn. What else have you overheard?

"M’aiq has heard it is dangerous to be your friend."

Nemain didn’t like the calculating look the cat was currently giving her saddlebags. Though she had padded the septims and pearls as well as she could with her spare stockings, smalls and her only clean dress...the jingle of gold was unmistakeable. "Has M’aiq heard why most mages dinnae bother with target practice? To be sure, one learns best in the art of destruction by casting upon living flesh."

Her horse trilled a neigh, spooked by something further in the thicket of trees. The hooded cat looked wildly about, taking off for the path behind them as Nemain clenched her thighs tightly around the saddle. Keeping her seat just barely as the dratted animal snorted and stomped. “Wha’-”

“M’aiq knows when he is unwanted!”

Kshhhthunk! Pwhwoof!

She couldn’t draw breath. She had fallen...the mare had thrown her so fast she hardly had time to blink. Something had frightened the placid beast; the fireball that was likely the culprit still smoldered upon the bush near her as Nemain blinked stupidly in the darkening forest. Movemovemove... as she dragged herself away from the horse that reared and kicked, she heard her mount shriek as an arrow - nay, a crossbow bolt! - buried itself deep in the horse’s neck.

Like a puppet whose strings had been cut, her mare fell with a whinny. Shuddered, then lay still...as a massive black werewolf tore out from the forest. Thundering straight towards her with death in its eldritch eyes. Flanked by three men and a woman, hollering and screaming as they circled and struck at it. A pinwheel of swords and teeth.

They hadn’t seen her yet. Summoning ice and fire, Nemain took aim at the brown robed man who carried a crossbow. Her ice spike took him in the chest; pinning the man to a nearby tree as his arms contorted in sluggish feebleness. That’s for me mare, you sick gobshite.

Ceasing to struggle she watched, eyes narrowed, as the dying man’s hands that were also holding a coiled length of rope loosened. Dropping their burden to the ferns and loam below.

Stendarr. More Priests of Stendarr, she thought angrily as she took in the warhorn amulets the dead one and his compatriots were wearing. The woman and one of the other men did not wear robes, but wore a motley selection of furs and leathers. The swords they were jabbing the poor werewolf with gleamed brilliantly - silver, doubtless. It was obvious...they aimed to kill the poor black beastie then. What harm had it done them? They were yet alive, weren’t they? Perhaps someone they knew ended up as dinner.

Or more likely, they were simply assholes.
As Nemain ducked behind a tree, switching her spells for calm and flame, she watched as the were howled in despair. It was already bleeding from several hooks that had at one point been attached to ropes, for the knotted ends waved like streamers as it battled against its attackers. Slashed and prodded by the silver swords, she could tell...the werewolf weakened. Had come to the end of its boundless endurance.

Eyes golden amber and frantic fastened upon her, beseeching her help even at this distance. The other Priest of Stendarr was advancing, ordering her to come into the light with forceful command. “I see you there! Hands up where I can see them, Breton!”

Right. They kill daedra worshippers. And what be I looking like but the picture of a hedge witch, all mankity from travel? Chewing her lip in indecision, she looked past the man to see the were snap and yowl. Slowly brought down by the rainfall of hooked ropes the silver swords were throwing, it raged on. Fighting the binds, the shackles with a vicious temerity that sparked a surge of fellow feeling in Nemain’s chest. Digging her nails into the bark of the tree, the witch watched in sore wrath as the werewolf fell finally to the ground, beaten. What right had they, to take doon such a wild free thing?

It would not do. She wouldn’t let them. Gods I do despise these priests.

Nemain could sense the dead that lay beyond her own kill. A tugging, prickling of magicka that rubbed her the wrong way. Like a fur stroked against the grain, or wood sawed irregularly - there. Three bodies lay savaged from claw and fang further in the woods. A tiny smile curved the edge of her mouth, as she stood straight and fingered her skull amulet. She stepped out from behind the tree trunk and into the line of fire, as the were shrieked and the man lifted a crossbow in her direction.

Relaxing a part of her that she kept pent up nearly at all times, Nemain felt a cold flood of power seep away from her. It trickled past the priests, nudged the werewolf and affixed itself to the three dead men.

It was the work of a thought to reanimate them. She could not see them, but yet they stood - and at an unspoken flick of her hand, they lifted their weapons. Bringing them down upon their living comrades with agonized cries and screams of surprised terror. Screams that choked off and faded into silence, even as Nemain hurled a spike of ice at the priest, whose last words were a choked curse.

“Walk in the...light! Or we will...drag you...to it.”

Unlikely, ye craven knapdarloch. Stepping on the body carelessly, a single spell sweep revealed that there was nothing else sentient and alive in the immediate woods besides her and the were. The thralls stood at ease, waiting for her next command.

“There’s a good braw beastie...let me release ye from these cruel hooks…” Holding up her hands in a gesture of goodwill, Nemain crept closer.

She jumped back as the werewolf snapped at her; muzzle slavering with long strings of saliva. Trapped, worn down...the were still bore strength enough to keep her at bay. “I dinnae blame ye for the distrust. But we must be removing the hooks, ye ken? Silver be poison for your kind.”

A purling growl continued to rumble forth from the heaving jaws. Well and truly trapped by the tangling ropes that pulled at its wounds, the beastman could do little but snarl at Nemain as she gingerly stepped over to where her mare lay, slowly cooling in death.

Cautiously riffling through her saddlebags while keeping her eyesight trained upon the predator, Nemain finally grasped the last of her rations. There.
“Perhaps this will make ye slightly less wroth with me, aye? My name be Nemain and I’ve been a healer a long time. You be in safe hands now. I know...ye can smell the thralls and they be unpleasant. Doon worry...I’ll be sending them further off to stand guard for the night. Go on. Eat.”

Tossing half of her remaining fish and waybread, Nemain waited with bated breath as it hit the mossy ground near those daggered teeth. Quick as a flash, it - he - snaffled up the fish.

Definitely a ‘he’, she thought in sudden cheer. For now that she had a better look, the wolfman’s genitals were quite obvious, hanging heavy between those furred legs as he devoured her rations like he hadn’t eaten for a sennight.

No neutered wolfman as what was typically depicted in the bestiaries. Prudes.

“That’s a good doggie. I’ve more for ye, if ye’ll just let me close enough to heal. Shhh.”

At the word ‘doggie’ pointed ears pricked, the wet shiny nose sniffing. Turning, the monstrous head tilted coyly, which caused her to laugh. Exactly like his smaller canine counterpart. Not quite sae cute, though...not with what looks to be bloody fingernails embedded in that fur.

“What? Dinnae like being called ‘doggie’?, werefriend?”

The great black shapeshifter slumped back as she approached once more, tongue lolling. He allowed her to finger one of the wicked hooks that had dug handle deep in the meat of his back. Painfully deep. It would take multiple sessions of healing for these to completely scar over.

“Arra well, sorry. My cousins who be werewolves didnae mind the names sae much, so long as I fed them. Regular famine faces they were, just like you. Take the rest...I’ll butcher the horse for more meat once you’ve been tended to. You do remind me of them. Poor thing.”

Handfuls of her fish and bread quelled the tremors that shook the beast’s haunches as she painstakingly worked the barbed hooks free. Six hooks, several spells, the rest of her rations and a litany of colorful oaths (that had the beast rumbling in what she hoped was amusement) and she was finally done.

What a sorry state to be in, Nemain sighed as she wiped her hands as clean as could be gotten upon the damp moss and her ruined robes. A hard blow, for such a huge and powerful manbeast to come under attack...to be humbled.

Gods, I hope I shan’t be forced to deal with a male ego come morn. Hircine bless me that not only shall I remain uneaten, but that the were will be more grateful than disgruntled at the rough handling. She had learned...men were twitchy about pride when it came to being saved. Particularly by women. Stubborn arses.

“Come on, pup. Let’s be off to sleep. You must be as tired as I be. I’ll feed you once more, so your wounds will have a chance to mend while resting.”

She cast the wards that would repel attackers and curious wildlife, sawing away at the unfortunate remnants of the mare and roasting the meat until the werewolf shook its hoary head; refusing the last proffered morsel. Gracing Nemain with an up close and personal view of razored canid teeth, the were heaved an immense yawn and curled tightly into a ball. Red oozing cuts and welts still peppered the beasts’ black back, as he flinched and whined beneath her probing hands.

No more could be done tonight. Her magic was run near empty; the three undead thralls standing guard roughly fifty paces from their camp would release but a small portion back, once their reanimation wore away. Sleep was what she needed to replenish herself.
Snuggling into her bedroll - thankfully unharmed by the horse’s death - Nemain felt her guts churn around her portion of cooked flesh. She missed her mare...how long would it take her by foot to travel to Winterhold?

Stomach bubbling unhappily, she chewed a mouthful of moss and forced herself to calm. To focus upon the steady, long pulls of the beast breathing oh-so-close - a smell redolent of blood, pine and wet fur that wasn’t wholly unpleasant.

It reminded her of her cousins in the Redclaw Pack, back home in the Druadach mountains. She had run with them in the summers of her childhood, though Nemain never could win an all out footrace with the fleet were teens. She wondered what they were up to, now. Whether they had been driven back by the advance of Imperial and Stormcloak troops, or if their hunting remained undisturbed.

Warm. Safe. Saved. She contented herself that she had done all she could for the beast-brother. Blessed of Hircine. With all the doubts percolating in her mind concerning the traditions of the Reach, her family, damn...even her very purpose - this one thing she had accomplished eased her guilt somewhat. She could still be a dutiful priestess to the Et’Ada, serving one of the Horned One’s servants in such ways.

No letters. No news of anything from the westfold for two seasons or more. No one cares, witch. They’ve all moved on.

Turning to face the slumbering werewolf, her eyes drooped shut as the sounds of the forest at night lulled her to sleep. Insects buzzing, birds chirping...the wind in the trees whispering secrets only Kyne knew.

You should move on, too.

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“Hey. Breton. You gonna get up today or what?”

Her eyes snapped open. Hulking, huge, hairy Nord! Right on top of her!

“Aauughh!” She shrieked, striking out with a fistful of fire...pulling the flames back into a mere punch as she boffed the stranger at the last minute, rolling in her bag like a demented caterpillar as the Nord merely grunted in response. Ouch! She sucked upon a knuckle, looking at him while sprawled and wide eyed. That’ll leave a mark. On me! The...the beast barely moved!

“Well. Can’t say it’s the first time a lady hit me in the morning. Though I figure that your weak-ass punch was for different reasons, this time around.”

“Werewolf...you…” Her tongue clearly was not working today. Being confronted with nine feet of towering naked Nord was not how she was accustomed to waking. At least not until just lately, her inner voice sneered. Shoving the voice back into the back of her mind and sitting upon it, Nemain turned her attentions to the were that had clearly changed back into a man overnight. A naked man. I thought clothing reappeared with the transformation? Shows what I know.
Hanging around the Nords truly had weakened her callousness towards nudity. She felt strangely affected. Which would not do. Not at all. Just as well to re-acustom myself to it without undue blushing.

He waited patiently as she dragged herself out of her sleeping roll to gather her thoughts. Trying not to be too obvious, she looked him over while brushing the moss and leaves off of herself.

Oddsodkins. He was the biggest damn Nord she had ever seen, which was saying something after months spent in Windhelm. She would not look down again...once had been enough to know she did not want any part of that tacklebox near her fishing hole.

And I reckoned Bear was a beast. “Er. Might I have your name, Hircine’s Blessed?”

“Aye. I’m known as Farkas.” A glint of humor apparent in the twitch of his mouth. Something in the eyes, paler even than her own, betrayed that he found her amusing.

“...warrior of the Companions of Jorrvaskr.” He bowed his head, long dark locks tangling around that log-thick neck. “Now in your debt. Haven’t been caught off guard like that in a long time. I owe you one.”

“Hey. What’s this then?”

It was getting to be a regular wildling wake, Nemain thought incredulously as another Nord appeared, wraithlike, from the morning mists. This one’s eyes bore the same reflective quality as her werefriend, a restless twitch dogging his steps. Dogging! Ha!

Rubbing her head, Nemain realized she might have hit her head at some point in the fight. Puns, witch? Really? Focus! “And who be you??”

“Brother.” Farkas stood easily, clasping the shorter, slighter man by the shoulder. Nemain began studying a line of ants that trailed along a nearby stump. Oh look...busy wee little ants, carrying bits of her travel bread from last night. She would not look up. She was a witch with considerable willpower and maturity. With absolutely no reason to ogle yet another handsome Nord. So wrong. Her grandparents would be a-rolling in their graves. No no no.

“Knew you’d catch up sooner or later.”

“Ysgramor’s balls, Farkas,” the man hissed, throwing the hand off like it was a frostbite spider. “How many times do I have to ask! Should you feel the urge to suck down a brew given you by some strange bitch at the tavern, goddamn let me know first. Else this will happen again!”

“You don’t know that. She was nice. Until she turned out to be not-so nice, with a silver sword and a shit load of orders.” Turning to Nemain, Farkas waved to catch her attention.

“Nemain, right? Meet my twin brother, Vilkas. He’s the smart one, hah.”

“Well one of us has to be, you lusty bastard.”

Nemain allowed herself a slow blink. Damn. As brothers they would have been nearly identical, were it not for the size difference. The look of pinching displeasure that the newcomer Vilkas wore set them apart more than anything; as though Nemain had trod through a nest of rotten pine thrush eggs. The giant Farkas maintained a nearly placid demeanor through the entire conversation, accepting what appeared to be a massive backpack filled with clothing and armor from his brother.
which he promptly began to dress himself with.

*Ants, logs, trees...what else to look at...* Latching onto any subject that would distract, Nemain bobbed her head in greeting. “Erm. Pleased to meet you both. So, werewolves aye?”

Vilkas fastened a gimlet eye upon her. Farkas clanked and swore; fastening a multitude of straps...occasionally hissing in pain as his movements stretched the gaping holes torn in his back. Stubborn git. *Should let me heal them, one last time.*

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. But if I were you, I’d hold my tongue.”

Fastening the last buckle of his greaves, Farkas made a chiding noise. “Now brother. Don’t get mad. She knows...and she saved my life. It would have been smarter to run away, like that Khajiit you were travelling with.”

If anything, Vilkas grew more grim in his appraisal of her. Nemain shrunk back, trying to look as small and harmless as possible. *Flee now, fight later. By the Gods I’m starving.*

His nostrils flared. “…Forsworn?”

“Aye.” *Be it truly that obvious? A sign painted upon my forehead? Ickle horns growing from my skull?!?*

Wristguards creaked as Vilkas slowly tightened his fists. “And a mage.”

“And a woman! The trifecta of evil, to be sure. Now this has been lovely catching up, but I do need to continue on my way. Might either of you know the fastest route to Winterhold from here? And also perhaps some village or tavern where I might replenish my food stores?”

She began rolling up her sleeping furs, tying them with twine as Farkas laughed and Vilkas groaned. “Yeah. Guess I owe you some travel rations, huh?”

“T’would be nice, famine-face. Looks like there be naught left of the mare.” The bones had even been cracked open; the marrow sucked dry. She noticed in sudden mirth that he had even eaten the eyeballs and cracked open the skull for the brains. *Hungry, were we?*

“Sorry.” Farkas did not look sorry. “Got peckish in the night.”

She waved a hand. “S’alright. Just fair gladdened you didnae choose to snack upon me.”

He cocked his head, warm grey eyes studying her as Nemain checked all her belongings. “Wouldn’t do that. Not nice to eat people who save and heal you.”

“Particularly when you’ve no notion of where they’ve been.” A smile stretched Vilkas’s face, more a baring of teeth than any congenial grin. *Forsworn taste like juniper and shit, anyway.*

Two could play at this game. Raising an eyebrow, Nemain allowed herself a wicked smile as the brother’s face faltered. “And *Nords* do be tasting strongly of mead. And shit - doesnae everyone taste like shit, when ye cut deep enough? Pah. Come now, we be bartering insults all day at this rate. Will ye point me in the right direction lads?”

Farkas kicked a rock away from the cleared campsite. “Come with us to Whiterun. It’s a straight shot west and south from here...only a day, if we push hard. The Bannered Mare has plenty of food and
drink. Beds for resting.”

Shrugging those massive shoulders, the huge Nord treated her to a wide smile strangely free of guile. “Like I said, I owe ya. What do you say?”

Nemain thought about it. She’d always wanted to see the tundra city in person. A hub of trade, cultural jewel of the plains, and yet…

“I’m afraid I cannae delay my trip, boyos. Be there an inn or waystop along the way? If ye’ll escort me, I can pay you for your time.” She patted her robe pocket, where the coins and pearls had migrated from the wreckage of her saddlebags.

The twins looked at each other. Then turned to her in sync, both heads tilting at exactly the same angle to reveal the pommels of massive steel warblades strapped to their backs. Twin swords, twin expressions. What was that even like, she thought incredulously as she shouldered her travelpack. *To know someone from birth like that, sae well that one could mimic every mannerism?*

“Won’t take your gold.” Farkas spoke slowly. Deliberately, as though the giant weighed every word in his mind before uttering it. “You’ve done enough to warrant an escort. Nightgate Inn lies a day north.”

“But the roads are treacherous...the mountain pass still likely snowed in.” Vilkas eyed her getup...the stained and torn robes padded with a now-grotty fur that she longed to itch. Just not in sight of these pillars of masculinity. She was feeling low enough, thanks to the sour glances from the more rangy twin. “You’d be better off taking a wagon ride from Whiterun’s stables.”

“Hmph. This inn sounds plenty good to me. Might find a caravan or wagon there.” Flipping Vilkas a cheery salute, she stuck out her tongue at his affronted look. “Lead on, Slim and Stout.”

She found herself practically jogging as the men walked at a leisurely pace. *Unfair. Damned fear thuaidh and their stupidly long legs. “Did you hear what she called us, brother? Ha hah hah!”*

“Yes. Very droll. Keep moving.”

Squeaking as she strove to keep up, a seemingly innocent question from Farkas nearly passed her by. “...What?”

“I said, you smell like sex. Hope I didn’t surprise you and your lover yesterday. Though you don’t really smell like cat...”

A stifled groan from Vilkas made Nemain snicker, even as she felt pleasantly warmed by the thought. *I still smell like him.* “Farkas! It’s not polite to mention such things, remember?”

“Nay worries, Stout. That Khajiit was a stranger to me. And, well. It’s been a few days, but I haven’t had the chance to properly bathe so it doesnae come as a surprise.”

“Didn’t mean to be rude, little mage.”

*Breathe! In and out! Woo! “Dinnae...ugh, dinnae fash yourself. Tis an honest observation from one of your kind.”*
Wading through the icy waters of the White River, Nemain awkwardly stepped around the slick river stones, thanking all the gods for her sturdy boots that had held through an entire winter without falling apart. The robes, on the other hand, looked like they were destined for the rag bin when she reached Winterhold. It didn’t help that she was beginning to sweat, straining to keep up with the furious clip Vilkas was setting for the trio.

“Ack...slow down, ye great ormadorms! I can’t...you’re walking too fast!”

Not turning back to look, Vilkas hissed an oath under his breath. “Keep up, woman, or I’ll throw you over my shoulders. The faster we are rid of you, the better.”

“Och no! I’ve had me fair share of being lugged around like sae much baggage! I’ll walk, thank ye very much, Slim!”

“My name is Vilkas.”

“Then I be Nemain. Not ‘witch-bitch’ or ‘that damn wench’. I’ve got Bretonish ears, you ken? I can hear all your nasty name calling.”

“Elvish hearing, you mean. I’ll call you ‘lost’ if you don’t pick up the pace, Forsworn.”

The sun was baking the tops of their heads when, after hours of bickering and name-calling, the larger twin emitted an irked growl. “Enough!”

Farkas stopped in place, causing Nemain to carom off his armored back with a grunted oofh! “This won’t work. Vilkas, stop pesking her. Nemain, ignore him.”

But it be sae much fun! Nemain bristled as Vilkas threw a crude finger signal her way. “Fine. I’ll leave him alone if he does me the same courtesy.”

“Can’t leave you alone now, witch.” Though his face never changed from a surly scowl, his tone was that of worry. “My brother is honor bound to see you safely delivered to Nightgate Inn. Though I will call foul on the supposed ‘great healing’ you’ve given Farkas...I can still smell blood and remnants of silver all over him.”

Nemain plunked fists upon her waist, glaring at the recalcitrant Nord. “The enemy’s swords were silver. But you be right...I’m beginning to think the hooks had some silver grade mixed in with the steel. Nought else explains this lingering resistance to my spells.”

Turning to the giant who was quietly observing them both, Nemain sighed. “Sorry, Farkas. I’ve ne’er seen such shallow wounds take so long to heal. I knew the deeper ones would take time, but...”

“You’ve done all you can. I’m good for now. But,” Stretching his arms, Farkas bore a decidedly playful mien as he beckoned to her.

“A bit-back sigh of relief greeted her as she stepped forward and raised her hands; a shimmering golden veil of healing settling over the were. “Suppose it cannae be helped. I thank ye, wolf. This will help.”
Clambering up, she had a moment to reflect on just how massive the man truly was, as one thick arm dragged her up even further to sit atop his shoulders. *Think I can see Solitude from here.* The metal of his armor dug into her thighs, but she could bear it. Far better than walking and falling behind. “Is this good? Not wearing ya doon, or giving ye pains?”

Tugging at his hair, she giggled as Farkas hhmphed and Vilkas turned back to shoot them both an exasperated glare. “Up? Come on then. Quit dawdling you two!”

“Hey. Can I hold on to your luscious locks whilst riding ya, doggie dear?”

She received a faceful of dark hair as the man flipped his head back. “That’s ‘Farkas’ or ‘Stout’ to you, midget. And while we’re on the subject of riding...pull my hair and I’ll charge you a chest full of septims. I only like rough handling under certain circumstances.”

“Oh?”

Tightening her legs around his neck, she was comforted by two hot hands gripping her ankles. She was sorry she hadn’t bathed properly...her odor must be rankly unpleasant for such a sensitive nose. Luckily this Farkas didn’t seem to mind. “What be your going rate, then? I wasnae aware the Companions offered other ‘services’ besides monster slaying and such.”

A scoff from Vilkas prompted her lumbering mount to speak, his voice a bassy rumble infused with laughter. “Well, not officially. Though my brother over there might as well start charging a flat fee, for all the rounds he makes amongst the fine ladies of Whiterun.”

“Farkas. Shut up.”

“What? Truth hurts, aye Slim? Woof my fair and noble steed! Go faster!”

Farkas turned and bit her leg, chuckling as she yanked hard at his hair. “Ack! Stop that! Only the worst wee yapping dogs be ankle biters. What d’ye say to that, Tiny?”

“Arf, arf, Breton. Now be quiet and enjoy the ride.”

“I’ll bet you say that to all the ladies, Stout.”

“Oh, I’d never tell them to be quiet…”

“...Will both of you kindly shut the fuck up!? Gods, I can’t even hear myself think!”

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Winterhold.

She shivered, wrapping her robes more thoroughly around herself. *Yol* was an ember in her throat, heating her just enough to bear the cold in silence. Always the interminable, bone chilling cold. Like a spear through her chest.

It had taken the full day (and a memorable night which she had spent sandwiched between the two to keep from freezing) but the Companion twins had finally delivered her to Nightgate Inn, where she
was able to barter the rest of her passage by cart for a simple healing spell. *Never thought I would find myself grateful for the hemorrhoids of a wagon driver. Sitting down all day would be pure torture, indeed. A fair price for fast travel.*

Farkas had paid to replenish her travelling supplies himself, bidding her farewell with a wink...making her promise to look them up when she made her way to Whiterun.

Vilkas had not bothered with any such niceties...the rude werewolf was far too busy cleaning up the rotten eggs she had hidden in his clothing that morning in their camp. Ah, and wasn’t the loud crunch he made sitting upon his things so delightful (almost as marvelous as the yowling scream of rage that came after, as Farkas held him back from physically assaulting her with another of those booming laughs). It was worth travelling with such a rank smell to see Slim so mindlessly wroth. *Addlepated boor.*

No...she wouldn’t miss Vilkas. But Farkas was rather sweet. *For a man-eating shapeshifter.* Nemain was seriously considering visiting Whiterun after all, if only to see the famed ships hull of Jorrvaskr and the Skyforge that predated Whiterun itself.

*Would be well worth a look. And should Farkas be needing any more ‘hands on’ attention...blast it, woman! Can ye hear your own very pucklesome thoughts? No. Nonono...*

Now Winterhold, on the other hand, was a city notable for just how much of it had been lost to the Great Collapse. The wreck of what had been left over seemed to exist under a near constant cover of clouds and snow. What buildings remained were worn and ill-kept...crumbling from the poorly shod eaves all the way to the cracked foundations. Trudging down the single street that formed the hub of the destroyed town, she looked around curiously.

*Such ruin. After sae long...when was the Great Collapse that took it doon? Fourth Era, one twenty one? Twenty two? A good seventy five years ago, at least.*

Nemain had read Arch Mage Deneth’s tome upon the subject, months ago in Windhelm. “ *This great collapse that has devastated Winterhold was unexpected, I assure you. That the College has remained unaffected is only a testament to the protective magicks placed around it so long ago. It in no way implies that we were somehow prepared specifically for this event, and is certainly no indication that the College was somehow responsible…*”

*Couldn’t the auld wizards have extended those shields around the entirety of the Winterhold? They had not done themselves any favors with the locals with their apologetic redaction of history. For what else could possibly have incurred such heavenly wrath, but from the weather magicks wielded by the Gods themselves?*

Huddled in on herself against the biting winds coming off the Sea of Ghosts, Nemain passed an inn - the only building that seemed to see any activity in this frozen wasteland; the door practically propped open with all the comings and goings - as well as many other wrecked or burned down dwellings. Far off, a pathetically small longhouse stood whose fading, peeled sign proclaimed it to be the Jarl’s residence. That more than anything decided her - she would have as little to do as possible with the local Nords. She'd have a grudge the size of the Monahven were her hometown so wrecked by the very powers that drew in commerce and tourism.

Snow crunched underfoot as she gave two arguing Nords a wide berth. *A trading post. Precious few homes. Where are all the people?*
Apparently they were all at the College. Solemn gray towers starkly overshadowed the rest of Winterhold, tall gated stones bracketing the bridge where a slender Altmer woman stood. Fire spilled from her hands, the heat warming Nemain as she stopped at a curt gesture from the elf.

“Cross the bridge at your own peril! The way is dangerous and the gate will not open. You shall not gain entry!”

“Why are you out here?” Nemain felt her teeth chatter as her breath clouded the air. “It...gods, it be absolutely freezing!”

“I am here to assist those seeking the wisdom of the College. And if, in the process, my presence helps to deter those who might seek to do harm, so be it.” The elf looked down her long nose at the witch and sniffed. “The more important question is, why are you here, Breton?”

“I wish to enter. Let me pass.”

“Perhaps. But what is it you expect to find within?”

Nemain shrugged. “I be no one. Just a scholar, seeking to study the Elder Scrolls in your fine libraries.”

“Do you now?” The she-elf pursed her thin lips. “It is true there are some here who have spent years studying the accumulated knowledge of the scrolls. But what you seek does not come easily, and can destroy those without a strong will.”

“Och aye, if you wish I can provide character references for the strength of me resolve.”

Shifting in her boots, Nemain thought longingly of her old room in Windhelm. Her private, fur strewn bed and built up fireplace. Hot baths, books, chatting with Ulfric over wine and apples...cor, she even missed stealing Galmar’s brandy. Perhaps there be massive, magic-fueled bonfires within the College? Even gutrot mead sounds right pleasant about now. And a spare bed to collapse into, absent of nosy Nords?

“Truly, I wish no harm to you and yours. I only wish to read - to answer my own questions, and then be on my way.”

“It would seem that the College has what you seek. The question now is what you can offer the College. Not just anyone is allowed inside. Those wishing to enter must show some degree of skill with magic.” The Altmer mage flourished a hand, revealing a sparkling ball of magelight. It glimmered and danced upon her fingers.

“A small test, if you will.”

Like I’d fail, after coming so far. Straightening, Nemain wriggled her fingers. “Go on, then. I’ll take your test.”

“Excellent.” Amber eyes narrowed. Stepping back, the hooded elf pointed to the circular symbol of a stylized eye that was barely dusted by snow. “A standard spell for one skilled in Destruction magic is the Firebolt. Casting one at the seal upon the ground here would be sufficient.”

“Right.” She did not even have to think about it. Her fireball roared against the stones, melting the frost underfoot. Causing steam to rise and mingle with both their exhaled breaths.
The Altmer’s voice became decidedly warmer. “Well done indeed. I think you’ll be a superb addition to the College. Welcome, apprentice. I am Faralda, and I shall lead you across the bridge. Please. Follow me.”

The ‘bridge’ was little more than a string of broken stones in places. Deftly stepping only where Faralda walked, Nemain bit her tongue in concentration. Were those the wreckage of actual houses down below? I can see why Nords be afeared of entering the College, my my...tis a verrah long way down.

The gates opened. A huge stone statue of a robed mage with open arms graced the center of a large, prettily decorated courtyard. Snowberries, mushrooms, all manner of creeping things grew despite the snow. Rubbing a leaf between her fingers, Nemain wondered at this profusion of life in such a bleak place. More magic?

“There.” Faralda gestured to the doors across the courtyard that bore a similar sigil of an open eye. “Head on inside. Tolfdir is likely teaching the other apprentices now. You’ll want to speak to Mirabelle Ervine, our Master Wizard about lodgings and new robes.”

Giving her mucketty garb a scathing look, Faralda waved her imperiously off. “...And soon. Those rags look to be falling apart at the seams.”

“Don’t I know it. Many thanks, Faralda.”

The elf did not seem to hear her. That, or she chose to ignore her farewell. Either way, Nemain shrugged and dragged her frostbitten self down the path past the monstrous effigy. There were only a few others milling about in this weather; a manservant sweeping the steps industriously.

Further away, nearly out of earshot a tall Altmer man and a Breton woman spoke. Arguing, she thought curiously, as she watched out of the corner of her eyes as the Mer gave a decisive swipe of his hand. Black robes. Geometric runes. Thalmor.

Bloody fuck. Nemain picked up her pace and pushed hard against the heavy double doors. Inside was hardly warmer than out, but the darkness was soothing after so much white snow. Her abused eyes relished the reprieve, as she walked through the quiet foyer into what a small sign proclaimed to be the ‘Hall of the Elements.’

More of those eerie bluish magelights hovered in spaced intervals around the circular tower. The overall impression was that of staid order. A mystic sort of tranquility, imparted by the tall glass arches and omnipresent hush. Any sound made in such a place would echo, she thought reverently. Echo and repeat. Best to watch what was said. No Shouting here.

“Ah, welcome!” A weathered old Nord mage hailed her with a wrinkled smile, as a small group of what looked to be apprentices turned from their huddle to look her over. “We were just about to depart upon to our dig site at Saarthal, nearby. Care to join us?”

Saarthal. Night of Tears. A remnant of the wars of the Merethic Era, when Ysgramor did battle with the elven population. Back and forth, blame on both sides. How fascinating it would be to actually walk in its historic depths…

“Sure. Why not.” Hefting her knapsack higher upon her shoulder, Nemain smiled at the other students. Oh look...they even have a Nord studying magic. A miracle. “Lead on, Elder One. A quick look around, then a bath and some vittles sounds just about right.”

“Excellent, young lady. Follow along, if you please.”
Joining the others who filed out of the Hall of Elements and into the snowy courtyard, Nemain breathed deeply of the fresh, salt laden air. *Magic.*

The very air of the hall tingled her skin with it; for magic suffused even the winds that swept through the college yard. She could sense the ancient wards like a transparent bubble, surrounding the entire structure. From high overhead to the deep base planted beneath the sea.

A true haven for mages and seekers of knowledge. Here, Nemain reasoned, her questions about the Scrolls (and much else besides) would not be looked at askance.

She willfully ignored the piercing golden eyes of the white haired elf who watched them leave. Tall and broodingly silent in those Thalmor robes, the Mer stood sentinel at the doors as though he were counting the fingers of every individual who took off.

Shivering at the feeling of eyes between her shoulderblades, Nemain swallowed the Shout of Yol that arose unbidden from her throat. It would not do, to reveal her hand so soon. No one here needed to know that she was Nemain, Dragonborn. *Particularly not a Thalmor.*

For a while - just the barest week or so, Nemain could be just Nemain. A wandering mage seeking further knowledge and enlightenment from the hive of magical activity in all of Skyrim. Surely nothing else unfortunate could happen, after all that had occurred? The Gods were not so vindictive as that.

Right?

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*Middas, Second Week of First Seed*

Bear,

I hope that your journey back to Windhelm was uneventful. My path seems to have been anything but.

Met the Companions of Whiterun along the way. One was nice, the other not so. What do you think of them? They might be worth checking out, if you have the septims. For your glorious rebellion, I mean.

Not a day in Winterhold (which is utterly depressing, by the way) and I was enlisted in what was supposed to be a simple archaeological dig that turned into a bloody horror story. We went into the ruins of Saarthal - you remember, where the elves killed all of Ysgramor’s kin and friends save his two sons - and oh look. Draugr! Traps! Feckin puzzles and Jyrik Gauldurson who blows, that skullduggery nipplecluster. And a massive glowing marble that seems to have something to do with Magnus, God of Magic.
Et’Ada only know why...you’d think he’d notice misplacing his eye or some such rot.

Anyhow, I now bear a newly healed lightning-burned scar upon my arm as a souvenir, and the College now possesses what the elves of old seemed to have sought from Saarthal, ever so long ago. It be huge and shiny and it is currently emanating an annoyingly bright light all over the Hall of Elements. I hate passing by the bizarre thing. Gives me the shivers.

Learned a new Shout. Somewhat interesting - instead of Frost Breath, this Ice Form freezes a subject into an icy statue. Causing them to fall, completely immobile, to the ground. I foresee many pranks being a success with this. Do you think Borri knows it?

I haven’t had much success in finding an Elder Scroll. The librarian here seems to be on holiday, visiting kin in the Wrothgarian mountains. And I cannot seem to find the substitute book keeper anywhere - some berk by the name of Drevis Neloren.

Of course he would be the Master Illusion trainer. Probably hovering over me invisibly while I write this missive. Damn him.

Point being - there be an astonishing amount of reading I must wade through. Everything from ‘Moth Priest’ to ‘Aedra’ to ‘Prophecy.’ Countless possible futures and pasts contained in the very fabric of the parchment upon which the Elder Scrolls be written! Small wonder whoever does read them goes mad or blind, after a time. I shall allow Paarthurnax to do the honors...no matter how tempted I may be. Dragons perhaps would be immune, since they ‘ride the waves of time’ or whatever nonsense the Old One was chirping about at High Hrothgar.

How be my foster children? Are Aventus and Sofie looking plump and happy? Gods, I miss them so.

I need no bones or runes to see that this endeavor may take longer than I previously thought. I be buried up to my ears in books now. Luckily, the College seems to have accepted me as a student and I have been provided free room and board - along with a very nice enchanted robe. You were right - Aye, they be bloody expensive.

As a side note, the mare you gave me to ride died along the way. I will pay you for the trouble of replacing her. She was a good horse and I shall miss her.

On that final note, there be a Thalmor here at the College of Winterhold. Some Mer named Ancano who claims to be an advisor to Arch Mage Savos Aren...though I've never seen the Dunmer ask for anything but the odd request for Ancano to move out of his way. Time will tell if this yellow bastard be a pot stirrer or not.

I have not forgotten the farmstead.

New term: rumbusticating. There was another, but it was far too foul. Oh, you DO wish to read it and burn out your very bonny blue peepers? FINE. ‘Locking legs and swapping gravy’.

Cor, I think I threw up in my mouth a wee bit. Your turn!

-Your ill tempered and eyesore friend,

Nemain

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Witch,

Glad to see you survived alone in the wilds. You had me worried.

Ah, the Companions of Jorrvaskr. They are politically neutral by tradition, yet I would not turn away such help. I am sure you used all your considerable powers of persuasion to illustrate the benefits of such an alliance.

I too have obtained a scar since last we met. Courtesy of your foster son Aventus, who roundly bashed me in the head when I was inattentive during practice. The boy shows promise with blunt weaponry. With your permission, I will allow him to continue training with the warriors. This may keep young Aventus alive - longer than he will be if he continues to occupy himself stealing Skjora’s pies.

I adore her pies. So it benefits myself as well. Though I know you think little of jazbay, it remains my favorite. The very taste of snowberries turns sour in my mouth, when I reflect upon how Wulfgar loved them so.

Odd. Years have passed with only the odd letter, yet I find I miss both Wulfgar and Einarth a great deal. It is the way of things...to long for what has been taken away. I long for your touch.

Sofie now shadows Wuunferth’s every step. I think the old man secretly likes it, though he complains loudly and at length when I ask how she fares. She might have an aptitude for magic. Congratulations - a little witch in training. You should be so proud.

Can - I want to Have you given any thought to my offer of taking on the position of court mage?

Be wary of any Thalmor -especially one who bides beneath the mask of amicable friendship. Likely the Mer is there to broker a treaty with the mages of your College. Perhaps bring them to his way of thinking. You would let me know if such pacts took place, I hope.

I have not forgotten the farmstead either.

Horses frequently die while travelling. I do not even name my mounts anymore, lest I become too attached. Though the stallion I currently ride is a fine beast; hale and steadfast in the thick of battle. I shall be sorry to see him fall.

Do not worry about incurring expense upon my behalf. Your task is an important one - while Galmar and I traveled to our southern outpost in the Rift we discovered a small farmstead that had been razed to the ground near Autumnwatch Tower. Bodies burnt nearly to ash, the topsoil ruined...this is the fate of the homeland should you fail. Hearken to it.

All Skyrim relies upon you and your talents, Nemain. Choose what to do with your time wisely. It is inevitable that other farms and villages, perhaps even towns like Kynesgrove will fall...but that is your disadvantage as Dragonborn. You may only be in one place at any given moment and occupy yourself accordingly.
But take heart. Given time and sufficient preparation, I am sure together we may stem the slaughter that the dovah have unleashed upon us all.

Some new terms to add to the list (which I have kept hidden from Galmar with great pains. He would never let me live it down. Though I will say that he and his fist of Stormcloaks have been a veritable treasure trove of ludicrous lewd speech. Prepare yourself.)

Quimsticking. Spearing the bearded clam (Vulgar. Thought you'd like it.) Grummeting. Pully-hawly.

And last but not least...an old Nordic term you may or may not have heard, which is Knullkompis. Liberally translating to ‘fuck friend.’ As in, a casual acquaintance with which one might occasionally grummet or quimstick.

...Is this what we are, Nemain? I find myself in a strange place when I think upon what lies between us overlong.

Truly, I despise indecision. Perhaps you can answer this one question for me while searching for your Kel, your Elder Scroll.

What is it exactly that you want from me?

Fucking tired of riding for days on end,

- Bear

Chapter End Notes

Knapdarloch - Scottish slang for a piece of feces hanging from an animal’s fur. Dingleberries, essentially. Such a perfect insult.
The Reality

Chapter Notes

Here we have a new and unexpected paradigm. Hope you like...was struggling to overcome writer's block. I have the entire story all blocked out - just getting to where I want to be is a bit of a slog.

I take all accounts of the Oblivion Crisis from the Rising Threat book series found in Elder Scroll lore. Perhaps a true believer of the Thalmor who believed they had been saved would find reasons to excuse their other crimes in the name of expediency? Huh. I always do like challenging myself to think outside the box. To find ways to make baddies relateable. We will see how well I did here.


See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Only the Aldmeri—the High Elves and their noble allies, the Wood Elves and Cat-Men—have the wisdom and restraint to peaceably rule the disparate peoples of Tamriel. Though we are reluctant to take up this burden, events have shown that we must. Recent events prove that the Dragon Break was not a unique event. Men always follow the destructive path of their defender and apologist, the Missing God whom we shall not name. This ends here. Once again, Elves shall rule Tamriel from White-Gold Tower... this time, forever. The world has gone wrong, and we must put it right. March proudly beneath the eagle banner of the Aldmeri Dominion!"

— Aicantar of Shimmerene

She was taking up his seat again.

It was the most comfortable seat in the poorly stocked and permanently frigid library, Ancano thought with covetous disapproval. Good lighting, open view of all entrances and exits, sufficient space from the orsimer librarian to avoid inciting a scolding should the desire for wine comingle with the urge to read. All in all, it was the best thing about the rustic tragedy that was the College of Winterhold.

And the little manner female had stolen it once more. Surrounded by stacks of books, one of which had been opened in her lap - and yet, judging by the foolish smile wavering upon the woman’s face, she was certainly not reading anything written by Albrecht Theophannes Bombidius. A fluttering of parchment that moved with each shallow breath - yes, he could see it right...there.

Reading a letter within a library tome, as a cover for such a foolish pursuit. How intolerable.
He folded his arms within the sleeves of his robes. “Excuse me, but I believe you have taken my seat. Would you be so kind as to liberate it from the oppression of your misplaced rear end?”

Grey eyes slid upwards, fixing him with rather unimpressed speculation. “Dinnae see your name stamped upon it anywhere, elf. Wait - lemme look.”

Bending over both sides of the chair, the Breton folded her book over upon one finger and raised both hands in a beseeching mockery. Her voice was a rasping husk, with a touch of threat added the more she spoke. “Oh look! No name. Guess it’s a free seat, then. G’bye.”

Opening her book with a dramatic snap, the tiny dremora began to read once more. Not noticing how Ancano’s fists were slowly tightening into whitened knots with every moment her fool flat arse lingered ever longer in... his...Auri-damned...CHAIR.

“Get out of my seat.”

“Or ye’ll what?” She murmured without deigning to look at him. “Fling a fireball or two? Lay me out upon the torturer’s rack and have a go? I hear you Thalmor do enjoy such things. May as well fling a snotball for all the good it will do you. This be my seat, where my arse be planted for the foreseeable future. Go sit somewhere else.”

She was right. Her crude, though well reasoned logic reached through the fog of frustrated rage that seemed to hover around the periphery of his mind of late. Turning to a nearby chair, Ancano sat. Grasping for something - anything - to do to occupy himself, Ancano reached out and pulled to him the first book he saw. Bristin Xel, Poison Song Book VI. Regrettable. He had already read the series twice. There was nothing truly unique here, in Skyrim. Nothing new to show his superiors, to prove his worth and continued presence here at the College. Nothing save that damnable orb. Holding the book open in his long fingered hands, he gazed upon it. Unseeing. This entire mission is a disaster. How could we possibly use such a uncontrollable artifact for our ends without blowing ourselves up?! And the dreams...gods. The Psijics have involved themselves based upon the whisperings of the Halls. What to do? It is truly hopeless.

“Ahem. Something the matter?”

Looking up with a jerk, the Altmer realized that the Breton was no longer reading but staring at him. She extended a single finger. “Yer book be upside doon.”

Clearing his throat, Ancano gravely rotated the tome until it was right side up again. “Perhaps I favor reading in the style of Bonorian the Wanderer.” Not that any such reading style existed. Like this one would know any better. I’ll bet she rips pages out of the books to use as toilet tissues when her squats get the better of her.

The Breton croaked out an inelegant grunt and lifted a bare foot towards him, wriggling the toes. He stared in fascination, as the bottom of her foot was thickly layered in brown callus. He’d never seen such hard feet - they must be tough as horn. “Och aye, and flying skeevers be shooting out of me
quim every time I sneeze. Wishes are nae the same as fishes, odd one.” She snorted, her rough laugh making him wince as her long braid flapped against a teetering stack of books. “Not that I’d wish that particular curse on anyone, mind! Poor wee quims the land over be a-trembling at the thought. Hoo hoo.”

Retracting the ugly appendage, she sat up and primly folded both hands upon the book. If Ancano squinted a certain way, he could nearly make out the name at the bottom of her letter… until she pulled out the parchment and neatly folded it into a square. Depositing what had brought such a dreamy smile into the folds of her robes. Damnation.

“So. What be troubling ye, Thalmor?”

Introductions first. Stuck as he was in the northernmost wastes of the armpit of Tamriel, Ancano would be civil. He had been born and bred to be polite. Even to this loathsome little toad. “My apellation is that of Ancano, thirty four years late of Firsthold of Auridon, being one of the Summerset Isles of Alinor. And you are?”

The little woman sucked hard upon her inner cheek, creating a concave bowl as her mouth worked. Watching him with those narrowed ghostly eyes - why did mankind have such offputtingly colored irises? - as her tiny fat lips finally opened to bray forth. “I be Nemain, of the fine western wold of Deepwood Redoubt. Late of Markarth, Windhelm and the asscrack of nowhere. Pleased to meetcha.”

“Charmed, I’m sure.” Forsworn. This has promise. “Which clan did you say you were from, Reachwoman?”

“I didnae say.” Taptaptap went the mage’s foot against the chair. His face must have betrayed the pining he felt for his favorite seat (By the Eight, this one was too soft and wide) for she wriggled even deeper into the cushions with a smug grin. “But if ye tell me a truth in return, I might be persuaded to tell ye. What say you? A truth for a truth, aye?”

Ancano steepled his fingers together, minding the slight flick of electric shock that danced as his fingertips touched. “Truth is far different from honesty, young lady.”

“Young lady, arrah well then. Let’s start this off straight with summat simple. How old be you, Anc-ah-no of the Fehrsthowld ahve Awhridawn?”

It may have been the first time he had ever been truly stunned to hear such a spot on mimicry of his own voice. “How did you do that?”

She tossed her braid back. “Simple. I just imagined meself to be a poncy skeletal swot what has a god complex, and the voice came to me. Now answer, you puckered salt-sprinkled arsehole. How old do you be?”

He saw no reason to lie about such a thing. Salt sprinkled? Puckered? No, he would not ask. Ancano had few things left to him, but pride yet remained. “Two hundred and forty three years I have lived. Well over the cusp of adulthood and yet not old, by most elven standards. How old are you?”

A dimple popped upon her cheek as she flashed him a surprisingly white smile. Though her teeth, he noted, were quite crooked and uneven. As though a few had been chipped off at one point. “So that hair be natural, then, and not the product of old age. Now that do be fascinating.”

“I be thirty five years of age. Astonishing aye? You’ve lived, what? Aboot seven of me own
lifetimes? And yet here I sit.” She patted the cushion currently bearing her up. “Upon your favorite chair. And there be nothing you may do aboot it.”

Tilting her head as he simmered, Nemain’s face tightened with abrupt frostiness. “So whatever be brewing in that pointy head concerning me mates here at the College can go and cobbin’ bugger off.”

Dismissing Ancano, the Forsworn selected another book from her pile. Night of Tears, this time. Written by Dranor Seleth. Damnation and divines. That was a book he had long wanted to peruse, but had not yet been able to find a copy thanks to the completely inefficient filing that the library had suffered through, in Urag gro-Shub’s absence. “Why do you read about Saarthal?” The orb, perhaps? Does it call to you as it calls to me?

“Truth?” She turned a page, licking the corner of her strangely blunt man-mouth with one wet swipe. “Saarthal fascinates me. All those ancient elves and Atmorans livin’ in peace, up until the elves decided that mankind were right overrunning the place. Then - bam! Genocide time. Rather shows how our present does repeat the history of itself. Over and over...like that old saw.”

“...the one that goes on aboot how those who dinnae study history be doomed tae repeat it. Only it didnae work out so well for the Snow Elves, wouldn’t ye say?”

He would not be baited, though everything within him soared to accuse her of spreading falsehoods. “I’d be tempted to argue that it was Ysgramor and his famous Five Hundred who slaughtered the race of Mer down to a lowly and crushed people underground. But I digress. What I truly did wish to know was which clan you hearken from, in your precious Reach.”

Another page turned. She did not look up. “Who be asking?”

He was not sure he had heard her correctly. Sitting right here, am I not?

“...I’m not sure I understand the question.”

Suddenly sitting up on her knees, the Breton mage slammed the copy of Night of Tears atop one of the many piles of books. Causing it to tumble to the floor with multiple thumps and thuds. “Is it you, Ancano the Elf who be asking? Or be it the Thalmor spy in Winterhold College? Who?”

Lie. Deflect. Change the subject. ”What? Preposterous, and just the sort of thing I would expect from mages who have nothing better to do with their time. I have made it quite clear that my only role here is as an advisor to the Arch-Mage. I would suggest that you not further spread this rumor.”

Closing her eyes tightly, Nemain inhaled with a snarling hiss. “Liiies. All of it. Every word that drips from your lips be only lies.” Picking up one of the books that had fallen, Nemain gestured to him with the volume, pages flapping as she waved it wildly.

Ancano shuddered as the priceless tome of inscribed Falmer history, painstakingly copied and translated, flew about the dust mote laden air of the library. “Tell me a truth, or this conversation be over. Why be you here, Ancano? So you’re a spy - well fuck a duck! Anyone with eyes couldae seen that!”

Leaning over, her robe gaped open. Revealing creamy white skin that held a drop of something dark that had been diluted. Somewhere in her past bloodline, Ancano thought idly as he forced his eyes upward from the firm cleavage put on display, her forebears had lain with a Bosmer or Altmer. Something not quite Nedic, for the flesh to be ever-so-slightly yellowed. Even the tips of those ugly
round ears had the barest hint of a point at their edges. An interesting realization. Perhaps the
manner were not so galactically distant from his species after all.

“Tell me true, elf, or I squawk and every mage in this towering heap of rubble comes to my call. Why
are you here?”

“Because there is nowhere else to be!” He roared, disbelieving his response even as the words
spewed forth from his mouth. Something...no, someone had done this to him. This rube had
managed something untoward to make him speak the truth. The worst of the truth. He could no
sooner lie to cover his gasp of shock than Nemain could...could be gifted the waters that fed the
Elden Root and shoot up three spans in a fortnight. What-

“Well, well.” Leaning back with a self-satisfied grin, Nemain tangled her fingers in the folds of her
robes. Causing her strange mutt-bred skin to be hidden from view. “That was indeed the truth.”

Ancano found himself hanging upon her words, as the Forsworn wet her full lips. Only to whisper,
as he felt the slightest twinge of real curiosity. To hear her bloodties, for he had researched the clans
of the Reach thoroughly before travelling to the province. To know his enemy and their weaknesses.

“I be one of the Stonetalon Clan, Ancano. Though if it be truth we speak, they dinnae give a shit
about me anymore. Where I go, who I be with. Tis all the same to them.”

Stonetalon, Ancano thought hurriedly. Skimming over his mental stores of knowledge until he dimly
recalled reading something about that particular clan. Matriarchal, like all the others. The Stonetalons
were the most reclusive and powerful of all; the women held in high regard as powerful seers and
magicians. Very auspicious tidings, indeed. If she could be turned...

Flipping open her book once more, Nemain flicked her fingers in a dismissive gesture. The pouty
mouth curled in what seemed to Ancano to be some sort of private pain.

“Now go away, ye auld scarecrow, and leave me to read in peace. Go and pesc someone else in this
wide place. Surely you havenae annoyed everyone this afternoon as of yet?”

Lifting his left shoulder in a minute shrug, Ancano continued watching the Breton. Who was looking
less toad-like and more morose every second that passed.

Lifting his hand to finger the books upon the near shelf, Ancano frowned as he pulled out a brand
new volume. Trinimac take him, the glue from the bindings still gave off an animal odor that
wrinkled his nose. What was this...

“Hey. If you’re no gonnae read that I’d be interested.

Finding the Forsworn’s attention upon him once more, the Thalmor scanned the title...amber eyes
widening as he looked back up in confusion. Surely she must be jesting.

“...The Sultry Argonian Bard?”

“Aye. Havenae read that one yet. The others weren’t too bad. Short, though.”

Idly flicking through the pages, Ancano ignored her indignant squeaks as he quickly perused the pages. “Ah, but you seem to handle your instrument so well, my darling.” Croon-Tail replied humbly, “You flatter me, my lady.”

“Yes, well it is such a large and magnificent piece. May I hold it?”

"...Goodness no! The innkeeper would never approve of such a public display."

Snapping the book shut, Ancano was bothered to realize that the woman was now laughing at him. High spots had heated his cheeks, cankering his mood even further. “Woohoo hah! Read summat that ye didnae like, elf?”

“This is poorly written filth, Breton. Why anyone would sully their mind with such trash escapes me.” He replied flatly.

Remaining silent, the little toad looked at him with a twinkle in those eyes, mouth pulled tight as an occasional giggle escaped her. One hand extended out to him, small fingers wiggling as she gesticulated. “Gimme.”

“Oh very well. But only, ” He held the book back as the woman made a swipe for it, nearly overbalancing out of that chair. If he could just get her to fall out of the seat, he could claim it for his own! “...if you give me the book you are currently reading.”

He tilted his head. “And that chair.”

“Hah! By Dibella’s stained smalls, you’ll never sit here again elf. Not if I have my way.” Sucking upon her lip, Nemain motioned to the book. “I’ll trade ye Night of Tears for the Sultry Argonian Bard. But I be keeping the chair, thank you verrah much.”

“...Fine.”

Leaning over, he waited patiently as she stretched as far as her puny mannish arms could reach. Struggling to hand over her tome whilst grasping her shoddy two-septim novel in hand.

Damn it. Barely managing not to fall (much to his disappointment), the Forsworn plunked back into her seat with a self-satisfied sigh. Ancano brushed off what looked to be crumbs that had been scattered upon the book cover as the woman cooed. “How lovely. And here I’d thought I’d read all of Crassius Curio’s works.”

“That book was not written by Crassius Curio.” Ancano demurred, feeling a prickle of interest as he memorized the skillfully sketched layout of Ancient Saarthal at its peak. My, my...Nords living underground. For safety, perhaps? Dragons roamed the skies then, so it seems they were prudent to do so. “If I hadn’t read the title page, I would still be able to tell by Ellya Erdain’s erroneous syntax.”
“You.” Pointing a finger at him, the Forsworn flopped over in the chair. Laughing fit to burst the entire while as his feelings steadily plummeted from middling apathy to a livid wrath. How dare this mixed breed raise her voice to him, a Mer superior to her in every way... “You! You’ve read all the Lusty Argonian Maid series! Hah hah ho hoo! Of all the chuffed stooks to indulge in such filth...”

“I’d read a Frost Troll’s scrawled diary to alleviate the boredom of this cursed town.”

“Riiight.” Making a rude noise, she stuck out her tongue at him. “Just goes to show you be more human than I thought were possible. Ye blessed gods! Doon smile or yer face will crack under the strain! Be a darling and hand me any future smut you find, aye? Lest ye break out a stiffy boner for the first time in centuries.”

“You’re disgusting. Resume your torrid choice of fiction and leave me in peace.”

“Yer just afraid your prick be sae out of use it would blow dust instead of chunks, dagger-ears.”

Wiping a tear from her eye, Nemain continued snickering as he turned away. Ignore her. Just fucking ignore that fulminous she-mongrel. Lounging in his chair sideways, Ancano blew a strand of white hair from his eyes and began focusing upon the letters. Why the words dodged and twisted in his vision, he did not know...his eyesight remained without peer. Perhaps a more thorough night of rest is in order.

He had spent the last evening creeping about in the shadows, all the better to oversee the other apprentices in their private experiments. Most of which, he reflected, were frightfully dull. The Khajiit seemed unduly focused upon fire cloak spells. The Nord did nothing but read and mope, hardly casting anything more than the odd magelight. And that Dunmer - Brelyna? One of the Telvanni. She showed the most promise - and the most ambition, casting spells upon any who would allow her to do so.

Now that had been amusing, Ancano sneered to himself. Seeing the Nord Onmund be transformed into a horker, a bee, a goat... gods, that had been satisfying. To see a mighty Nord bleating like an idiot, after being changed back to human form. If only he could immortalize the moment in verse or prose. Onmund the churl, hayseed did he hurl...

Just as well that poetry was not his strong suit. Yes. Brelyna was the most likely candidate he would elect to approach. She would make an excellent spy. Dunmer were a septim a dozen here in the Pale and in Eastmarch...the young mage could travel without notice anywhere in Stormcloak territory.

Feeling reassured, Ancano focused again upon his reading.

“Vingalmo's Treatise on the Altmer Antecedent suggests that the elves of the Merethic Era, along with their counterparts the early Dwemer, possessed a degree of sophistication unparalleled in Tamriel. They displayed power beyond what could be expected of the time. While a distinct explanation is not given for this, I believe that this work, compared with the early writings of Heseph Chirirnis, suggest that something greater was at work on that night in Saarthal...”

“So, elf. Why do you hang about the Frozen Hearth Inn sae much? Getting tired of replenishing your
stock of black soul gems with the souls of Nordling babbies?"

The tiny woman was becoming a right thorn in his side. “If you must know, witch, I have an old associate there. A scholar friend by the name of Nelacar. I do so tire of drinking the rank slop these snowbacks call mead, and Dagur keeps a goodly stock of Alto and Surilie wines.”

“Surilie wine?” Nemain licked her lips, making her grey eyes wide and innocent. “Be there by chance any from the verrah good year 125 from Skingrad?”

*By Phynaster, that was his favorite. Very suspicious...how did she know? “Possibly.”*

“I should like to meet your Nelacar. Even if he be a Thalmor sympathizer, it would be a source of fresh conversation. Oh, and wine. Fresh wine would be a godsend, to be sure.”

Bookmarking his place in the Night of Tears, Ancano gave the woman his full attention. “Now why in Nirn would you be lacking for conversation here? Are there not enough blithering dimwits about to share lurid tales of freezing skeevers and stealing petty soul gems?”

Nemain’s face closed in upon itself. “They dinnae wish to have anything to do with me, after...after what happened in Saarthal. And I cannae blame them...they be apprentices.” With an idle sweep of hand, the witch gestured to herself. Bare feet and all.

“And I be an accomplished witch of advanced years - a shaman since my youth. We share little in common. And I will admit - I dinnae care for their fool experiments.”

*What happened in the depths of Saarthal? He had not heard of anything beyond shock and amazement at the discovery of the Eye. Reluctantly, Ancano’s lips quirked in the smallest of smiles. “You must admit, seeing Onmund transform into a horker was…”*

“...a great ruddy achievement!” Nemain brightened at the thought, as the strange sensation of a smile stretched his lips. *Odd. It almost hurts.* “Cor, I would pay septims to see such a spell misfire occur again. Perhaps to J’Zhargo instead...I do despise that poncy catman. Thinks he be sae much better than everyone else, when his spellcasting be nae more than mediocre.”

Considering, the Thalmor mulled over his options.

On one hand, the less time spent with the crude hedge witch the better. Loud and obnoxiously crass, he did not care overmuch for her company. And plying her with wine would undoubtedly only make it worse.

On the other hand...Nelacar did love a good debate. Their own arguments had grown rather stale and repetitive after months of rehashing the same old points. A new perspective would almost be worth the annoyance that was this cheeky Forsworn.

“Very well. I shall introduce you to Nelacar. Meet me tonight at the Frozen Hearth Inn at sundown, and we shall discuss the subject of Saarthal and the Merethic Era over a bottle of Surilie red.”

Looking nearly rueful, Nemain stroked the spine of her book. “This isnae a trick, is it? You’re not gonnae clobber me over the heid and use me for some daft experiment, aye?”

*Ridiculous woman. “If I were, I certainly would not inform you of it beforehand.”*
“...But you indeed would have nothing to fear.” He hastened to add, as Nemain’s eyes froze over at his words. “All I ask is that you refrain from insulting Nelacar’s...rather odd beliefs. He holds some strong opinions concerning soul capture and Daedra worship.”

Nemain shrugged. “Fair’s fair. I be having some opinions of me own that I cannae wait to lay on ye.” She smiled fiercely, white teeth gleaming in the dim library. “Strong opinions.”

Well. You have gone and done it now, you fool of a wizard. “I’d expect no less. Come hungry.”

“Always am.”

Leaving her completely embroiled in her fictitious drivel, Ancano glided in soundless steps downstairs towards his chambers. Pondering the indelibly odd workings of the manner mind, even as he chided himself roundly for allowing this to happen.

A Thalmor, a Forsworn and a Magician supping at the same table. Truly, this is more of a bardic joke than any mutually beneficial idea. Perhaps this seed once planted will prove fruitful, though I rather doubt it.

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

At the threshold of the Frozen Hearth Inn, Nemain sucked in a deep breath. Ancano could barely see her, swaddled as she was in furs and her robed caul. “Mmm...sour mead, vomit and the smell of desperation.”

Opening the door, the Altmer bent his head. Inviting her in out of the blustering snow. “It is early, yet. And believe it or not, this is one of the better taverns in the Pale.”

“Well they let you in. It cannae be that much better.”

Across the crowded inn, Nelacar brightened as Ancano waved him over. “Nowswaith da, my friends! Come in, come in to my private rooms. We shall hear nothing over this din otherwise!”

The top of Nemain’s hood bobbed far below as Ancano kept a sharp eye upon the Breton. She avoided being trampled by spare inches, as she navigated the room thick with drunken Nords, hooting Dunmer and the odd Khajiit and Argonian. Used as he was to the rank smells of the unwashed masses, Ancano still held his breath while pushing through as quickly and deftly as possible. No need to start a fistfight that will delay us even further. That had happened once, after accidentally spilling some Nord berkserker’s mead upon his boots. Ancano had nursed a bruised eye for at least a full day, oh the shame. Thank the Gods for the School of Restoration. No one need know.

Ushering them into the relative silence of Nelacar’s study, he watched as the Breton lifted her hood to look around in wonder. Ancano supposed that for a Reachwoman, the room was richly furnished. Every wall was lined in bookshelves filled to the brim with a collection that would have made any
scholar back in Lillandril moderately proud. A collection of staffs and staves had been hung up on
the wall along with a random assortment of robes and furs. It seemed terribly provincial to the
Thalmor Mer, but perhaps for such a one as Nemain, it came across as exotic indeed.

“Come, sit!” They sat at the table, where Nelacar proudly displayed a carafe of Skingrad Surilie
wine. “Ancano has told me all about you, my young friend...particularly of your fine taste in wines.
Year 125, as promised.”

The tiny woman looked on avidly as her goblet was filled three quarters full of the rich, dark liquid.
Quaffing it in one gulp, the Breton pursed her lips. Smacked twice, then grinned. “That do be an
excellent vintage. Y’know, I had a friend what passed on recently. Now he was a true lover of the
vine. You’ve given me a grand tribute to his memory with the taste of this, Nelacar. I thank ye.”

“No trouble at all, young thing. Not at all.”

Wine was poured, and a maidservant entered bearing covered plates of slaughterfish and roast leeks.
The three ate in silence; the awkward tension brought on by two old friends being joined by a
complete stranger slowly tamped down by the Breton’s random questions. First about wine, then
Nelacar’s academic pursuits....yet it was not until the wine was nearly gone that Ancano’s ears
quivered with one of the Breton’s seemingly innocent queries.

“So Nelacar. What d’ye think of the Markarth Incident?”

Oh gods. So much for polite conversation. Maintaining an aloof silence, Ancano continued to eat.
Head down, hardly daring to look up as Nelacar laughed in delight. “A bold start to the evening! As
one of the Reachfolk, perhaps you might enlighten us on your perspective first, Nemain?”

“Oh no. I know my own thoughts quite well, thank ye.” Swirling the last dregs in her cup, Nemain
rested her chin upon her fist. “And they be far from unique. Born and bred in the Reach, sae you
may imagine my view concerning Nords and such. I be far more interested in what you both think of
the recent events since the Great War. Since we all be in this for the long haul, ye ken?”

Nelacar hummed thoughtfully. “I see. Let me begin by asserting a common trope about history. If
that is acceptable, youngling?”

“Quite acceptable.”

“Very good. Now, one of the most unfortunate and widely accepted ideas about historical thinking is
that “history is written by the victors.” This point asserts that the truth of the past is not shaped by
reasoned interpretation or factual understanding of the past, but by the might of political and cultural
leaders on the “winning” side of history. Do you follow, Nemain?”

Ancano could see the woman’s fists tightening around the goblet, though her face remained
untroubled. “I be following your way of thinking sae far.”

“Yes. Marvelous. Ancano, you have truly brought me a treasure. So, those who have the power to
shape our historical narratives through scholarly texts, public statuary and songs do hold great
influence in our lives and in the shaping of future minds. Namely, in the teaching of our children.”

Waving a long yellow hand, Nelacar barely paused to draw breath...so enraptured he was by the
flow of his thoughts. Ancano saw the Reachwoman look increasingly sick, the longer the Mer
expounded. “To be sure, these mediums are powerful venues for establishing ideologies and shaping assumptions about the way our society works. And it certainly holds true that “official” entities can and do exploit this power to achieve their own ends. Thus it can be reasoned that we are truly the results of our upbringing. That truth lies in each and every beholder, and not some lofty ideal.”

This will not do. “Nelacar, you are surely not suggesting that the Thalmor are guilty of such perversions? The Aldmeri Dominion has been nothing but a blessing upon our fair isles. Why should we not take this boon...the strength we have fought and died for to lead the rest of Nirn into the light of the coming age?”

Nelacar smiled sadly. “Perhaps the rest of Tamriel, and yes...even Nirn does not wish to be remolded in the Altmer way, Ancano.”

Quiet so far, Nemain began to speak in a rush - as though she were afraid of the very words she uttered. “It be not just the Thalmor who do teach their version of truth. I have heard very similar stories amongst the Nords of Windhelm concerning their oppression by the evil forces of elves and magic.” Shrugging, she smiled at the looks of interest and disdain that colored Nelacar and Ancano’s expressions. “And I be aware of my own upbringing amongst the Forsworn who tell it all opposite-like. Nords be bad, magic be good.”

Shaking her head, the Breton witch sighed. “I have nursed me own fears of what truly be evil and what be good, lately. Unclear it is, though I have thought upon it long and hard. Who be right? Who be wrong?”

“When it comes to Nords and Forsworn, I’d say both are equally right and wrong.” Nelacar pushed away his plate, which contained only crumbs and bones. “Everyone tells their story the way it appears to them. Take for instance this Eye of Magnus that has come to you. The eye of a god! Immensely powerful and ancient, yet still we have little idea of what it does!”

“...besides granting us nightmares?” Ancano muttered, breaking his bread into bits with long fingers as Nemain gave him an odd look.

“Besides that. Any such artifact might do the same. It is steeped in magicka, riddled with the pain and tears of countless souls who lived and died above and around it. This Eye is primarily responsible for the greed-induced slaughter during the Night of Tears. Who knows...perhaps the god Magnus gave up his eye in sacrifice to Mer and Man? Hiding it deep in the earth, yet shallow enough to be discovered when the time was right, to provide light and knowledge to Nirn’s children. Was it worth it, this great Aedric sacrifice? Considering all the blood that has been shed on its behalf?”

Ancano scoffed. “The Snow Elves would not think so.”

“If they could still speak, they might relate such opinions.”

“We call him Magna Ge.” Nemain folded her hands, rubbing her thumbs together as she frowned. “One of the Et’Ada who tore their bodies apart to give us, their creations, life. God of the Trifold Way: Light, Sight and Insight. Power beyond imagining, dimmed forever and absorbed back into us. Forsworn legends say that Magne Ge tore a hole through Oblivion in his rush to escape the birth-pains of Mundus...creating the sun. His smaller, less powerful brothers and sisters also tore holes in the sky shroud, forming what we now see as stars.”

“A pretty sort of tale, to be sure. And yet this entire argument is completely irrelevant.”
“Oh?” Nemain cast a cold eye upon Ancano, as he stared right back with a grim foreboding. *I will say it. I was there. Truth is not the same thing as honesty, little Breton.* “Tell us, then...Ancano. Why our views be completely irrelevant. I shall bow to your superior knowledge if ye can tell me by what right ye do piss on our views.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Ancano felt the familiar rage rise within him as he summoned memories undimmed by time. “I was there, you know.” *Gods, even now...I can barely stand to speak of it.*

“There during what? Speak up, Thalmor. I cannæ hear you properly when you grit your teeth so.”

Nelacar watched in sympathy as Ancano slammed his fists down on the table, making Nemain jump. “During the Great Anguish! When that halliad halt Mehrunes Dagon unleashed his Gates of Oblivion upon us all! I was there when the Crystal Tower fell, and every Mer, she-Mer and child who survived the fall ran screaming to drown in the depths of the sea, to avoid slaughter by the dremora and daedra! *Do not say that the Thalmor did nothing, for without their help I would not be here! The very isles of Summerset would have sunk into the sea but for the Dominion!* *Peidiwch byth â dweud hynny!*”

Slumping back into his seat, Ancano found himself suddenly exhausted. His words rasped out in weary confirmation. “Yes. I was there.”

“Alas.” Nelacar cleared his throat. The elder Mer’s green eyes looked upon Ancano with a knowing grief that only hardened his heart further. *A pox on all who would decry our pursuit of power! Do they not know what may happen in its absence! Damn them! Auri-El take them all!* “I think our evening has drawn to a close, on the point offered by our friend Ancano.”

“Don’t!” He hissed, tightening every muscle as the little wretch moved. Lifted a hand, pity coloring those mirror-grey eyes he despised so very much. “Do not think that I will accept your supplications to my misery! You cannot know it! You were not there!”

“I wasnae there.” Her voice was quieter than a whisper. “But I have lived such pain as well. You are not alone in loss, elf. We all suffer.”

“Unless you lived it, you cannot know.”

“Och aye?” Nemain laughed, a bit wildly he thought. Her face contorted into a strange rictus of disgust mingled with empathy. “Sae you’re the only bastard what feels such intense grief? What of the Nords, then? Their Talos torn from them, homes destroyed and loved ones kilt for your Thalmor, your Dominion’s empirical schemes? What of *my* people, Ancano?! Have we known nothing but joy, being ripped from our lands to starve on the steppes? Who may brag most about their sufferings, elf? Tell me where it is written! Who holds the most right to rule, based on such mollycoddling standards as bloody fucking *pain*!”

He could bear it no longer. Standing, Ancano stepped jerkily away before his hands reached out to throttle the manner witch. “I bid you both a good evening.”
Nelacar dipped his head. “Ymadawol, young one.”

His elvish ears twirled as he heard the Breton mutter angrily beneath her breath, as he paused outside the almost-shut door to listen. Ignoring the twist of regret inside, that he had handled that so poorly. “And sod off, you stupidly proud blighter. Where does he get off, thinking the Thalmor be all sunshine an’ honeybloom? They kill babies, Nelacar. Slaughter for the fun of it! Tell Ancano I have seen that.”

“Oh? And have the Nords never raped or pillaged? I seem to remember swathes of Cyrodiilic countryside that ran screaming when the woad painted warriors of the north came. They hid their daughters as well as their goods. Ah...Ancano is yet young and rash. You might think as he does, Nemain, were your life dependent on their policies. I will say this: you were not there when the Aldmeri Dominion begat the burnings. A convenient method to dispose of political enemies, while claiming to eradicate all who were not of the Elder blood. Many died who might have otherwise lived, who chose to speak against what those in power proclaimed to be true. I shall loan you the works of Lathenil of Sunhold, for further reading upon the subject.”

“Never. Upbringing and ideological assumptions be damned! I’d ne’er say that what the Thalmor does be right and good!”

“That is a discussion for another time, perhaps. Good night, lbwydmerch.”

“What be you calling me?”

“I forget - you have little of the Old Tongue. I called you ‘Grey Girl,’ for that is what you are. Is it not? The hue of your eyes, the tenor of your political leanings…”

“Havenae been a girl for years, Nelly. It fits - for now. Say...och, this be a bit of a stretch. But indulge me.”

“I shall. But I’m an old Mer, my dear. I do need my rest.”

“Aye. Well. First I’ve a mind to ask you about the Psijic Order. There be a right dearth of information on that poxy group. But more pressingly...I’ve a wee contest going on with a fellow mate. We be trying to discover the filthiest terms for. Erm...tupping, that we may find. And since you be sae wise and auld...I thought…”

Nelacar laughed. “You, my dear, have come to the right Altmer. Let me get out my notes.”

And that is my cue to leave. Slinking past some Nords who were singing a bawdy tune, sloshing mead everywhere, Ancano ducked and weaved through the smoky inn. Mentally chewing over what he had just heard, now that his thoughts had calmed somewhat.

A Forsworn as well as a Stormcloak sympathizer. Some sick sham of a contest that will certainly prove useful as blackmail, for she is far more intelligent than I previously thought. And with those clan connections...Yes. By Phynaster and the Eight. If this one could be swayed to our side!

For the second time that day, Ancano felt his face split with a painfully tight grin. This night has born fruit despite all odds, after all.
Fredas, First Week of Rain’s Hand

Bear,

What I want is of no import. You be there in your lands, terribly busy (I know. Remember last autumn when I could not peg you down even for a simple meeting? I had to vomit all over you to get you to listen to me!) and I be here. Swamped in reading and the goddamn snarled logic of elves.

Your offer to be instated as court mage be tempting. I can see it now - us all creaky and ancient. Sniping at one another, you barely stooping upright upon Ysgramor’s throne while I shake a staff at you. All toothless and crankety. Is this the future you wish for? Because if you be wanting a woman to nag at you, I would hate to take that task from Skjora. She certainly handles you well enough. Those would be big boots to fill. And she be a better baker besides (I do love her apple pie).

In all honesty, I do not know Bear. I do not know what I want. What I used to want has soured with the winter and all the travel...all that I have seen and spoken of has changed me. And I fear...I am no longer who I was. And what I want - what I truly desire frightens even as it beckons to my spirit. I am still Forsworn, though my blood has forsaken me. And yet...Do you take my meaning?

I want to find this Elder Scroll and leave this place. Even High Hrothgar would be preferable, as the bloom has certainly come off the sanguine rose at this point. I am at once delighted and repulsed by the mages who reside here.

I blame you, you know. You and your brute Nord ways have spoiled me for good, old fashioned half-truths and trickery. With every breath, I taste the deceit of those who claim to be my friends and it saddens my heart.

If I taste your breath, what would it tell me? What do you long for? No...do not tell me. I will find out for myself.

Have you heard anything from Markarth? Anything at all? All my missives have gone unanswered and I fear the worst has happened.

I am fair pleased that Aventus and Sofie have found solid occupation at the Palace. Tell me...has spring come to Windhelm? Are there flowers? Here, there is nothing but stone and ice as far as the eye can see. The sea is nearly interchangeable with the ever-clouded sky. Grey like the turmoil that grows, like some weed...poisoning all the good, until I fear that when I leave I shall not see spring flowers. Only the grey and the cold, everywhere. In everything.

I shall be happy to quit Winterhold. Soon. For Urag gro-Shub has given me a strange tome called ‘Ruminations on the Elder Scrolls.’ I doubt I could describe just how poggy strange this Imperial’s
words be, so it may be something one must read for themselves. Cor - one step closer to that scuddy scroll.

How unsurprising that Galmar be the source of your latest skulduggery. Some of those were so rank, I could see the ink peel straight off the parchment! I jest, but here: I've found some of my own to challenge you with.

Amorous congress. Buckwilding. Jiggery-pokery! (So cheerful) Ilawes goch - which translates to red sleeve from High Elvish (don't ask) It means exactly what you think it might mean! Bodging, getting a bellyful of marrow (euch!), boffing. And finally - bopping squiddles. Though if you EVER use that term with me, I'll have your balls for earbobs. Och aye. I will. Do not test me on this. Balls off. Snip-snip.

Write me back soon. I miss you.

Perpetually annoyed and rightly peeved,

Nemain

Chapter End Notes

I have used the lovely Welsh language as my version of High Elven. Hey, Tolkien based his Quenya and Sylvan off of Welsh so why not? But again - I'm not a native speaker. This is fanfiction. I might get it wrong. Sorry, native Welsh speakers.

If you want to know what Welsh sounds like, here is a lovely folk song.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nrkgdj0bVAo

Nowswaith da - good evening

haliad hallt - salty wank. Just - ugh. Another great term that perfectly encapsulates the douchebaggery of Mehrunes Dagon. I WILL CONQUER THE WORLD BY SMASHING IT TO BITTY BITS AND THEY WILL LOVE ME FOR IT. Snore.

Peidiwch byth â dweud hynny - Never say such things

Ymadawol - Farewell

Oh. And the Sultry Argonian Bard is a REAL book. Kind of a genderbent Argonian Maid. Look it up, hahah.
Clicking her tongue against her teeth, Nemain continued to read with half her attention. The other half of her mind was fixed firmly upon the silence of the library, unbroken save for the occasional coughing wheeze from the old orc who held court at his oversized desk.

And... there he was.

The door opened. A patter of footsteps, followed by a hushed shirring of soft soled shoes against the stone as Ancano stopped. Thwarted in his pursuit of The Chair, as Nemain gave him a victorious smirk. She could almost hear the Altmer glower, as she primly licked her thumb to turn the page in *Ruminations on the Elder Scrolls*.

The Thalmor had joined Nemain to read in the library every day after the bizarre dinner at the inn. Most days, Nemain managed to secure the prized seat before he showed...always enjoying the stymied look the Mer unsuccessfully tried to hide each and every time. The written work of Septimus Signus was a laborious slog, and after the initial half an hour of looking up every other minute to see what the spy was up to, she forgot that he was even there.

It was rather like an unspoken agreement. Whosoever managed to occupy The Chair first thing in the morning had dibs upon it for the duration of the day. Yet Nemain never failed to be wary when she took those oh-so necessary breaks from reading...always pinning the silent Mer with a glare that promised murder should he attempt to usurp her seat. So far, he had not tried. Ancano had been unflaggingly polite.
No...not until the second week she arose from the Chair, arse-sore and in search of vittles, did it even register that the Mer was being pleasant. Saying ‘good morn’ and inquiring after her health, as she merely glared at him in response. Like there was something that bound them beyond mutual toleration and a desire to read unmolested. No one else at the College was chatting up either of them, that was for damn sure.

What by blighty Dibe’s nipples does that elf want?

As though he had not yelled two weeks past about having nowhere to go, the insufferable scrog. Like he had not made a sweeping logical leap during Nelacar’s debate by jumping from cultural relativism to Thalmor superiority...all by dubious dint of the oppressive regime being the last line of defense during the Oblivion Crisis.

It was obvious, Nemain thought when her mind wandered from Septimus Signus’s ramblings (and they did often) that the stiffly decorous Altmer was either a poor orator...or more likely, distressed enough to crack from whatever had caused him to shriek out under the truth-seeking influence of her Thu’um.

It made her genuinely curious to see just how much he would reveal, should she push a bit further with her Voice. Tit for tat, she could turn the tables on the swotty arse of a spy, and then... no no no! Such poor choices always rebound upon one in spades of trouble. Best to try other ways first.

Nemain resolved after the first week to utilize every skill of persuasion she possessed - other than the coercive push of her Will - to pick apart Ancano and pry out what he knew. Perhaps it would be of some benefit to get the old spider’s thoughts upon the civil war. Nemain hoped he might even prove a fount of information on the doings of the Reach, thought it seemed unlikely. For no matter who she asked or how often Nemain stopped the various couriers running in and out of the college, the answer was always the same: Markarth had gone dark. No one had heard anything - good or ill, for months. She tried very hard not to count back; to picture in her mind’s eye the Silver-Blood matriarch’s head exploding. The hrshhhhrshh hrshhh of the old Breton’s broom, as he smiled an old man’s kindly grin. Saved me a lot of trouble, you did.

Was her family even alive? Or (and she was not sure if this was better or worse) had they finally managed to kill off the rest of the Silver-Blood clan and retake Markarth? Better not to know, mayhap. Her hands were tied - bound to the fate of the dragons, to the wee sprogs back east in Windhelm.

To Bear...though it guiltily rubbed her the wrong way even thinking of such a thing. To the finding of an Elder Scroll and now - despite her better efforts to remain unattached, to the gods damned Eye of Magnus and the bumbling fools who studied at the last bastion of magic in Skyrim.

It had become increasingly onerous, receiving such fearful glances day in and day out from the other students. Curse the poxy bag of bones that had been Jyrik Gauldurson! It had taken every spell she had known, plus a well timed Yol Toor Shul to bring down the draugr lord. Her spells had drawn raised eyebrows, but her Shout had brought out the screams. And now...despite her better attempts to befriend them or even strike up conversation, none but Enthir had bothered with her (and the Bosmer had made no bones about his interest in parting her septims from her purse, rather than the thoughts from her head).

She couldn’t wait to leave the College and return to Windhelm. To dote upon Aventus and Sofie, to
play knucklebones with the Dunmer at the cornerclub and tease Bear...perhaps do even more…

*Nought but trouble.* Troubles never seemed to end. This trip, the dratted book, and now the Psijics had popped in for a visit once more...as always leaving more questions than answers.

Who were they, really? I’d ask Ancano, but I’d be afeared of getting me head bitten off. And then I’d owe the blighter a truth in turn.

After yet another odd visit from the mind bending mages of the Psijic Order (this time leaving her blinking after the strange audience in the company of the Arch Mage AND an irate Thalmor spy) Nemain had been strung along with yet more vague insinuations about the Eye of Magnus. Disembodied eye of a God, unstable artifact of unlimited magicka spewing power...a weapon of mass destruction. Why had Tolfdir decided to move it out of Saarthal and into the College again?

Right. To study the thing.

*Stupid bodgers. Go talk to this person, Nemain. Go fetch me this book, you mollycoddled fetcher, since I cannae be bothered. Kill this or pick that. Climb the sodding death trap of the seven thousand steps! Just to give a dragon a rotty scroll!*

Not left entirely absent of guidance, Nemain had been encouraged to seek the Auger of Dunlain for further answers by both Savos Aren and Tolfdir. She had been putting it off, after seeing Ancano sniff about the Midden. Which was aptly named, for a great gouty reek had erupted from the passage door as the elf lowered himself down (with many a grimace of disdain, to her amusement) only to be seen furiously scrubbing down later in the dormitories, shirtless and uniformly yellow.

Much, she reflected while staring at the oblivious Altmer in amusement, like a golden apple which had bruised in spots. The Mer had not a spare ounce of flesh upon him. *Mankity elf be thin as a reed. Does he have to hold onto someone to keep from blowing away in the wind?* It was deeply unattractive. She’d save references to his hideous scrawny form for insult fodder, later...when the Mer inevitably let loose some slur about her dog-mongrel looks. *Toffy wafflesnot. Like he is so much more attractive. Only the she-elves seem to swoon at the sight of him.*

All thoughts of yellow skin or - *Dibe save her* - desirous musings upon heavily scarred and pale flesh flew out of her mind when the source of her ire became glaringly apparent. It was the day that Nemain awoke to find the water in her room unfrozen. Not warm - the coastal gales enforced a year round moratorium on warmth - but the realization that spring had come even to the far north brought a strangely subtle, yet persistent sense of feeling out of place.

Usually, the pitcher of water (fresh drawn, hand delivered by College servants every day) had a thin rime of ice upon it come morn from the bitter cold. But now that spring was fully underway in the frigid climes of the north, her water was merely chilled. Dipping her fingers in the ice-cold liquid brought her out of her funk...pushing forward memories of other, simpler times when she had washed in the rivers and ponds of the Reach. Had rolled around in the mud with the other children like wee little mudcrabs, only to scuttle back into the water with a shiver and a splash, laughing at the game all the while. *Oh, to be young and innocent once more.*

She cleaned herself perfunctorily, with none of the pleasure she might have taken in other
circumstances. Seasons may come and go, but the College of Winterhold certainly endured...in eternal winter.

_Spring, pah. There should be flowers. Why be there no flowers? Damn castle might as well be made of icicles._

Small wonder her mood was so sour...Beltane was but a couple months away, and many of her traditional rituals the witch had kept up with over the years had gone undone. Nemain resolved to walk the outer courtyards later, in search of blooming things. To rake her fingernails in the soft earth and hold it up to her nose, just to remember the earthy smell of life. To sweep out her rooms and chant the dirge, casting off the old and bringing in the new. Remembering with every fistful of fresh dug earth and sweep what the turning of the season should have been, instead of snow and stone and an unfrozen ewer of water for her wash. _No letters. Not even from Ulfric, though why it bothers me shouldnae be of any import. Friends, remember? Just friends, you twitterpated fool._

_What be everyone up to?_

“It is a marvelous morning is it not?”

Jerked from her woolgathering, Nemain blinked over at the elf who had shattered her thoughts. Ancano was reading _Mannimarco, King of Worms_ today. _I shall have to steal that book. Need to look up summat about this skull amulet if it be what I suspect._ “The weather has improved. I might be able to walk about without feeling complete numbness from the shoulders down. And Nelacar has put in a fine order for tonight...we will be sampling some of his personal collection brought over from Skingrad. You are invited, of course."

To her surprise, Nemain found herself looking forward to the evening. Despite her misgivings she had attended every dinner she had been invited to. The two older male Mer may have looked somewhat similar, with their yellowed skin and cotton floss hair - but appearances were where the sameness ended.

Ancano was sarcastic, arrogant and spitefully intellectual - countering every argument with unctuous ease. Whereas Nelacar reminded her more of Calcemo - easily distracted and happy to be so, often devolving a thought into a long winded rant about soul gem capacity or the properties of the color blue. The visits staved off her niggling feeling of loneliness, and while the conversation never quite reached the pitched heights of the first dinner...it had never been what the witch would have termed boring. “Ooh. What be on the menu?”

Sighing, the Mer turned a page. “Dried salt fish. With stale bread and pickled vegetables. And if we are very lucky, perhaps there will be some slightly molded apples to go with it. I hear the green fuzz is slightly less rank than the black mold. I suppose I shall find out.”

_Nearly smiling at the look of despondence the Mer wore detailing such a feast, Nemain wrapped her fur wrap more tightly around her shoulders. Lovely, lusciously thick furs. If I were a Jarl, I’d get me a room filled top to bottom with plushy fur pelts, to roll around on bare nekkid. “What d’you expect? It be the end of winter. Nought but the old stores left, until the first crops may be harvested.” Her stomach rumbled, unhappy with their contents of stale oatcake and rock hard beef._
“Yes I realize the change of seasons are upon us, but must we still dine upon the rotten remains?”

She pointed a finger at him, wagging it chidingly. “You be sodding lucky to have even that, y’prat. Yer breakfast be more food than I used to scoff in a day. I havenae gone hungry since…” her words trickled away, as she barely remembered to avoid speaking Windhelm. How could I explain the time I spent there?

“…leaving Markarth.” Wincing at the Mer who had now placed his full attention upon her, Nemain kicked a foot idly against the chair cushions. “Never enough vittles to go around, there. Always someone stealing food, or overcharging for what little there was to be had. Hunger be a terrible thing.”

Desperate to change the subject, Nemain ploughed onward. “Have you ever visited the Hold of Whiterun? I do hear their city be fair surrounded by great fields of golden wheat in the summers! Imagine! Such a wealth of food...all the meat and eggs and veg available, even now in this sheer huddy between-weather. I cannae imagine it.”

“I have seen the streets and plains of Whiterun.” His curt words were disparaging enough that Nemain swallowed what she had been about to ask. Had he seen Jorrvaskr? Was it really built out of a huge auld ship? I bet Farkas would show me around if I asked all nice-like.

“Doesnae sound as though you were impressed, though I’ll hold judgement for meself till I see it. Huh. What be your homeland like?”

The Mer was silent for the space of about a minute. Jiggling her foot, Nemain thought he might not answer, until he did. Quietly, with a wistful longing that made her click her tongue in sympathy.

“Auridon is green and lush...thick with trees, bordered by tall cliffs at the ocean’s edge. One may walk through the forest and but lift a hand to find sustenance, for all manner of fruits and nuts grow for the taking. The Trebbite monks still tend the gardens my people carved out from the wilderness. Tending acres of greenery that have stood for untold centuries; a marriage of beauty and usefulness.”

“Sounds right elfy.”

“Hmm. Yes...as you state so eloquently it is ‘elfy’. Though much of the inner isle is mountainous and the forests strewn with ruins...Firsthold is still the place my soul wholly desires to be.”

Long golden fingers tapped his book, as Ancano's face almost softened into something she would have termed homesick. Did elves truly feel yearning? I’m nae completely convinced that they be not cold-blooded automatons. “And so very warm, little witch. All the Mer...even the elderly go about in spider silk robes and gowns, for the breezes are mild and the weather pleasant year round. All the colors you could imagine light up the skies every sunrise and sunset, echoing across the island, for there are flowers blooming upon different parts of the island at any given time. Ah, Auridon! To feel the touch of sunlight, and smell the salt of the tropical seas once more!”

Her stomach grumbled pathetically. Nemain licked her lips. “Ugh. Dinnae mention the fruits. I’d be a’sniffing all the trees like a hound on the scent.”

The Mer nodded. “Yes, and such fruits. They also perfumed the air with their delicate vines and aromas. And by Auri-El, the wildlife! Savory boar we hunted, as well as a certain variety of striped bear - went well with saffron and moonsugar. Though my favorite was a dish you might find to be rather exotic; a certain arachnid that has a gleaming gem-like carapace that we call slabhra shiméir, or shimmer-shell. Very tender white meat, when boiled with sea greens and mallowroot.”
“Yech.” Nemain made a face. “You say that like it sounds tasty, yet all I can think upon be a frostbite spider all roasted - wavin’ those hairy legs all perspekity at me from the pot!”

Ancano hnmphed, his attention recaptured by his book. “That image would turn anyone off their palate.”

He’s going tae make me hungrier than a farm lad on threshing day. “What does yon tome say concerning necromancy?” Fingering the little skull face of her amulet, Nemain stopped pretending to read and squinted across the way. If she could just lean over a bit closer without falling off her seat...

“This book? Ah. Here is a particularly poetic passage.” The lines around the Altmer’s mouth smoothed away as he read aloud. Even, she thought in growing fascination, upon such a grisly subject as the famed necromancer of yore. Maybe I can get him to read ole’ Signus’s book for me? Just to sum it up?

“Corruption on corruption, ’til the rot sunk to his very core,

Though he kept the name Mannimarco, his body and his mind

Were but a living, moving corpse as he left humanity behind.

The blood in his veins became instead a poison acid stew.

His power and his life increased as his fell collection grew.

 Mightiest were these artifacts, long cursed since days of yore.”

Nemain scratched her head. “Cor. That be a raw deal. Ugh, life as an undead lich. I’d rather suck doon swampwater in Hjaalmarch...t’would make me live longer than any of that rot.”

It wasn’t really a true laugh. More like a cough...and yet, it was there. Whatd’ye know. Not such a dry stick after all. A sudden idea popped into her mind.

“Hey. Thalmor. Do you know what a limerick be?”

He did not look up from his book. “I am sure you are about to tell me.”

“Hoo, be you in for a treat! Here. I’ve an example for ye.” Rubbing her fur between her fingers, Nemain licked her lips, struggling to recall the exact wording.

“There once was a Man from Caradhras,

Whose balls were made of fine brass,

In stormy weather, they’d bosh an’ clang together!
Making sparks fly all oot of his ass!

Still no laughter...but she thought she could detect the slightest hint of amusement. Something around the way those thinly sliced lips kept turning at the corners. As though he would fain grin, should that ironclad control slip. Damn. Almost got the swot tae open up.

“If you are quite done with your disgusting excuse for poetry, then...?”

“Aye. Quite done for the mo’, Ancano.”

“My, my. The full appellation and no vulgarity. Nelacar will be pleased.”

“Nelacar be disappointed, you mean.” At this rate, Nemain was never going to finish this thrice-damned book. “That Mer has a mouth worse than an orc stronghold brimming with bored, glaikey sex-starved hunters.”

“I...do not think I shall ask how you know of such a thing.”

“Hmm...haha ha. Probably best if y’left it alone, yeah.”

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“...Said the Breton to her Altmer Superior
‘Your singing is quite inferior!’
So as not to be crass,
He demonstrated gentlemanly class
And said,"Hah! You may kiss my posterior!"

Nemain clapped enthusiastically, cheering on Nelacar even as some bard wailed out the chords of the Age of Agression out in the tavern. And out of tune to boot. One of those noisome patrons shouting an’ stomping that racket should clobber him. Put us all oot of our misery. “Oooh, well done! That be a right fine limerick you’ve done. And on the spot too. Tis official...you be my favorite...ooophthf. Favorite elf evarr!”

Puffing out his thin chest, Nelacar smiled at her...those teeth still giving her the shivers. Something about Mer teeth, all blade edged and glinty - Nemain wondered if they ever cut their tongues upon them in casual speech. Didnae seem to bother this one none. “I’ll drink to that! Come on, Ancano my young Mer gyfaill! Bottoms up!”

“Shame aboot the lack of swearing though.” She added with a wicked glance at Ancano, who
looked the picture of relaxation...his spidery frame slouched upon the rickety chair. “Needs a touch of spice.”

The Thalmor sniffed, gripping the neck of the fat-bellied wine bottle as though he would strangle it. “The spice inherent in conversation with you would choke any who cared to dine upon it, Reachwitch.”

“What be you going off aboot? Hah, well...just your luck then that y’be in the company of such a trained wordsmith!” She flourished a hand, snickering as Nelacar nearly fell over reaching for his goblet. “Ah, the good auld Reach gab. Trust me, you’ll be loving this. Ahem.”

“Now therra was a wick feller named Perkin,
Who was always jerkin his gherkin!
His Da, he squawked ‘Perkin!’
‘Stop jerkin your gherkin!
Your gherkins fer ferkin’ not jerkin!’”

Wine squirted from Nelacar’s nostrils as he choked and spit upon his laughter. Sighing, Ancano reached over to pat the duffer on his back as he whooped, tears leaking from emerald eyes as Nemain tilted in a drunken bow. “Oh, I say ahah hah hah! That was rather excellent!”

“Truly a saga worthy of Solitude’s College of Bards.” Ancano drawled, giving Nelacar one last pat that was stiff enough to be a shove. “Remind me why I bother speaking to you again?”

Nemain yawned. “Coz’ no one likes ya and yer bored as paste here?”

“Yes. Thank you ever so for clarifying my thoughts exactly.”

Cor, she was right knackered. These elves might not enjoy mead, but hoo-ay could they slam the fruit of the vine. Near nightly she’d been coming to the inn for dinner and wine, and yet she was no better at holding her own. “Yer welcome. Y’know, I was hoping you’d clear up your blarf aboot the Thalmor and the Great Anguish and such...it being one of the subjects that have been steered round of late.”

Oh gods, he was pouring her another cup. She couldn’t refuse...seeing the rich redness trickle into her cup still made her lick her lips wantingly. Cannae let it go to waste, och no. Ancano’s snooty tones reverberated in her ears like bells as her vision blurred. “Steered around?”

“...Like an Imperial pinchin’ septims t’make the faces scream and complaining about the noise as well as the cost. Ye were all over the place.”

“Ah, you think it was poorly reasoned?”

“Pfft. Blooping from a logical discussion of relative perspectives on political propaganda to...” she gestured laxly as Nelacar giggled. Completely smoshed, they were. “...some graw adamant denial that the Thalmor be anything but ruddy saviors. Ye must redeem yourself.”
Gods. She was going to urp again. Just her luck that seafood was far less tasty going up than down.

Ulph.

Clear amber eyes narrowed at her as the Thalmor seemed to give her words careful consideration. “I suppose we might indulge this line of questioning. If you can stand to speak intelligibly, without falling over. You look rather peaked.”

“Hah! I can drink another flagon and still be in fighting form, you frow faced son of a cuntlicker! Doon give me such a face...havenae jerked yer gherkin in a while, have ye Ancano? Though who’d commit fuckery with you, with a mug like that...”

As Nelacar continued to slosh his wine, still laughing (lovely wine, what a waste!) the Thalmor heaved an irritated groan. “How crass. Though one would think I would be inured to it by now.” The Mer lifted one long yellow finger and pushed the half-empty plate of sweetrolls closer to her side.

Nemain deftly snatched one up with a chortle of delight. “Here. Sop up the wine with this, or you will be well and truly chuffed. Now, is it truly so difficult for you to refrain from vulgar speech?”

Mmm. So delicious. Nemain licked the frosting from her fingers as Ancano continued harping on. “- Some mishap causing such foul verbal spoor to pour unbidden from that mouth?”

Swallowing, she treated the elf to a sugar smeared grin that made him delicately shudder. “Och well, swearing be almost a pastime back home! Every wee lad and lassie cuts his teeth upon the glorious words of fuckery and gobshite. I almost doon even notice it cropping up...ye bowfing shiggly galoot.”

Oh, this was nearly more fun than the time she had hidden all the maps of the war room behind the tapestries. Seein’ all those bear rug wearing Commanders all cursing and stamping, screeching to flay a skeever...hah! Nemain licked her lips and grinned as the Mer fixed her with a forbidding glare.

“To curse is a sign of an inferior vocabulary, Breton. And while I have doubted your intellectual acuity in the past I have come to realize that you rather seem to delight in acting the oaf. Have you no diction that does not involve body parts or incomprehensible gibberish?”

“Hmm.” Pretending to think about it, Nemain wriggled her toes deeper into the fold of fur rug that lay upon the ground. Mmm...toasty. She could feel the plushness through her stockings, sliding against the pads of her soles like silk. “I hesitate to articulate, in fear I may deviate upon the highest degree of accuracy.”

And because she simply had to see that outraged look once more, she added, “...You piss-yellow stained fopbotch.”

Och, that be a good one. He looks about to hurl. Whoa, Nelacar! Dinnae hurl! The older mage stumbled off for the privy, as Ancano audibly ground his teeth. “Well, I for one would pay your utterings more notice if you happened to speak with less ‘fuckery’, as you say and more actual discourse. Indeed - if you should wish to pursue further vocation at this College, might I suggest that your conversation involve more subject matter? And less of the folderol you are so fond of perhaps?”

You be assuming much, Altmer, to think I have any desire to stay in this icebox after my task be done. “Right. Whatever.”

Nemain had taken a much needed break from slogging through the bizarre works of Septimus Signus
to walk down to the seashore. She had spent an idyllic afternoon upon the icy beach: cutting seaweed, fishing and prying off clams and oysters to stir into a very salty but nourishing stew. Anything was better than the disgusting swill left to them at the inn and the College. Even shellfish - not her favorite. But, as she reflected upon licking the cream that had spilled from pouring it into the cauldron...many ills could be cured. Provided there was enough fat and sugar. *Cream, glorious cream!*

And though the two older Mer had uttered not a word of thanks, the intense focus with which they spooned down her chowder and seaweed roast slaughterfish was compliment enough. The bowls had practically been licked bare...her own utensils joining the pile of used dishware as the three mages savored a night free of the usual fare. *Mouldy apples and stale bread what has ground weevils in the crust! Though I once woulda eaten it with relish, I admit I cannæe wait for proper spring greens to fashion a salad.*

Resting her hand upon a fully distended stomach, the witch swallowed an unladylike belch and reached for more wine. With any other dinner companions, she would have borne no qualms about letting her wind erupt out with a what-for. But since these oddball Altmer were right fastidious and - to her taste, prissy about all things that had to do with presentation, Nemain found herself tempering her natural flair as the weeks wended on.

Almost, she thought swirling her wine around in its glass, she missed the natural ease with which Nords ate at table. Dinners at the Palace of Kings were more or less an informal affair; filled with good-natured ribbing and roughhousing. One kept their hands tightly wrapped around plate and horn, lest the warrior sitting near decided you were not eating fast enough to suit. She’d had her dinner promptly stolen once or twice, and had memorably wrestled Bear once for a leg of venison that had ended with both of them on the floor, laughing fit to burst as Aventus had sprung forward with deft wee hands. Eating half of the meat clean off the bone, hungry little pip, before she could steal it back with a swat to his skinny arse. *Cor but I miss them all. Ruddy savages though they be. Shite, are the elves rubbing off with their Mer snobbery? Shiteshiteshite...*

“*I’ll be sure to brush up on all adjective and verbs before planning on running for Arch-Mage, Annie.*”

“You, Arch-Mage? Hah! I’ll believe it when I see it. And the name is Ancano.”


A hissed inhalation. Picking at her teeth, Nemain idly thought she’d never seen the High Elf look quite so blanched. Rage or annoyance, it all looked rather the same when staggeredly off her chump. “*You will address me by my given name if not my title, or I shall give you a lesson in manners! Reach-damned mongrel.*”

“Och look! Y’swore! *Now* who be a bloody hypocrite!”

“....Are we about to enter into a debate or not?!”

Holding her hands to her mouth to conceal yet another burp, Nemain chortled. “Oh, An-Can he hails from Auridon! Said, ‘Lass yer hole sure be a tight one!’”

“By the Eight. *Stop .*”
Tch tch. Shouldae asked nicely. “...she said, ‘nae t’burst yer bubble - tis really no trouble. But ya bastard, yer not in the right one!”

Ancano sat there as if in pain as she bent over laughing, rubbing at his forehead as Nelacar stumbled back in. A roaring swell of sound rolled into his private room, ending abruptly as the door slammed shut. “Wharra I miss?”

Grasping Nelacar’s arm to assist him in sitting upon the chair instead of falling across it, Ancano responded with clipped sarcasm. “If I remember correctly Nelacar, you glossed briefly over the subject of how rulers shape preconceptions of the past and the Breton seconded the validity of changing mores. Yes?”

Slugging down the rest of her wine, Nemain felt her head begin to pound as well, as she grimaced against the taste. The brackish salt of the chowder backwashing with the sour tang of alcohol...she was definitely gargling with saltwater before bed. *Must remember to wash me mouth oot, or my breath will be like a dragon in truth.*

“...true that those in power have an interest in maintaining their power, and a “useable past” that conforms to their vision of present-day conditions. For it can function as a strong tool in upholding their status. Nemain?”

“Aye! What he said.” She was starting to feel dizzy, the two elves were superimposing themselves into one cranky visage. Then splitting apart once more. Damned confusing. “Whoever be strongest and wants to survive most will win. History do be written by the victors, but of course, it doesnae tell the entire tale.”

She was not alone in feeling the effects of the night. Nelacar was practically dozing off, and the Thalmor spy was shaking his head even as she finished her utterance. High red spots burned upon his cheeks from the booze, giving that queer bisque skin unnatural color. “On one count I will agree. Strength does determine success in war, but it is just as much strategic placement of troops and sheer luck that wins battles.”

Plucking at a piece of lint, Ancano dusted off his robes. Fussing with the way his sleeves lay, as Nemain shook her head at his vanity. “I can think of many I have seen where superior firepower did not gain ground...yet foes caved when presented with the valor of certain exceptional individuals.”

“Seen many battles, have ye?” Five more minutes, and she reckoned she’d be good for nothing but the bedchamber. *How many cups did I suck doon? Three? Four?*

The Altmer’s voice was dry. “I have been stationed at the front of every major battle in the last two centuries. Elsweyr, Hammerfell, Cyrodiil...what do you think?”

Nemain indecorously snorted. “I think your lot be cobby fools to take on so many fronts all at once.”

“The Dominion has plentiful allies. Valenwood and the cat-folk have proved staunch friends to us in times past.”

“No no, I shall not knock yer taste in friends. Though what with your heavy hand at ‘reforming’ the Bosmer, tis a wonder they even give ye the time of day.” Thinking upon the weight of a small, squirming bundle fastening greedily upon her breast, Nemain sighed. *What was it Bear said? The gods have a cruel sense of humor, giving you the thing you always wanted at the worst time possible...damn.*
“You lot are doomed, y’know.”

“How so?”

“Well, tis obvious. How many of your kind died in the Great War? And yet I dinnae see you lot marrying or scurrying home to replenish yourselves. And though I cannnae speak for Imperials or Redguards, trust me - Nord clans breed like rabbits. Wait a few years, and a whole new crop of younglings will rise up. Cuttin’ their teeth on sword and axe.”

Though all the wine and warmth had given her vision a decidedly fogged effect, Nemain could still see Ancano peer at her with somewhat less frost and more surprise than he had expressed the entire night prior. “You say this as though you know something of my people. You, manmer, are little more than a failed experiment of my ancestors. What would you claim to know of the Elder folk?”

She dearly wished for the dexterity to punch that insufferable smug face. Right in the kisser. *Bam.* Nemain would have to settle for a brawl of blarney instead. "This failed experiment be around one fourth Bosmer, you prick. Perhaps more...I’ve only just found out who my Da is. And let me say, I have pondered what glorious mongrel mix he be holding in his blood as well.”

Preening under the heightened shock the Mer was giving off ( *really? Was it that much of a jaw dropper to think her bearing a quadroon of elven blood?*) Nemain decided to push on. “And the Reachfolk be made so for good cause. Answer me honest, and I’ll tell you in turn: what be your reproduction rate amongst your folk? The truth, now. I’ll know if ye lie.”

*There.* The Mer’s face was impassively arrogant, yet she could see the slightest tremble of his fingers as he tapped them against the table in thought. “I...I believe the Altmer have had difficulty keeping up their birthrate as you say. Though I cannot guess how you know this.”

“Barely one child born for every couple, accordin’ to my cousins of the Wood. Less and less as the years pass on.” Damn, she was feeling fine. There was no way to counter cold logic such as this. “You Altmer marry and breed so little. Thinking you have sae much time left, which does make it even worse aye? See...we backwards Reachfolk have managed to lower miscarriages and raise our viable births to nearly three quarters of our bairns born alive.”

“Improved and *proven* fertility, Ancano.” The pain that sliced through the Mer was swiftly subsumed, but it had been there. She had seen it. *This, at least, was getting through. “...And all through cohabiting. Tch tch tch...y’know, An-Can? I hain’t never so much as seen an elf child that was not Dunmer or Bosmer...much less a High Elf woman that was not absolutely decrepit with age! What d’ye do...shunt them and their dusty wombs off to die in battle when they cannae be seeded?”*

Swinging a clumsy hand around to punctuate her point, Nemain smacked her arm against the table. *Ow.* “Aye. Sooner or later man will out breed the elves. And then where will your precious conquest of Nirn be then, yeah? Be that why you march upon us all, to make one last grand stand against your blighted state? To seek death in battle and not in sick beds of misery and empty arms?”

“Mmm. Then, long lived High Elf - you brilliant Elder Folk who be sae much better at everything...” She snort-laughed. “Except sex, *pfwoar.* Perhaps then t’will be *you* who’ll be the slaves and beggars not long in our future. *Conas an iontach tar éis titim!*”

Silence. Only Nelacar’s snores; the muffled shouting and singing of the tavern goers and the guttering of the candle in the drafty breeze. She felt drained. Cold, even. As though all the fire from the wine had sparked out, just like her words had left her with a sense of hopeless inevitability. *We’re*
all sodding doomed. Nord and Mer alike. No one can see eye to eye, now. And the world will burn in dragonfire even as they be killin’ each other o’er it.

“Cohabit with the likes of hedge witches and scum?” Ancano asked in a changed, yet still calm voice that raised her head from where she had lain it upon her elbow.

The frost in his tone had returned in spades. Disdain unmistakeable, even as Nemain bared her teeth at his words. “When one Thalmor wizard has the might to bring down twenty Nord beasts to their knees? Oh. I think not, Nemain. Our armies may be smaller, but the blows we land shall smite all the same. We do not need to outbreed your kind.”

Locking eyes with her, she refused to look away first from the Mer’s sharp golden eyes. Colorful irises that expanded the longer she watched; dilating like a cat as the candle burned lower. “Hmph! You walk too proud, elf. I know warriors that can claim similar kills. You be not so strong as you may wish.” Ulfric slayed five of you, y’raping narky pillagers. Not so high and mighty then, aye?

“Oh of course. You trafficked with the Stormcloaks whilst in Windhelm, did you not.” Dripping with syrupy affectedness, the casual mention of them made her jerk. Almost breaking the contact that had spun - like a web woven between their conjoined gaze.

He didn’t. He couldn’t know. Her letters had gone by courier, unseen by any eyes but her own.

“Ah yes. I know of your sympathies, little Nemain. I overheard you speaking with Nelacar that first evening, you see. No...do not awaken him. He needs his rest.”

“You do realize, Reachwitch, that even should Ulfric Stormcloak - by some miracle - end up taking the High Throne and winning over the Moot, it will prove no hindrance to the ultimate goal of the Aldmeri Dominion. Our purposes are served either way...rebel victory or reunified province. It matters not.”

“Of course it bloody well matters!”

Her voice sounded strange even to her own ears. How she hated this elf with the sharp smile, him and the cocksure superiority that she reluctantly allowed had some basis in fact. The Mer’s aura practically thrummed with magicka, even loosened with drink. What would it be like, fighting such an oldmage? One who had survived so much?

“Dinnae deny it! I ken all aboot your Thalmor plans, bastard! To eradicate the race of man, trod em’ down under heel. Enslave them and bury their bones under stone! I know! I have seen! Peace cannae last forever, and when the day comes...you’ll be shite out of luck, won’t you? For every Nord you cut down now will be replaced tenfold, nay...a dozen! Whilst your lot stew in crystal towers, casting spells and...and naming the stars!”

Ancano looked upon her with pity. “Elves have long memories, young woman. We are patient. We can afford to wait, whereas you cannot. You, with your quicksilver lifespans and urgency must think only of the now. And it is we Mer who shall pick up the pieces of your crumbling empires and build anew. Something that will stand the test of time.”

Nemain did not wish to hear anymore. Yet it seemed Ancano would not shut up. “I know you do not care to think of it, but you are not an unintelligent woman. Think! The Bear of Markarth is already out of options. Frankly I would ask for the tale of how you came to favor such politics, as I have never in my life heard of a Forsworn that could tolerate any Nord. Yet I shall not.”
“No you shan’t! Get to your ruddy point!”

A knowing glint passed through that sharp gaze. “Forgive me, I digress.”

“It may be a noble goal, to be sure...to unite all Nine Holds in glorious splendour like Ysgramor or Olaf One-Eye.” Mirth imbued the Mer’s mellifluous voice. She loathed him for it; that he could make such odious words sound pleasing. “But where are Ulfric’s staunch allies, to save him from the fall? I have seen no notices claiming connection with the proud Alik’r or the Clans of Hammerfell, no gestures of goodwill that have been tendered towards High Rock. The Stormcloaks stand alone. And that more than their lack of troops or poor rhetoric shall be their undoing.”

“Truly...his own people abdicate their rule to the Empire - and by default, to us Thalmor quite willingly. Begging us to save them from the savage Men of the North who stand only for Talos and themselves. Dunmer, Imperials, even loyal Orsimer of the Legion…”

Long fingers walked along the table, flicking away sweetroll crumbs with every syllable. “All...on...our side. Not theirs. My dear Nemain, I am afraid that the rebel Jarl of Windhelm is bound for one destination and one end alone. That of the sword, the noose, or better yet the selfsame chopping block he avoided somehow in Helgen. You’d do well to cut off such...ties, as soon as possible.”

Shrugging, Ancano ended with an elegantly lifted brow. “To sum up - as you see, my superiors are not unduly worried about the doings of the Stormcloak rebellion. To be sure...an Imperial victory will make governing the province more palatable. But a victory on their side shall surely drain their resources to the point where the Dominion may pick apart the fledgling kingdom of Skyrim at any time of their choosing in the near century. After all, this Ulfric remains unwed with no heirs. No allies, no army...by Phynaster I hear tell the Nords have all gone home to plant crops for the spring, oh ho...and soon, he’ll have no life save what glories remain to him in Sovngarde. That is truth, little witch.”

“Where be your wife, elf?” She could barely control her voice, for spite had soaked near through the previous muzzy bliss of her wine sotted thoughts. Surely not...but ah, yes. Even the suggestion…

Gods! Even the errant thought of Bear having children with some winsome Nord lass was enough to curve her nails into claws that scratched at the wooden table surface. And somewhere deep inside, the dovah soul that slept cracked open one brilliant red eye and whispered. Dii...

Mine. Dragons took...and kept their treasures safe. Her fingertips peeled splinters that pierced, causing pinpricks of blood to ache under her nailbeds as she clawed in mute fury. Mine!

“Where be your bairns? Your people be dying, slow and steady. The time of the Altmer be gone, Ancano...trying to reclaim a glory what has long been left to dust. Sae pitiful. You willnae cohabit with us lesser mortals, ye say? Fine! Rot in yer solipsistic ruin! How bitter you be, desperate to prove that Mer still be holding all the gifts of their swotty ancestors. Well, guess what? Tis man who rules, now. Man and manmer, like me humbly repellant self.”

Nemain fairly quivered as she pressed her bleeding hands into the table, breathing heavily and smelling her own breath as well as his. Gods, the elf finally bore some emotion in that saturnine face. Some odd mixture of repugnance and grief.

Breath of wine. Regret soured her belly, tightening her gut into a clenched snarl. She had been a fool to think - to imagine that over limericks and cups of Surilie - that they could have been anything like
“...And that is the way it shall be! Until you give in. Until you swallow that...that damnable vanity
and pride to lay with manner like my people, elf! Och, it will be a slow transition, to be sure...but
what will your men do, when all the womenfolk are gone? How many males be born for each elf
maiden? Thirteen? Be the ratio up to sixteen to one, now? A marvel you lot have not already gone
extinct.”

“Do not -” His voice was a shadow of a whisper. “-Presume to speak to me of wives or children,
Breton. You know not of what you speak.”

Too much! Oh, it felt like she had swallowed a disembodied fist. A fist that was busily punching her
inner organs, and Nemain moaned even as she flopped over on the table. The ceiling blurred, and
before she knew what had happened a firm surface pressed up against her back. *Nelacar's bed.*

Resting her pounding head gratefully upon what had to be a pillowed fur, Nemain squinted up at
Ancano, who loomed over her with that peculiar expression once more.

“I shall...forgive you for your words. It is clear that your faculties have been impaired by the evening
follies. But there shall be a reckoning, Dragonborn. Though sadly I fear I shall not be the one to issue
retribution, for you are well on your way in earning such pain yourself.”

*Love is pain. Everything worthwhile be pain.* She could barely keep her eyes open. “Dragonborn. H-
how d’ye know? I never told ye.”

Something warm smoothed the hair out of her eyes. His sleeve trailed over her nose and mouth,
wrinkling her features as the Mer sighed. “Onmund was more than willing to share what transpired
in Saarthal. A worthwhile exchange. One measly Nord heirloom bartered from Enthir for the identity
of the newest Ysmir of the North.”

“Why d’you bring it up now?”

A sinister chuckle made her squirm against the furs, even as she worked at remaining on edge.
Aware. Able to fight back. “Leverage, Dragonborn.”

*No use.* She could always kill him later, should the Mer try anything untoward. Nemain was far too
tired to question the whys and hows right at that moment. “Yer a spy. Shouldae known you’d find
out. You be too nosy for your own good, An-Can.”

“Yes. You should have known I would discover your truth. Though I will say - you have done
precious little with such powers.”

*Corker never saw Kynesgrove. Or High Hrothgar...good that the Thalmor did not know so much,
yet.* A sigh blew upon her face, so close it fluttered her eyelashes. “Rest, little witch, and reforge your
strength for the morrow.”

A weight sank in deep next to her on the bed, making the rope mattress squeak. Cracking her eyes
open, Nemain dully watched as Ancano shifted the limp form of Nelacar to lie next to her. The old
elf was breathing deeply, lined face smoothed out in sleep.

Ancano laid down on her other side, effectively quashing her between the two on the suddenly
crowded bed. Nemain nearly voiced a complaint, until the heavy weight of thick fur pelts suddenly
blanketed her, erasing all thoughts of just how damn wrong this was. *Oooh, so cozy...wait. Doon*
“...Ancano.”

“Shh. It is time to rest. I shall not question you, Nemain. Not yet.”

“Y’know, I dinnae understand you elf. Not one bit.”

“Then it is just as well. I have many important things on my mind and your concerns are not among them. Tomorrow I will ask, and you will tell me.”

A thumb stroked the divot in her chin. Making her jerk away from his grasping hands with sluggish haste.

“Mark me well. You will answer my questions, Nemain. Cysgu yn dda.”

He smelled like stale silk and something fragrant that once had burned, yet now resided in coals that smoked. The pungent incense-ash tickled her throat as she yawned...the elf pushing her over on the bed; further into Nelacar as she voiced a sleepy protest. A long arm snuggled around her waist, making her freeze until she realized old Nel, sweet drunken Nel had done it in his sleep. She wouldn’t push him away - the mage was surely as lonely as she. “Bugger your questions. G’night to you too, you insensible arsehole.”

A soft snort. “Bitch.”

“Cuntlicker.”

“Nordfucker.”

She sighed with longing. “Not yet. Not really.”

An indrawn hiss of breath greeted her statement. Long hair tickled her face as Ancano turned over in the bed, away from her. “How you could fathom - never mind.”

Sniggering at his discomfort, Nemain felt the blackness rise up and claim her. Blackness that moved and stirred her dreams - images of men and elves running, fighting, loving. Revolving in a cauldron that spun into a maelstrom even as she stirred, furiously striving to mix them together. They simply wouldn’ae listen!

A voice crept into her dreams, a feminine throaty chuckle that sounded like Máthair’s, though it was far more kind. Sweet child, dear child. Come to me, my own. Dearest daughter.

She felt the pressure of stones being pushed, gently but firmly into her eye sockets as she screamed. Black and white stones, one on each eye as a noose snaked around her neck, the sharp yank sending her back to a dreamless state.

Oil and water. Man and Mer.

Nemain awakened briefly sometime in the early morning to discover that Nelacar had pulled her fully flush against his lanky form, with Ancano hugging her from the front. Both completely
oblivious to her annoyed grumbles, as she extricated herself from their grasp to use the chamberpot...then climbed carefully back into the nest made of furs and golden skinned arms.

She sighed to feel such warmth, for her breath fogged the chilly air. And the tavern outside had fallen more or less silent with the glooming hour. It was so very peaceful, she nearly hankered to stay awake to enjoy the novelty of it. The quiet hush...skin on skin contact, unbidden but welcome after such a long dry spell. For their robes were so thin, she could feel their body heat as though they wore nothing at all.

Pulling the mass of her hair up and away, she shivered as Ancano’s long nose buried itself in her neck. Arms and legs twisted around her as she settled herself into a more comfortable sleeping position.

*What was she, then?* Was a manner even able to choose? Nemain felt her insides fairly rip, though she thought it was probably just a bowel movement making itself known - her favors excruciatingly torn between both worlds. *Who was right and who be wrong? Everything be up and down. Black and white - mashed into a grey slurry I doon care to drink. I will not drink.*

*Dinnae make me choose.*

With her vibrant defense of the Stormcloak’s strength, the witch worried that it would go badly for her in a few hours...when the Thalmor spy who held her so tightly awakened. She must not have been so repulsive as Ancano repeatedly stated, Nemain mused. Else both males would not he cuddling her quite so...eagerly.

*Whatever. They be elves, but they also be men. Male. Cocks dinnae care aboot such things as the color of one’s skin.* Nelacar’s manhood was a throbbing hardness against the small of her back, and every so often she could feel a puff of air as Ancano breathed out in his sleep. Exhalation that prickled the small hairs on her neck, sending a guilty thrill down her spine as long fingers grasped her hips. Locking the three of them firmly in place, a tangle of hair and limbs.

Sleep was coming again, pulling at her eyelids. Yet still her mind whirred.

Without so many words, the Mer had threatened to make her talk. *Dragonborn. Onmund! That skeevershit...landed me in a right stew, he has. He saw. Now they all know. Must get out of here...go to Septimus and have the numpty screw translate what the fuck his book even means.*

*Got to get out of here.*

The two Altmer awakened to find a still-warm hollow where Nemain had lain, recently evacuated. A few strands of dark hair and a note were all she had left.

Picking up the parchment, Ancano yawned. Ignored Nelacar’s pitiful groans and the desperate pounding of his skull he lifted the note higher, the better to read her crabbed, spiky handwriting.

-Anky-Cano and Pell-Nel,
Do not worry. We did nothing but sleep. I know because I checked, and despite both your todger’s better efforts at making their blighty presences known, I be yet unmolested. Perhaps we should drink a bit less, the next debate dinner night? Just a suggestion.

So what if I be Dragonborn? What’s it to you and yours? Dragons be a far more pressing issue that your silly conquest anyhow. And if I be sympathetic to the Stormcloaks, you may be sure that it be for excellent reasons. Stop confusing me with your fool flummery. I know what you are trying to do.

Truth for truth. Tell me of the Augur of Dunlain, and I shall tell you what it be like to be Dragonborn. The world is bloody ending and yet we dance around what truly must be done like Khajiit kits batting round a skeever. Tell your superiors about that, will you? Maybe send them home like good little elves to copulate in Alinor. You should go on home too. Firsthold sounds like a right lovely island. Leave, tup some elf lass and do not come back.

Sorry for what I said when I was drunk. Should have known you had lost someone close. Do not ever tell me what to do again.

-Nemain

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Nemain returned from the sad, solitary hideout of Septimus Signus to find the apprentice mages of Winterhold standing in the Hall of Elements, attempting to practice combative magic.

*Oh Et'Ada. They're gonnae get themselves kilt.*

Scrubbing her dirty face with the sleeve of her robe, Nemain pocketed the strange cube and dwemer oddity the Septimus bodger had given her, for she wanted her hands free...if only to wring them in torment. *Of all the fool ways to teach younglings to use spells in battle!*

They stood in straight lines, unmoving as they cast defensive wards at a glacial pace; only throwing offensive magic once their barriers were fully glowing. The Nord Alteration teacher Tolfdir watched, sometimes criticizing their work. But more often issuing praise, as the Khajiit, Dunmer and Nord continued the same humdrum pattern.

*Stand. Ward. Cast. Repeat. They’re sae dead.* Nemain felt about ready to cry. No matter that she was absolutely *filthy* and frozen through from traipsing over sea and glacier - she would make time to correct these grievous errors. *This ends here!*
"For Oblivion’s sake, you cannae stand there like ninnies! You think your foes shall be waiting patiently for ye to cast at them? No! Move, dodge, squat...do anything but stand stock still!"

“I beg your pardon young lady?” Tolfdir sniffed, folding his arms as the students stopped and stared at her. “These are tried and true methods. Basics must be mastered before advanced spellcasting should be practiced. Now no more outbursts, please. This is a class in session after all.”

Unbelievable. “Y’mean you actually will be sending these duffers off tae fight like boards sunk in sand?”

The old Nord was visibly annoyed at this point. “If you take issue with my teaching, perhaps you might demonstrate for us some example of what you find to be more instructive.”

“Gladly. All you apprentices cease those wiffling sneezes y’call spells and step back. Oy!”

Spying Ancano as the skulky fetcher attempted to creep out of the Hall of Elements (probably spending all his time gawping at that blasted Eye) Nemain waved him over. “Need your help with this. Doon worry, ye’ll enjoy it to be sure.”

The tall Mer sighed theatrically. If he bore her any ill will for her note, no trace of it showed. He wore his habitual mask - that sharp edged face filled with world weary frustration. “I had hoped that Winterhold’s scholars would be on a level comparable with my own colleagues. It seems they are not. And why is my participation necessary? Surely these apprentices may cast a simple Lesser Ward without undue hand holding.”

“Hmph.” He was wearing full robes today, hood and all. Probably enchanted, she thought grimly as she rolled up her sleeves and tucked them in, to prevent them from spilling over her fingers. My own garments likely be not half as rejuvenating. Och well.

“You be an advisor? Well time to put such advisement to good use! This be where all your mucketty dreams come true, An-Can. Do be sae kind as to cast low level Destruction spells at me. Ice, fire, lightning - doesnae matter. Just as long as you keep them coming.”

Ancano’s thin lips twitched. “With pleasure.” She waggled a finger at the look of unexpected delight blooming across his face. “No killing. No maiming me lovely features. And no holding back.”

“Trust me, Breton. Any rearrangement of your face would be an improvement.”

“Says the one what has a mug like a draugr!”

“Don’t damage the structure of the College.” Tolfdir warned, as she tossed off a vulgar hand sign and readied herself, smiling with madcap glee as Ancano uttered a black oath.

Her breath came ever faster as she watched gloved hands lift into the air...fingers twitching. Already thrumming with power, as she threw up a hasty stoneflesh spell and began to run.

Nemain became a blur of motion, the better to evade the arcing crackle of electricity soaring from
Ancano’s fingertips. No weapons to brandish, no steel to intimidate...she would circle, but then how would she dodge?

Bear’s low voice crept into her thoughts, unbidden. Use the environment around you to your advantage. Running behind one of the pillars, Nemain hears a pop of displaced air as she throws up a hurried shield. A tugging sensation, as she draws in magicka from her core and holds hands filled with flame. Waiting for the Thalmor to find her, for she can hear the ethereal hiss of his spellcasting even now...

“Why isn’t she doing anything?”

“Shh!”

The crackling spray of lightning springs to life, a spray that does nothing because Nemain is not there anymore to hit. She ducks behind another pillar after lobbing a ball of fire that slides down like jelly against the Altmer’s shields.

Flinging quick, small spells from her cover, Nemain prays - hopes against hope that the apprentices were taking notes. This be how to fight and survive, you stupid sods. Move fast, aim quick. Small, sharp bites like bee-stings. Drawn them out and leave them dry. Leave the heavy hits for the warriors to take.

Her shield ward is nearly gone when Nemain jerks suddenly; lightning winding over her limbs in blue ribbons of energy that make her shake. As Ancano readies another spell- this time a blast of frost - she has run away again...darting behind the great Eye of Magnus as ice crystallized upon the floor where she had stood.

Smiling savagely with those sharp teeth, Ancano begins to move as well. A graceful, dancing step; every placement of his boots an orchestrated rhythm that matched the rapid fire succession of spells he threw. The sheer amount of power welling from the Mer... it was truly phenomenal. I’ve never faced a High Elf before...perhaps there be something to their gobsmacking about superiority after all. And Bear took down five of them. The respect she had for her erstwhile companion rose by a few notches in estimation. It took all she had, with no bodies nearby to raise in her defense, to avoid Ancano’s hammering welter of attacks.

She deflected. He struck out. She ducked. He aimed anew. The air hummed with a tangible aura of ozone and brimstone, shimmering shields giving the appearance of looking at everything through a thin veil of water.

Every mage in the room seemed utterly attentive. Drawn in silent expectation, and though Nemain hates that he is holding his own, she cannot help but admire Ancano for the fluidity of his movements. Perhaps if she spent centuries spellcasting in a pitched war upthrust by dogmatic fear mongering, she too would attain such poise. Unlikely that I shall live that long. Cor, he be fast!

A sudden blast of frost caught her off guard. Her chest hurts, her frozen robes crackling with cold as she rolls down the stairs, hitting each and every edge with a pained grunt. Ouch, get up get up you ormadorm, he’s a coming for you...
One of the apprentices - Brelyna, she thinks - tosses her a magicka potion. Nemain barely catches it. Waving in thanks, she bit off the cork and sucked it down before her opponent could stop her.

She cannot see Ancano, illuminated by hands haloed in lightning. His magicka flared, eddies of it sucked even as she watched, unbelieving, straight into the Eye of Magnus. Nearly too bright to look at directly. “That is cheating, hedge witch.”

Throwing the empty vial at him, she watches vindictively as the Mer swerved; narrowly avoiding a faceful of glass. “Come on o’er here an’ stop me, then!”

*Shit.* Watching that yellow face pull into a cool sneer, Nemain felt her stomach drop as the wizard pulled upon the power floating everywhere, in everything and-

“No! *Dinnae use it!*”

Tolfdir’s cry joined hers, even as the world went white. “*Do not use the Eye!*”

Nemain tasted blood. Why...she could not move. *Stones on me eyes, the dream - the dream!* Black and white tearing, crushing!

As lightning caused her to seize, she screamed and screamed. The white light bursting against her retinas, fading thankfully to black. Until there was only the dark.

Only the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Gaelic:

Conas an iontach tar éis titim - How the mighty have fallen

Welsh:

cysgu yn dda - sleep well
Gyfaill - Friend
"Compromise makes a good umbrella, but a poor roof; it is temporary expedient, often wise in party politics, almost sure to be unwise in statesmanship."

-James Russell Lowell

If I taste your breath, what would it tell me? What do you long for No...do not tell me. I will find out for myself.

Rubbing his thumb against the seam of the letter, well worn from being folded and unfolded countless times, Ulfric frowned to see a splotch of water warping the words. Hastily blowing upon it, he tried to sponge off the droplets that were steadily increasing in number. Rain, pattering over his hair and armor descended from a sky dark with silvered clouds. Heavy with wind. A storm. He inhaled the cold with relish, noting how the sharp edge of it had been tempered by the spring thaw, even up here in the far north of the Pale.

No use...he’d have to remember the blurred part of her words by memory, now. Hastily hiding the letter away in the inner padding beneath his breastplate, Ulfric Stormcloak looked over to where Galmar stealthily approached.

His friend nodded solemnly. “All set. The lads and lasses are ready to go. Give the word, and we’ll be on those dogsons like flies on shit.”

Ah, the glamorous tasks of war, the Bear of Markarth thought ruefully. After weeks of travelling up and down Eastmarch and the Rift - adjusting troop movements and presiding over funeral rites - Ulfric found himself in the Pale. The southern edge of it anyway. There are still trees, here. And here in the barrens they prepared to take back a mill that was, his commanders had stressed, of utmost importance. For the dragon ships that Torsten Cruel-Sea oversaw being built required a phenomenal amount of lumber, trees that grew straight and true. One of Captain Lonely-Gale’s better ideas, the Jarl thought. Though the rebellion insofar had been fought entirely on land, he could not overlook the advantage of strength at sea.
Solitude, after all, was a major port of trade. *Let those spoiled sons of bitches see the war brought up to their doorstep for once.* Ulfric had plans - great plans to end this war once and for all. One move to blockade Solitude’s port, and surely, the Imperials would capitulate.

He greatly looked forward to it, for as he looked about at his men and women the strain of hunger was evident upon them all. Lean faces, gaunt with half rations and the starving cold looked up at him in respect still. Looked to him to lead them; to end this twisting despondency that grew more pressing with every meal missed.

No. He could not fail them now.

They could not afford to give up even one mill. Not one farm. They had lost so many soldiers to the spring planting already...and yet as his stomach turned in on itself in hunger renewed, Ulfric shook himself from doubts and self pity that had steadily crept up upon him. There were many more far worse off than he. Those poor damn sods left in Markarth, for instance. *Those who were left alive, anyway.*

Trudging along to follow Galmar’s stolid strides, he spied the small fist of Stormcloaks separated from the main camp. Willing volunteers, prepared to clear the civilian target of all bandits. Lucky for Ulfric, he happened to be in the right place at the right time to help. Which still made him walk with a secret glee, even as Galmar scowled in disapproval. If he could avoid the close confines of the Palace and its imprisoning war-room for one more week, Ulfric would count saving a humble mill as time well spent. No matter that his second in command felt the task to be beneath a Jarl’s notice.

It was still early morn; the only hint that the sun would rise soon was a hint of a glow hovering upon the eastern horizon. Rubbing boot black all over their faces, Ulfric gestured to the men and women to attend to their swords as well. Dulling the silver sheen with more of the greasy substance would prevent any chance that light would shine off the flat of the weapons. It would be shite luck, signaling their position in such a way.

He wanted this strike done fast. Wanted to slay the occupying bandits before they knew what hit them. Speed and strength of violence. End the threat before the bastards even awakened. As he peered over to the dark lump that was the mill, he could dimly see smoke curling from the chimney. Could smell the smoke tang of burning wood; an oily scent of fish overcooked. The huge waterwheel that powered the lumber saw could be heard creaking above the rush of river water. Savoring the relative peace before the fight, Ulfric ignored the growls of his stomach and carefully cleared his mind. Enjoying the chance to think about absolutely nothing for a change... no matter how brief.

“Still bent on heading to Winterhold after this?”

Ulfric blinked. *Well that lasted long.* “Yes, Galmar. Months have passed, and I am eager to see what progress has been made on the Dragonborn’s end.” Five more settlements had been razed by dovah fire. And Falkreath...Falkreath was no more than a charred heap of rubble, or so his spies said. This spring had given Ulfric ample opportunity to see the close up effects of this dragon uprising...hollow cheeked orphans and burnt bodies.

*Yes.* Nemain had been given enough time to pursue a lead by now.

With effort, he purged his mind of the sudden image of the tiny witch sliding down his body...soft
tendrils of hair sliding silkily against his stomach as she took him to task with lithe fingers and hot mouth. Grey eyes shining in exasperation, levity. Darkening in lust...

-Hastily bringing his mind to the present, Ulfric held back a cough and fell in line with the other soldiers as they began the slow, cautious creep forward. Checking the edge of his blade to ensure it was fully blackened, Galmar grunted. “Gonna tell her about Markarth?”

Ulfric winced as a thistle pricked his hands, piercing through the wool that covered his knees. Crawling through the brush like this was uncomfortable, but being close to the ground kept them under cover. “I shall. She deserves to know what has come to pass.”

The older Nord gave him a crafty look. “If you don’t tell her, she’ll probably come back with us to Windhelm. Take on the position of court mage, and all that. You risk much, telling the truth.”

Shrugging, he kept his sight on the mill. He could just make out the dark outline of one bandit, fast asleep on a chair outside the cottage’s door. A sleeping target - *the first to die*. “I find honesty serves best in most things.”

Galmar grunted, what could be seen of his grease smeared face stamped with that sly expression. “As long as you don’t wed the chit. Don’t think I didn’t notice just how goddamned relaxed you were upon your return from the monastery. You...Shor’s balls, Ulfric. You *know* it would be political suicide.”

Saying nothing, Ulfric pointed two fingers to the sentry. Quiet as shadows, two of his Stormcloaks crept up, and with one quick slash sent him into an eternal sleep. Ulfric found himself strangely eager as they spread out to surround the mill. How long had it been since his blade had been stained red? *The skirmish outside of Shor’s Stone? Far too long.*

A cut off gurgle was heard, as another unseen sentry was hastily dragged through the snow and into the bushes.

“Ulfric…”

“Have I ever led you astray?” Motioning for him to be quiet, Ulfric squeezed his eyes shut tight. Then opened them as wide as they would go. *Damned night vision...not what it used to be.* “If nothing else, trust that I know what I am doing.”

Galmar’s teeth shone unexpectedly white against his blackened beard. “Your funeral, lad.”

They made quick work of the bandits. A bare handful (no more than five along with the two standing guard) had taken the mill and made merry with the owner’s winter stores. Said owner - a weathered Nord matron - stood wringing her hands and babbling her thanks as the Stormcloaks wearily hauled off the bodies. “Talos preserve you, you came just in time. We scraped the bottom of the flour barrel just this morn.”

Spattered with arterial spray, Galmar waved a hand in response. “Think nothing of it, goodwife. Tell me, is your millwheel still operational?”

The woman’s face wrinkled in thought. “Aye, it be functional. Be some time, though, before I get some new workers in. Most young folk have gone and joined up with yore warriors, not that it ain’t a just cause. Be difficult to find bodies to fill in for needful labor.” Her eyes continually darted around the mill, seeming to rest upon the bushes. Curious.
Eying the blade he gripped that was disappointingly clean and free of gore, Ulfric heaved a sigh. Gods, his beard itched - with nothing to show for it but a fire in his blood and black staining his hands. He had a sudden, intense desire to bathe. “Galmar, see that she has what she requires. I saw a smaller stream beyond the cottage. You may find me there.”

“Aye.” Sparing a glance back, Ulfric nearly chuckled to see Galmar release his full blown charms upon the woman. Old goat that the Stone Fist was, he could see the Nord woman winding her hands around her apron strings like a girl. Talos only knew how the man managed it. Galmar always had a way with women...a secret envy of his, though he would never state so out loud.

The merry little brook glinted in the first rays of the sun. More of a hint of a promise than any real light, yet it was sufficient for his needs. Kneeling down, he plunged his fingers into the cool silty sand of the stream and brought it up to his face. Again and again, sloughing off what felt like the majority of his skin along with the greasepaint, Ulfric washed until he felt nothing but abraded flesh and gritty sand.

A flicker of movement caught his eye. Continuing to bring water up as though he had noticed nothing, the Jarl scooped a small amount to drink, minding where his bootknife dug into his shin and casually resting his free hand close to his sword.

Rustling bushes - whoever this was made for a poor assassin, if not a spy. As he continued the charade of bathing, though surely no trace remained, Ulfric accidentally knocked over his knapsack. A half loaf - more a clump, really - of stale bread fell out, rolling in the grass until the edge of it landed in the mud.

A choked off exclamation sounded from the bushes, quickly silenced. And the shuffling...

More than one spy, then. Though why bread would incite interest...he stiffened, only to relax as the suspect showed himself.

Rather, themselves. A young Nord girl in a threadbare kirtle emerged from the rushes, tugging along a Dunmer boy who barely looked to be out of breechclouts. Thumb firmly lodged in the little mer’s mouth, his red eyes were fixed determinedly upon the bread.

“Ey, sir. Ifn’t it not be too much trouble, can we ‘ave summat that bread t’eat?” Biting back a grin at the hopeful look she was giving him, Ulfric made his face stern.

“You should not hide in the bushes like that, scaring travelers.”

The girl planted her free hand on her hips. That truculent mouth reminded him of nothing so much as Nemain. Lately, everything did. “I wasn’t hiding! The visitors what Gran called ‘loafin’ layabouts’ were getting nasty, so Gran tol’ me an Moof here t’hide till she came an’ found us!”

The one eponymously named Moof nodded, what response the lad chose to utter blunted by that thumb. “Mfmhph.”

Plucking the bread from the stream, Ulfric pinched off the soggy bit and cast a critical eye at it. “Well, you have Mara’s luck today. Just so it happens, I only like soggy bread. Here. You two can share this, until my fellows can hunt us some elk or deer for the day’s meat.”

The girl made a face, the sentiment echoed with another slurpy exclamation from Moof. “Eww, soggy bread! T’aunt me place to criticize elders, Gran says, but that sounds yucky! ‘Ave yew lost some teeth then?”

Feeling a tickle of playfulness, Ulfric bared his teeth and snapped them shut...maintaining a careful
stillness. For all that the lass was begging for bread, he could see she was firmly holding the Dunmer child back with a clamped hand. *Smart, not to trust so easily.* “I still have all my teeth, but I don’t bite. Not like that Bear over there, chatting up your Gran.”

“Is...is that a real bear on his head? Gran says bears ‘r hungry and to run and shout for ‘er if’n I see one. Will he ‘et us?” Stouthearted as she was, there was real fear reflected in her thin voice. Ulfric was quick to shake his head.

“He’s all bark and no bite. I’m sure he’d let you pet that pelt later, if you ask nicely. Here...I think I have some apple slices left over, though they are dried and none too fresh.”

*So cold, to be wearing so little. If he could but coax them out of those muddy reeds a bit further...* placing the bread upon a relatively dry patch of grass, he shuffled away a few paces. The way the Nord and Dunmer children had looked askance at Galmar’s blood spackled armor spoke more clearly of their recent captivity than anything else, and Ulfric made a mental note to provide their Gran with any help that was in his power.

Starting, he thought as he watched them tear into the bread and apples hungrily, with some decent victuals. “I take it the loafing layabouts have been eating your food stores.”

The child Moof had pried away his thumb just long enough to stuff his share of the bread inside, making his cheeks bulge like a squirrel. His tiny caretaker broke away from scoffing just long enough to censure him. “Aye, they have. We’ve bin eating roots an’ minnows along with what Gran can spare from cookin’ fer the blighters. Even grass...though it tastes fair nasty. Ack, Moof! Don’t eat so fast - t’wont last if’n y’do!”

Red eyes looked down in shame. “Mfsowee.”

Ulfric sighed. He had been planning on eating the last of his horker jerky on the ride to Winterhold. But there were worse things than being peckish on a long and boring ride. Handing it over, he watched the fist sized bag of meat disappear as fast as the bread had. Hopefully his men would manage to bring down some game. Perhaps an elk...a big one. “She’s right...small bites. Eat slowly, so you don’t get sick.”

Golden light streamed over the mountains, hitting the tiny stream with sudden, clear bursts of light. The Jarl nearly yawned, feeling his fingers twist in matted clumps of plantlife as he watched the children chew ferociously...turning to the stream on occasion to wash down their serendipitous feast with mouthfuls of water. It was satisfying, watching them feed. He idly wondered if Nemain was well cared for at her college.

*That fragrance* - Ulfric lifted his hand to see that he had uprooted a fair amount of some sort of flower, roots and all. Blue wildflowers, with small oval leaves. This early in the season it was a marvel that the colorful petals were blooming at all.

“If y’make a tea from the dried roots o’those, t’will bring ye sweet dreams.” The girl offered, suddenly much closer to Ulfric than he would have expected. He could see dirt patched upon her cheeks, clean lines tracing through where tears had trailed down. Her hair was a bird’s nest of dirty blonde straw. Moof peeked out from behind her, his dark face missing nothing as Ulfric fingered the flowers.

His voice was gentler than he had planned. “I’ve drank the tea before. It does what you say. What is your name, girl?”
The pointed face still plump with baby fat squinted up at him. “Dotta.”

Moof smiled around his thumb. “Mhodda!”

“Well, Dotta.” Brandishing the clump of blooms, Ulfric smiled. “Do you mind if I pick some of these lovely flowers from your stream for my lady? I plan to visit her not a day’s ride from here, and I would not go to her empty handed.”

“Those ‘ns are all squashed! Y’can’t give a lass those, she’ll think y’don’t care!” Tromping briskly up to where Ulfric sat, Dotta pulled at his arm. “C’mon. Y’need to add some prettier colors to make a proper bouquet! Gran can show you...our garden has already started sprouting!”

Allowing himself to be pulled, Ulfric dusted the dirt from the mountain flowers and distracted, nearly stepped on Moof. The child skittered away, growling around his thumb. “Sorry.”

Baleful red eyes glared up at him. “Hnhggh!”

“Moof, be polite! He’s with those what be helpin’, not harming.”

Walking along the dirt trail back to the cottage, he waved to the Stormcloaks who were binding up what wounds had been gained in their brief foray against the bandits. Wrinkling his nose against the sudden scent of garlic and onions, Ulfric coughed as his two young charges made varying noises of disgust. Their Gran brightened to see them approach, holding out her hands as both Dunmer and Nord ran squealing into her arms. “Land sakes, you are all right then?”

“Mhrghh!”

“Aye, we’re fine! Starving though.”

Galmar stretched, his hastily wiped face still bearing streaks of brown and black. Ulfric could hear his stomach growling, twin to the rumblings of his own. He hoped the strong vegetable scent meant stew, though he could see that the men he had sent hunting had not yet returned. Damn.

“What is that stench?” He whispered as his second in command drew near, yawning.

“Onion and garlic soup.” Galmar tilted his head towards the healer who was, oddly enough, sniffing one of the injured low on the torso. A wound had gashed the man’s chainmail, dried blood staining the tabard around the slash.

“You can blame your little witch for the ripe smell. After she worked with our own in tending to the wounded in our Falkreath camp, our healers now force feed the stuff to all soldiers headed off to fight.”

“Whatever for?” Resisting the urge to plug his nose, Ulfric began walking to the garden Dotta had pointed out. Small green tufts of plantlife poked out from the brown earth, as though afraid of their welcome. Galmar followed, scuffing his boots in the freshly turned dirt.

“Aside from scaring our enemies shiitless with our breath? Bitch claimed it could cut down time in triage, seeing what soldiers would survive gut wounds and what wouldn’t. Apparently the goddamn rankness is so strong, any warrior who has taken a fatal cut to the gut will stink, and should be tended to first...or consigned to death. Also, the healers say the broth has some healthful properties.”

Galmar shrugged at the amazed look Ulfric levied his way. “Hrm, can’t say I can vouch for how
well the dose does its job...the first time a healer came at me with a ladleful I poured it over his fool	head. See how the fucker likes his own medicine. Hah!”

*Clever. Smelly, but clever.* “Well, if it works.” Bending over, his fingers parted the stalks of
newgrown dragon’s tongue and nightshade. *What goes with blue? Yellow.*

Carefully laying his clump of blue mountain flowers upon the grown, Ulfric unsheathed his boot
knife and began cutting the delicate stems. He wouldn’t think too closely about what he was about to
do in Winterhold. It was, after all, necessary. Part of the long term plan that he had been nurturing for
what felt like an age.

No matter that his chest pounded with unseemly excitement at the very thought of meeting the
Dragonborn once more. Seeing her smile that crooked grin, just for him...

*“Posies, Ulfric? Really?”*

Arranging the longest flowers to fall artfully from the center, Ulfric began binding the whole mass of
it up with some spare string. “Don’t give me any shit about this, Galmar.”

The Bear-General snorted. “If this is for who I think it is, you’d better believe the shit-storm will be
raining down in spades. I will give you props for having the stones to consider ploughing the wench.
That Forsworn’s cunt likely is ringed with fangs and spits acid.”

Rolling his eyes, Ulfric stood and stretched. The blue flowers gave off a delicate scent that minded
him of that night in the dining hall, ever so long ago. Their first kiss. *Focus. Think of something else.*

Nemain was a practical sort. If his plans were to have any chance at succeeding, he knew - he would
have to apply first to her sense of pragmatism. To the loyalty the Breton still bore for the people who
had so callously thrown her out. Their loss, his gain. He hoped.

It seemed Galmar was not picking up on the subtle signs of Ulfric’s displeasure, for he would not
shut up. “That wee little witch is a necromancer! A *Forsworn* necromancer! Wouldn’t a skull goblet
be more to her liking than that bedraggled clump of greens? Mayhap a corpse or two? I could drag
along the bandits. Be nice and frozen by the time we reach that blasted College.”

Shooting his friend a wry smile, Ulfric scrubbed at his chin. *Need to shave too.* “I’d say by now that
I know what she likes. Speaking of which - Galmar, you are filthy. Time to shed your winter coat.”

*“Nay!”* Holding his chest in a mock gasp, Galmar aimed a half hearted kick at Ulfric which was
easily dodged. “Not the beard! Tis you who is gone a’courting, not I! Bitches adore my beard!”

Ulfric gave Galmar a jaundiced eye, starting from his general’s muddy boots, up to the stained and
dishveled armor...coming to rest on the tatty bear’s head cowl. “I don’t want to draw any undue
attention in Winterhold. We’re going in disguise. So, you are going to shave off that dead animal and
dress in something else. Even if I have to hold you down to do it.”

Holding up both hands and backing away, Galmar clucked his tongue. “Ease off! Fine! I think the
goodwife has a glass somewhere in that cottage of hers.” Grumbling under his breath, Ulfric watched
as the man stomped off towards the mill.

Picking up the bouquet of blooms, he sighed and closed his eyes. *Words written in Nemain’s*
crabbed hand came easily to his mind, memorized as they were.

Tell me...has spring come to Windhelm? Are there flowers? Here, there is nothing but stone and ice as far as the eye can see. The sea is nearly interchangeable with the ever-clouded sky. Grey like the turmoil that grows, like some weed...poisoning all the good, until I fear that when I leave I shall not see spring flowers. Only the grey and the cold, everywhere. In everything.

He would bring to her the symbol of springtime. Then....then time would tell if his gamble had paid off. Gods, he wanted this to work.

All his hopes rested upon her.

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“Special delivery.”

Pulling at the blue mage robes, Ulfric felt the brightness of his smile fade as he beheld Nemain appear behind what Faralda had shown him to be her chamber door - one of many in the pretentiously titled ‘Hall of Attainment’. Purple and green bruises marred the sharp edges of her familiar fox-face, nearly swelling the right eye shut. Her movements as she pushed against the wooden frame were ponderously slow.

He owed someone a goddamn drubbing, for laying hands on the woman. His woman. Not yet , a wayward thought cautioned him, tempering the white-hot rage that curled his fingers into fists. Wait.

“What the - Galmar! Bear?!? What in blazing Akatosh’s name be you doing here!”

That accent...had it softened with time? Despite his anger at the sight of Nemain’s pulped face, he managed to smile once more upon hearing her voice.

“What?” Ulfric quipped. “You must be mistaken, miss. I am Hendrik, a humble courier. At your service. And this is my Khajiiti companion. Uh...Kazheir.”

Galmar gave him an annoyed glance. The sabrecat pelt he wore as a replacement for the moth eaten bear cowl drooped over his forehead, fangs scraping near his eyebrows. Clean shaven looked strange on his friend, though a shadow of beard threatened to reclaim his grizzled face. “Meow.”

The Forsworn witch chimed in delighted husky laughter, her slim frame drooping over the hand she held against her stomach. Her dark unbound tresses flowed over her face, and Ulfric felt his tamped anger flare as she winced. Pulled away strands of hair from sticking to her wounds. “Oh ye gods.
Hahah hah...you ridiculous...Get in here you fool fear thuaidh! Out of the hallway!

Setting his jaw, he forced his voice to sound casual. “Nemain. Who hurt you?”

Tiny hands seized the folds of his robes and hauled Ulfric bodily inside her room, Galmar making only a token protest as Nemain manhandled him as well. “Never mind that now. Quick! Before someone sees.”

Ducking beneath the low frame, Ulfric straightened to look around at the Dragonborn’s small abode. Rumpled furs and blankets lay scattered atop a sturdy sleigh-back bed, wooden cabinets and dressers similarly cluttered in a disarray of soul gems, potions and books. So many books...piled in teetering towers, bearing feathers and strips of ribbons for bookmarks. Nemain had not been false when she had stressed just how much reading it had taken to discover the Elder Scroll, he thought in awe.

“Seriously lass, what beastie or bastard got ahold of you now?” Turning back, he saw Galmar reach out to prod at the bruises on her face. Nemain’s hand slapped Galmar’s weathered paw away, her face set in a familiar scowl.

“None of yer business, that’s what! I have it all well in hand...the bodgy git what did this to me be so guilt ridden, he waits on me hand and foot.” Nemain preened, gesturing to the various boxes of sweets, cakes and pies stacked around the room.

Feeling his heart sink the slightest bit, Ulfric also spied several glittering necklaces draped carelessly upon the dressers, gemstones glinting from a wad of furs thrown into the corner. A curved circlet embedded with sapphires dangled from the goat’s horn chandelier. Evidently her other admirer - or attacker, he wasn’t sure quite which from the sound of things - had excellent taste. His flowers would seem a paltry offering near these. Damn damn damn.

“Now what are ya doing, skipping up to the College of Winterhold like a couple of lunkheads? Do you have any idea what might have happened had the Thalmor spy seen you?!”

“He didn’t. No one else suspects anything. Faralda never batted an eye when I told her we were merely couriers.” Ulfric spoke blandly, pushing back the wall of black hate that surged to the forefront every time the word ‘Thalmor’ was mentioned. “It appears we have much to catch up upon, Nemain, and little time in which to do it.”

“Any chance you’ve been keeping some of my Cyrodilic brandy to yourself, witch? It’s been a dry spell for far too long!” Galmar supplied hopefully, brown eyes shining in the low light of the sconces.

Her scowl crumbled around the edges, easing into an expression that was almost rueful. “I find meself disinclined to drink, these past few days. So I cannae say I have any strong spirits in stock here. Mayhap some tea or ale? As you can see, I mostly sleep or read in my quarters. Come.” Patting her bed, Nemain sat down with a sigh.

“Sit down, you two, and tell me what ye’ve been up to these past months. Certainly it be more exciting than what progress I have made.”

“Exciting? I'd say downright god-damned depressing. Falkreath has fallen to the dragons.” Galmar muttered grimly, the bed nearly tipping over as he sat. With a ripple of floating hair, Nemain’s grey gaze rested on Ulfric. He nodded to confirm the Nord’s words, causing her mouth to pucker sourly the longer Galmar wended on.

“Nought but burnt down buildings remain, after two dovah escaped south from Whiterun’s warriors.
As far as I know, the other settlements of the Holds have resisted and stand still. We’ve sent a clarion call to all of Eastmarch Hold, telling those who can spare the attention to their farms to shore them up with sharpened stakes...and to keep bow and arrows close at hand. Much good it will do the poor bastards.

“We’ve been sending patrols out to guard what settlements we can. But Galmar is right - our numbers have lessened significantly with the thawing of the frost. We have seen a flood of refugees - civilians that have no other recourse but to abandon their steads - fleeing to Windhelm. Though I pray that some remain, or we will be even hungrier come next spring.” Ulfric stated, watching as the witch curled her feet up beneath the bag-like robes that flooded about her. Fastidiously tucking a fur pelt around her shoulders, her left eye widened to compensate for the squashed swelling of the other as she peered up at him.

“Someone, somewhere is going to have a raw day when I get my hands on them.”

Nemain idly waved a hand, encouraging Galmar who paused, shame faced, over a plate of sweetrolls. “Go ahead. I be sick of sweet things.” Ignoring the Nord who delightedly began stuffing his face, she scrubbed at her uninjured cheek. Leaving a long smear of ink, Ulfric noted...more black staining the tips of her fingers and knuckles. Looking to her desk, he could see a half-written letter set out to dry. Childishly, he hoped it was addressed to him.

“Aye, I’ve had quite the time of it. From the moment I set foot in this benighted College, the mages have been setting me to task. Not least of which be that glowing eyesore held in the Hall of Elements. Pah, pieces of the Gods. Like having such blighty things around ever ends well. I read that story about Lorkhan’s heart, by the way...a cautionary tale if I’ve ever heard one.”

Seeing his encouraging nod, Nemain continued blithely onwards. Her slender fingers danced as she gestured, waving wildly in the air to illustrate her plight. “At first I was searching blindly for anything having to do with dragons or Elder Scrolls, you ken? Completely at a loss, for the libraries here be absolutely monstrous. I must have wasted at least a week, bumbling around for any lead at all. Then the librarian returned, I made some friends who, er, helped…”

Her cheeks suddenly flared bright pink. “And now I be in a right mawkish mess.” Nemain muttered, brushing crumbs from her furs. “Oy! Save one for Bear, you brute.”

Rapping Galmar’s knuckles before he could seize the last sweetroll, the witch deftly stole it from the plate and held it up to Ulfric. Their hands touched; a familiar spark zinging from his fingertips all the way to his gut.

Sucking an inhaled breath of air, he knew - she felt it too. The air of her breath told him all.

Desire. Guilt. Fear.

The witch’s throat bobbed as she swallowed, consciously turning away from him. Accepting the dessert with a nod, Ulfric focused gladly on the taste of yeast, sugar and flour as Nemain coughed. “I be pleased to say that I know where the Elder Scroll lies. The Dwemer depths of Blackreach, if one can believe it. I’ve been reading up on the best entrance routes and I do think Alftand may be my best bet...though I fear I shall be delayed by an errand that cannae wait.”
“What errand?” Galmar was rooting around the shelves, presumably searching for a drink.

Shooting him an aggrieved look, Nemain pulled out a box from beneath the bed which held a crate of ale. Pulling the corks free from two bottles, the pungent smell drifted through the air as Galmar sighed in pleasure. Ulfric sniffed the air, wondering at the smell of mingled reluctance and sadness that emanated from the witch. Ale. Almost as good as mead. Almost.

**What does the smell of alcohol have to do with guilt?**

“One of the mages and I have been tasked by the Archmage to undertake a trip to Mzulft. To retrieve a staff that will help us control the Eye of Magnus - that artifact we found beneath Saarthal. And a good thing too,” Nemain grimaced.

“That fool thing seems to be messing with the minds of the mages here. Particularly those of Mer blood. The longer it stays, the more I be convinced that such a powerful thing ought not to remain. I’ve...well, never mind that. Suffice to say that this piece of Magnus does pose a threat every bit as calamitous as those damn dovah.”

“If you say so,” Ulfric’s voice remained studiously sober, though he felt like screaming inside.Dragons, woman! Falkreath is no more, and yet you plan on traipsing nearly to the eastern border for some shitty staff? Kynesgrove, Falkreath, Markarth...damn it we are out of time!

She looked at him for a long moment. Nostrils flaring, he could see her mouth open and close...tasting the emotions he could not help but reveal in Kynareth’s element. Perhaps he would have been better off holding his breath.

“Galmar. Leave us. There is a rather fine tavern down in Winterhold that doubtless would please you greatly.”

Looking back and forth between the two silent Masters of the Voice, Galmar shrugged. Mouthing the word ‘flowers’ as he left, Ulfric frowned as the door closed on his friend with a clumping sound of finality.

Alone at last...a sick, pining dread filled him. Anxiety hastened each heartbeat, pulsing in the silence between them.

Listening to the footsteps echoing outside the door, Nemain hopped up from the bed the instant the outer door slammed shut. “What, Bear? The tension be vibrating from you sae thick I can practically see it. What bothers you so?”

*Talos guide his words* ...if he was to die this day, let him die like a man. He swallowed. “Markarth has been taken.”

Blinking up at him, uncomprehending, Nemain’s eyes widened when Ulfric added with not a small amount of venom, “...by your kind.”

“Congratulations.” He spoke, feeling a faint sense of satisfaction as the witch continued to stare up at him in stunned silence. *She had not known...took no part in the planning of it. I knew it!*
“Markarth and its surrounding lands now belong to your dear old da. He swept up from Cidna Mine along with all his minions, killing near every Nord in the city. Jarl Igmund and his ilk were the first to fall. And of course they have found reinforcements in the Forsworn that live in the outlying wilderness of the Sundered Hills.”

“It is done. Madanach, Ard Ri of the Reachmen, now sits upon the Mournful Throne.”

Quiet pervaded the small room. Neither Breton nor Nord fidgeted or moved, both simply taking in the measure of the other.

He could bear it no longer. “Does this please you?”

Nemain shifted her gaze to the bookcase beside him, looking troubled. “I...I hardly know what to think or feel at this point, Ulfric. Truth? I am...torn.”

Tapping her hand upon her knee, she graced him with a sad smile. “I have wondered, these past months, why my family has chosen not to contact me for sae long. I feared the worst, that death had taken them. But now I see...they’ve been too busy to respond to my missives. For this, I be grateful...and equal parts grieved. For I know the way my kin make war, and it be not pretty.”

Ulfric thought upon the hasty report his spy had made, two weeks past in the dragon razed shell of a crofter’s hut. Nord bodies, drawn and quartered...heads mounted on pikes on every outlying wall. What the Reachmen take, they mean to keep. “No, it is not. But this new development does bring to light something I have wished to discuss with you for some time.”

“Oh?” The woman was obviously distracted by the news. She had scurried over to her desk, turning over the clutter in search of something. The ink on her hands must have dried, for she left no mark upon the papers she turned over. “What is it?”

_No better way to say it. “Marry me.”_

Nemain guffawed, grey eyes darting back and forth amidst the mess she had made of book and rolled parchment. “Oh, that be rich. No more jests...you’d look right terrible in harlequin garb. Now, what be you olagonin’ on about?”

He waited, arms folded as the sounds of papers rustling ceased.

“Oh. Bear - gods, you are serious. Why...”

“Almost forgot.”

Drawing his knapsack closer to him, Ulfric forced himself to look in the bag and not at her. To retrieve what he truly had meant to deliver, before becoming so sidetracked. It annoyed him that he so wished to see her reaction. This was political expediency; nothing more.

Keep telling yourself that. “Before you say anything else, I was not lying when I said I was playing the courier. I do have some things for you - from Aventus and Sofie.”

Her bruised face was fixed upon him, the expression so serious as Ulfric carefully placed two letters
into her hands. “Aventus wanted to send you a dagger he had smithed, but I think it is a gift better presented in person. But he sent a note, as did your foster daughter.”

“Hmph.” Unrolling the more lumpy of the two parchment scrolls, Nemain squawked as the rough lump of a petty soul gem bounced off her foot. “What-”

“Sojie’s doing. Her first filled soul gem - Wuunferth says she killed a skeever with an ice spike. Practically combusted with pride…I think you have a rival for Sojie’s education, there.”

“Many thanks.” And Talos damn him if she wasn’t sucking on her inner cheek again. Seeing the soft indent her tongue made against flesh nearly made him lurch at her, then and there. No!

Rigidly holding himself aloof, Ulfric reminded himself to be calm. Passionless. Reasonable. She will not respond to overtures of romance. Don’t you dare scare her off.

“Ulfric…”

The flowers! “I...also brought you... something, where - oh shit.”

The bouquet had not endured well the day and a half of hard riding they had spent crumpled up inside his knapsack. Dried petals fell in lazy swirls as Ulfric felt a queer rush of shame spiral through him. There was such a drastic difference between the wilted bouquet and the lavish presents his Dragonborn had now surrounded herself with; the silly twist of flowers nearly deadheaded completely as he gripped them in stilted shock.

This was never going to work. What had he been thinking? Why hadn’t he brought some of the heirloom jewelry she would be entitled to, as Lady of Eastmarch? Galmar’s voice rolled through his head, the disparaging tone echoing like a gong. Posies, Ulfric?

Kyne take me for a fool.

“You...you brought me flowers.”

Looking up, he could see Nemain silently pad over to where he stood like a dullard. Taking the bouquet from his hands, the witch fingered the few, bright blue petals that had survived amidst stalks of dragontongue and sweetgrass. Burying her face in the blooms, Ulfric heard her inhale a shuddering breath.

Setting his jaw, the Jarl prepared for the worst. “It. Um. Well…”

Raking fingers through his hair, he could feel clumps of it stand on end as he fought to find the words that had seemed so damn appealing, back when he had first considered proposing marriage to her. Oblivion take him, he was downright babbling. He knew. He had known long ago that Forsworn thought of marriage and monogamy far differently than the Nords did. Should have brought at least an amulet of Mara. She thinks this is a fucking joke.

“Well, er. Your letters mentioned that you missed spring, and-”

Whatever he had been about to say evaded him as two small hands feverishly pressed his face to her
lips, causing his mind to shut like a steel trap as he dragged her small body closer. Tight, hard - every touch a thrill. Reminding him of what he had so strenuously sought to block out, these last few months. Every goddamned night spent alone in his tent, every boring trail ride to yet another camp...

Huh. It seemed his witch favored the gift after all.

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Et’Ada save her from herself, but...he had brought her flowers.

He had read and remembered her letters, well enough to recall what she missed most. As Nemain climbed him like a tree, taking a small hop-skip to wind her arms more securely around his neck she could feel just how changed he was.

The last few months must have been as fraught with travel as he had implied, and just as light on eating. Where before the Nord had been one massive stack of bulk, he had leaned out. Parts of him that had previously been covered in a sleek layer of healthy flesh were now taut and hard. She could practically feel his hip bones cut into her thighs.

Tracing a small scrape where he had hurt himself shaving with her fingertip, Nemain released his lower lip from her tongue long enough to lave it along the small scar. She did not like the exhausted lines that lurked beneath his eyes. It did not suit him.

**Ugh, but this marriage malarkey?** Surely it was all a ribald joke, and all would be the way it had always been between the two of them. If she had her way, the witch would tie him to her bed and force feed him sleeping elixirs and sweetrolls. She would chase away those shadows, make him laugh...

His breath washed over her, panting harshly. Gods, they were both gasping like draft horses.

“Marry me. I can give you children, gods...ever since that damned cabin I can’t stop picturing you with my child in your arms! Be my wife. Help me save Skyrim from itself. With your support - the Dragonborn’s support! - the Stormcloaks could ally the Reach. There could be an armistice. True, enduring peace at last.”

He brushed his mouth against hers again, and Nemain’s mind blurred. It was unfair, how a man had been blessed with such soft, full lips. Her own were nowhere near as plush. “Just what you and yours always wanted - a sovereign nation for the Reach. Faolan Red Eagle’s lands returned to his own, at last. Backed by Skyrim herself. Joining forces, we can push out the Imperials for good.”

It had to be said. She would utter the words, though the steady, insistent circles his fingers were tracing down her spine and rump were muzzling all rational thought, the more south they went. “You’re cracked. I like you Bear, but marriage? Cor, we’d get along together as fair as a Dunmer and a Khajiit thrown down a well.”

Dropping her lips to his chin, she dragged her tongue down the skin of his throat. “Which is to say, not at all.”
Pleased that she had managed to wring such a sound from him with her attentions to his neck alone, Nemain bowed forward. Distractions were good.

She had to leave the next day. Ancano had spoiled her long enough. It had been intensely amusing, watching the Thalmor try to redeem the nearly fatal electrocution he had dealt her with baubles and treats. Healing itself was a time-stealing endeavor; the worst of the wounds needing constant care and restoration potions. Yet a bit longer, and the last bruises would eventually fade…

Her no-longer absent teacher was making elocution of thought increasingly difficult. After Nemain began humming against the shell of his ear, Ulfric had forcibly grabbed her by the neck and claimed her kisses once more. Every sweep of his hot tongue against her lips, prodding her to respond was soaking away every rational excuse to refuse this. To refuse him.

Dimly, Nemain wondered if Bear wasn’t just making this offer out of desperation. The man was insufferably proud. Yet he had tasted honest - wretchedly so, when he mentioned children and that Hircine blasted cabin. Did he…

The Nord’s voice was a husky rasp. More akin to a heavy skooma smoker than his typical highborn drawl. “I would much rather have the People of the Reach allied with the Stormcloak rebellion than the Empire. I know overtures have already been made to Cyrodiil and I...I believe you would be the best choice for ambassador to Markarth. Madanach’s daughter. Dragonborn. My people will hearken to you. Yours would undoubtedly follow you.”

Pulling away to achieve some distance, she nestled her chin in the hollow between Ulfric’s neck and shoulder, where there was still the faint scent of snowberry soap. He really was very built. “I am flattered.”

“And yet you are going to say no.”

“And you be surprised? Of course ‘tis a no! My people likely already believe me a traitor, at this point. And you dinnae want to know what they do with traitors. The man what sent me to kill you be not known for his leniency.”

“You’re no traitor. How could anyone who cared for their own folk so much ever betray their ideals?”

Pretty to think so. She shivered as a roughly calloused thumb scraped over her neck. Feeling a tug at her hair, Nemain eased herself back. Her face was beginning to throb. Blinking through the fug of desire, his eyes seemed more brightly blue than usual. Bear. Not Butcher. When be the last time you thought of him as such?

I am so incredibly codswalloped.

"I thought I had forgotten how to kiss," he said, sounding thoughtful.

She gaped at him, prompting another of those bright smiles that so utterly transformed his scarred features. Had he heard not a word?

Ulfric sighed. "Luckily, I begin to remember." Large hands cupped her head and pulled her face up
It wasn't like kissing Galan. Not at all. She remembered - so faint the memory, but she remembered - that it had been a sloppy, eager assault of mouths meeting. Her orc lover, Moth, had taught her caution in liplocking with a male who bore tusks. When he got excited, he tended to clamp down hard on whatever body part lay between his jaws.

But with Moth gro-Bagol- sporadic, casual sex had been pleasant, but never more significant than the satiety of scratching a particularly bothersome itch. This, though…

Bear’s teeth gently tugged at her lower lip in turn, making Nemain moan like a camp whore. Far too loudly for such a crowded tower, but this - this was Ulfric in essence: his lips brushing her uninjured face, cheekbones and finally her mouth. So lightly that she shouldn't have even noticed. Pressure gently crescendoing until she was consumed...tormented by his hot, hungry pursuit of her mouth.

Certainly she shouldn't have felt all her senses spring to life, so that suddenly every scrap of her skin was aware of the hard body under hers, of its ridges and curves, of the power of the hands cradling her face.

She whimpered in pain as he bumped her bruised cheek. Nuzzling apologetically, Ulfric's kisses became slower, less feverish, pulling away to nibble again on her lip and then slide his way back into her mouth. He acted as if he had the world enough and time…that urgent hunger she glimpsed only reappearing when he forgot himself.

"Ulf ric," she said, and her voice came out in a strangled gasp. “A rúnsearc .”

"Hmm ."

Stepping up to the bed, his big hands still cradled her face as he bent back to take her mouth. Her feet finally hit a solid surface. Sliding down his chest, she balanced on the straw tick of the ropy mattress, feeling flushed and stupid. No clothes had even come off, yet she was far more flustered than she had been. Even naked on the damn mountaintop.

This meant something, she knew it. More than mindless tupping or a way to pass the time. Stop this. Stop it now!

"Bear!!" she said, infusing her words with a firm strength. But he was kissing her again, and he must have remembered how to kiss. Because this kiss made all her thoughts flee, and weakly she relented to the heat of the moment: the fingers tangled in her hair, the smell and the taste of him. Snowberries, leather and sword oil.

Of course, it was damn foolish to be kissing a man - a Nord, no less - whose proposal she had just spurned. And even worse, a niggl ing wee voice inside Nemain insisted that what she really wanted - needed - was the feeling of that hard body on top of hers. More of what they had shared on the mountain, in the monastery. In their shared sleeproll. You feather-headed doxy. This be exactly what he wants - to seduce you into the marriage bed! No no no!

Hating herself, Nemain did not open her eyes immediately after his mouth left hers.
"Nemain." His voice sounded odd.

"Mmm?" She kept her eyes closed. There was something so glaickety embarrassing about it all. She couldn't quite work it out. It was just Bear, after all - her teacher, prodigal Greybeard, the thorn in her side. The man who shook her silly and roared when prodded during arguments, a man with such a sheepish, little-boy smile...

"I'm not sure how to put this."

"What?"

"Well." He ducked his head down, tracing his nose against the tight, corded line of her throat. The sensation of his breath against her bare skin made her wheeze. "I have decided not to lay with you until we are, in fact, married." His voice was deep. Calm. Casual for such an important topic.

"Argh!" Nemain shifted against him, realizing that she had turned pink with the fury of it. Of being denied, for he obviously had noticed her hand sliding ever lower on his stomach. She had indeed been thinking of parting the folds of his robes to see just how authentically the Nord had dressed as a mage, for most wore no smalls beneath their robes.

_Hadn't they danced around the topic long enough? Curse his sudden bout of prudery!_

"What d'ye call all that we've already done, then?"

Ulfric’s mouth twisted in a playful smile. “Fun. Pully-hawly. Rumbusticating.” Those lake blue eyes flaring with mischief, she nearly went rigid when he leaned over and breathed gently into her ear.

“...bopping squiddles.”

_That rot-bastard born of a horker’s cheesy flipperpit! “Now that drivel deserves a mouthful of lye, Milord.”_

“And yet I am not worried.”

“I shall nae marry you,” she added lamely.

"I understand completely." His arms tightened around her.

"I'm certain you will find someone to marry."

His sigh blew over her like a gentle caress. “Mmph. Most likely.”

It had been settled. _There._ Yet she felt hesitant to break the embrace that had changed from awkward to comfortable. She felt no need to move, to shift from where she stood on the bed all tucked up in the heat of his arms. Their breathing had matched up again, syncing nearly without thought.

It was nearly more intimate than kissing.

"May I beg you to return to bed, oh woman who is not my wife? Standing like this is pleasant, but you must needs attend to your face. And I have been stuck in the saddle unable to lie down for longer than I care to recall."
Marriage was for romantic, addle-pated fools. Nemain had long thought it to be so. So few marriages escaped boredom, adultery or time-soured scorn. As she stubbornly kept her head against the braw chest of the Nord who had, beyond belief, become one of her most treasured friends Nemain pondered something Hatti had once offhandedly mentioned. *Something about hauling water for a bath, and how it was akin to marriage. Had the old bat been wed at one point then? How long ago was this anyhow?*

Not that long, for she suddenly recalled everything. The oil Hatti had dribbled into her bath - gleamblossom, with lavender embroidered towels. The knap of cloth had been so soft that her rough hands had snagged the fine fabric.

*Ridiculous foppishness.* Such luxuries had been wrenched away once, she could do without them a bit longer.

The old woman’s voice had a bright ring of cheer that she realized she missed, especially amongst the more stridently snobby tones heard amongst the mages in the College. “Girl, you mark me well! I was young once too you know. Passion - ooh, that fades eventually. Just as this bathwater will cool and turn tepid. Useless. Tchah!”

Hatti had waggled her wrinkled claw in Nemain’s face, thrusting her lips up in what she had taken to be a smile. “Ah, but love? Not your silly sweetheart’s love, but *real* love...hmm. It is the fire. And trustin’ companionship, true kindness and loyalty keeps the fire burning. You’ll find out for yourself, if you’re lucky. Now get in, afore it gets cool.”

Her heart now thudded so loudly against her breastbone, she wondered that Ulfric showed no signs of feeling it. *In for a septim, out for a sodding skein.*

“I have decided to accept your position of court mage.”

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Ulfric Stormcloak, Jarl of Eastmarch stirred in a strangely jerky motion. As though he had been surprised from whatever plotting went on in that gingery head of his.

“Truly?”

“Aye.” Daring to look up, she noted the familiar mien of condescending coolness had reappeared. Replacing that hot, hungry look that had so nearly captivated her. Had prodded the vowels and consonants she had locked away behind teeth and tongue.

“...Though I’ll only take the post so long as you remain unwed. I think t’would be strange, attending you and yer wife.” Pulling a hand free from where it had become buried in his robes, she gestured to them both. “Considering the circumstances.”

His eyes were glinting shards of ice. “Hmm.”

Against her better judgement, Nemain allowed her head to fall forward once more. For he was so warm, and she was so very, very tired. Tired of it all.

*The visions.* Her dreams...it was all playing out exactly as the Et’Ada had foretold to her. Would she bring to pass that future in which this man’s head was stored in a cask? His child bared to her blade -
dinnae think on it! Or could there possibly be another way? Yet another choice that awaited, should she be bold enough to grasp for it?

Was one truly bound by the whims of gods? Or could one steer one’s own fate?

“Bear. A rúnsearc .” May Dibe take away all sensation in her favored nerve endings if he ever found out exactly what that endearment meant. “Let’s vanish off and away.”

“Pardon?”

Bumping her head against his collarbone, Nemain winced at the stinging pain of it. “Pretend. I know y’shall never leave Windhelm, but pretend...imagine you and me with the little ones. With Aventus and Sofie. Somewhere far away from here.”

“Mmm?” His hands had started that butterfly-soft tracery again. Looping over the hem of her robes, pulling them down in the back to touch her bare skin. She shivered, gooseflesh prickling at the sudden draft that whispered against her spine.

“Somewhere hot. Like Elsweyr...blue skies and white sands. Green jungles and...and sugared fruity drinks...and no one to know us or call us to task. Doesn’t it sound grand?”

He sighed raggedly somewhere above her. “It sounds fucking miserable.”

“...What?”

Ulfric’s jaw brushed her forehead. She could feel the curve of his smile as he rubbed against the unswollen part of her face. “I burn horribly in the sun.”

“Oh.” Of course he would. That milk-white skin with its freckles and scars. A snigger-snort escaped her.

Hands tickled at her underarms. “Don’t laugh. I was severely punished by sunblisters in Cyrodiil.”

“Redder than a tomato.” He added, his dour tone softened by the peal of giggles she now could not hold back, as clever fingers danced beneath her robes. “I don’t remember why, but I chose to chop wood shirtless. Spent near an entire morn that way, thinking a dip in the nearby river would cure all ills. You’d think I would have known not to disrobe in the south during a month known as Sun’s Height.”

“Terribly careless of you, Bear. What happened?”

“I was forced to convalesce in a smelly cot deep in the Colovian highlands, at the mercy of the Imperial healer. A fat, frowsy matron who breathed with her mouth open.”

Nemain squealed as Ulfric suddenly blew into her ear. “Ack, stoppit! How’d she treat ye?”

“With fervent diligence. I could hardly escape her attentions, laid up as I was and hardly able to move for the pain. She slathered some sort of oily concoction over me, thrice daily….and took far too much pleasure in it. Suffice to say, I am never leaving the northlands again.”
“But fruity drinks, Bear! Beaches! Warmth!”

Yipping as she nearly fell over in the bed, Nemain felt a thump of something tender burn in her chest as he smiled rakishly down at her. His strong grip was the only thing keeping her from flopping over, thumbs perilously close to the curve of breast on either side. Ever so close...a bit more...

The door clanked open, rebounding from the stone wall with a thunking groan.

“Ulfric Stormcloak.”

It was Ancano, arms filled with what looked to be yet another basket of sweetrolls and wine. Staggering upright, Nemain kept a firm grip of Bear’s robes. Judging by the look of astonished rage, it was easy to see he had put two and two together. I dinnae want anymore wine. Not after that night...curse him for a stook! What rotten timing that elf has.

The Altmer pushed the door open more fully, until his skeletal form was backlit by the bluish well of light beyond.

“Jarl of Windhelm. Your reputation precedes you.” Taking in their proximity, his amber eyes became slits of pure spite.

“I hear from a reliable source that you scream like a little girl.”

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A deep, black hole and a pit of rage.

As he swiftly drew the blade that lay in its custom-fit harness against his spine, Ulfric held tight to the thought that Nemain had agreed. At least to one thing, Somethin’ . It was the one clear thought amidst the blanking fury that had seized control of his limbs. Nemain’s insistent yowling was but a scratchy echo in the dross of his senses.

Oh Ulfric, your dear boy. Elenwen’s cloying voice - so unwanted - slid over him like spider silk. Of course it is your fault. No, not even in his waking moments he could not escape her!

Fool thing. Who could you return to now, ere you think only of me?

It did not matter, he told himself as he prepared to lunge. To decapitate the Thalmor agent, bound for death by necessity of knowing his location and weakness ( her, always....stealing his attentions. Hoarding his thoughts ) Ulfric would accomplish this task first. She had said yes to his invitation to court. If he made his arguments compelling enough, the witch would come around full circle.
She would not begrudge him this one thing. And damn if he didn’t have some plans as far as his powers of persuasion went.

As his limbs tensed for the blow, Ulfric wished things had turned out differently. Wished he could swing his future wife into his arms; set out on the path to the Sea of Ghosts and find some curve on the shore where they would not be seen or heard. He was rock hard, and so lustful that he felt as though desire was leaking out of him like a visible mist.

But his instincts had never led him astray. Best to wait. The tiny woman was downright livid, her mouth open in a silent screech as he shoved her towards the bed. To safety. Almost in slow motion, he could see the elf drop his basket of goods and summon the barest beginning of sparks. Those long fingertips nearly luminous, glowing brighter every precious second it took to draw and pull his sword.

No way around it - he’d deal with the threat first. If there was anything Ulfric hated, it was going into battle half-cocked.

That was such a bad jest that he didn’t even bother to grin.

“...enough. Enough! Both of ye! Stop where y’are!”

His sword no longer obeyed his hands. Frozen where he stood, awkwardly poised for an overhand slash, Ulfric realized the roaring in his ears had quieted to the point where he could finally make out what the woman was saying.

Standing atop her bed, Nemain was hunched over in a catlike pose. Both hands stretched towards Elf and Nord wreathed in a nimbus of power. Paralyzing them where they both stood.

“...I swear upon the darkness that eats all things, you blithering lackwits havenae got the sense the Ef’Ada gifted cabbageworms!” Her brogue was shrill with fear.

“Think! Think on what wouldae happened had one of you landed a killing blow? Truly, would you wish open war in a mage stronghold Bear? Not verrah smart! Not like you at all!”

The elf twitched in the unseen bonds of magic. When he managed command of his speech, it was accompanied by a hissed gasp of repugnance. “Bear? You call him by a pet name? Gyfaill, your profligate favors have gone too far.”

“Aye I call him that, for tis what he is! My Bear! Mine to protect as I will!” Not standing down a notch, Nemain turned to fix a furious frown upon the Altmer. “And you, Ancano! I expected better from ye! How dare ye impugne me friend’s honor by implying he endured suffering sae poorly! And at the hands of your cocksucking superior...if y’took part in such, we can call our friendship o’er right now. This instant!”

Shaking her head, Ulfric watched as Nemain brought contorted fingers to bear...bodily dragging an inert Ancano inside the room, as she waved; telekinesis making the door bang shut all on its own.
“Now at the count of three, I will release you dunderheads to your previous freedoms. But if one of you even lifts a finger - a finger! I shall have you blasted and bound beneath my bed where ye’ll be sleeping away the night. Together! Be that clear?”

Both men nodded. Ulfric felt as though his tongue had been strangled in twine. Bruised and battered as she was, the Dragonborn had stopped him in bare seconds. The light flickering from her palms cast an eerie pall upon her furious face.

Beautiful and powerful. Of all the women he could have chosen to wed he felt assured that Nemain could hold her own, should she join in the strange menagerie his life had become. Court intrigue and assassination attempts notwithstanding.

Let the Shadow Scales slither over and try their foul trade at the Palace of Kings now!

The spell snapped. His own weight slammed him down to his knees, and he heard the elf panting somewhere to his right as Nemain stepped off the bed. Her dainty bare feet shuffled into his line of sight, toes digging into the stone floor as he blinked against the woozy feel of blood recirculating in his veins.

“...like bodgy children.” Ulfric heard her mutter. A quick flick of fingers through his hair - had he imagined it? Then a stern harrumph.

“Listen up. I’ve had enough of you both! Ulfric, you shall accompany Ancano to the Frozen Hearth. Galmar should be right plonkered by now, so t’ll be easy to find him. Your word of honor: no fighting. You both shall be on your best goddamned behavior whilst walking together to the tavern. Else I shall snip both yer balls and pickle them up for skilly n’ duff. Be that clear?”

Ulfric looked up. A small cloud of elation filled him as Nemain blushed to the roots of her hair and looked away. “Yes.”

The Thalmor sniffed in disgust. “Abundantly clear.”

The Breton witch must have healed further portions of her face in situ, for the swelling had gone down. Greenish shadows lay where bruises had been. Yet as steely as her eyes had become, Ulfric could not help but notice the wet softness of her lips where she had licked them, giving that little speech.

Would she taste like a sweet roll?

He took a testing step forward.

“Balls!” She barked, making him nearly jump. “I will - I swear, unman you sae thoroughly ye’ll squeak like a skeever the rest of yore life! Now both of you scat! Hssst!”

The door practically smacked their asses on the way out. Walking guardedly next to the silent and tight lipped elf, Ulfric counted their steps. Forcing himself to breathe slowly, evenly. In and out. Holding his sword arm tight to his side.
Seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen. Surely she is overreacting. *This ponce of a Mer cannot possibly be both her friend and assailant. What is she thinking?*

Picking their way across the crumbling bridge, he noticed that the elf stepped forward willingly. Placing himself in front to traverse the narrow scaffold, at risk of assault from the warrior stalking behind. Begrudgingly, Ulfric accorded him a silent hail for his bravery. He would not have been so trusting.

Forty five, forty six, damn that’s a long way down. *This motherfucker nearly killed her. Breathe. The tavern is not far off. Fifty two? Fifty three? Double damn. Lost count.*

All too soon their careful trudging brought both man and mer to the swinging sign of the Frozen Hearth. Chewing on his lip, Ulfric watched as a guest bulled his way out of the tavern. Bringing with him the smell of stale mead, smoke and the sound of raucous laughter.

The elf Ancano caught the door’s edge right before it could slam shut once more. His thin lips were screwed up in a disapproving snarl, as he seemed to search Ulfric’s form. It was clear he found him wanting.

“I have not the vaguest idea why the Dragonborn finds you appealing. Your political leanings are a death knell to any who choose to be near you, and now that I have been introduced face to face...well.” Long fingers swept out in an all-encompassing wave. Dismissing Ulfric even as he stood there patiently, waiting for the elf to finish his longwinded rant. He knew that Mer held courtesy in high regard. A shame this one had kept none for himself.

“I am disinclined to believe the rumors that you are handsome for your race. Am I missing something about the way the fairer sex of mankind judge health and virility, perhaps? Your skin does have all the effluvia of a slaughterfish gone rancid.”

Ancano bowed, ever so slightly as Ulfric tightened his fists into knots. “Surely your boon companion remains interred. Let us fetch him, so you may rest. And be on your way.”

All politeness, the Altmer held open the door for him. “After you.”

His pointy-toed boot slid past the heavy-worn line where the door habitually rested. *There. He was officially inside the tavern.*

Ulfric felt an evil smile bloom upon his face. “Oh, no. After you, you woman-beating bastard.”

It was terribly fulfilling to see those yellow eyes bulge when he kicked the Mer straight in the gut. Sending him soaring straight into a table of orc warriors who shoved at the unfortunate elf; bellowing in animal rage as Ancano stumbled and stood erect. He was now painted liberally in gravy and mead, dripping with every flap of his finely embroidered robes.

A flashing hatred sharpened the already blade-like face as he made his way back to where Ulfric stood. Waiting.
What had been her words? ‘You both shall be on your best goddamned behavior whilst walking together to the tavern.’

Well, they were officially inside it now. All bets were off.

“Ulfric!” A red faced Galmar emerged from the hooting, hollering crowd, bearing two mugfuls of what was probably mead. Or skeever piss, judging by the clientele. He wouldn’t be drinking it anyway. “There you are, man of the hour! You—”

His friend almost dropped both mugs when another robed Altmer flitted out from the morass of tavern goers, jostling Galmar who near toppled over. Likely from a combination of drink and the shoving mob, Ulfric thought dispassionately. Depending on how drunk Galmar was, he’d be either a liability or a lifesaver in this instance. Too soon to tell, for the Stone-Fist was deceptively good at holding his drink.

The stranger neared his opponent, raising long yellow fingers that reached back just in time to avoid being slathered in greasy foodstuffs as Ancano shook his arms and swore. This elf was both taller and older than Ancano; grass-green eyes observing the general distress with a look of resignation.

“You tried the Surilie 125 and it did not work?”

“I didn’t even get that far,” growled the Mer assailant. “This primitive barred my way.”

“Galmar.” Ulfric gave a supercilious bow, adding an extra flourish when he saw just how tightly both Mer compressed their lips at the sight. The Nords might honor tradition, but the Altmer were truly hidebound by it. What? Is that the wrong angle to bow at? Did I not angle my head appropriately? “Meet the perpetrator of our fair Nemain’s brutal beating. I suggest we teach him exactly what happens when elves lay hands upon innocent womenfolk in violence.”

Mead sloshed in a great golden wave as Galmar howled. “I’m gonna rip your head off and shit down your throat, you milk-drinking sonofabitch!”

“A woman-beater?” One of the orcs that had lost their meal sauntered forward, thick lips writhing in displeasure around heavy tusks.

“And a mage.” His taller orcish companion grunted. Popping his fists, the huge orc graced them all with a hideous smile. His teeth had been filed down to dagger points and painted black.

“Malacath have mercy on you, elf, ’coz I certainly won’t.”

“Marauder! Woman molester!”

“An’ a bad tipper to boot!” Someone else yelled.

“Get him!”

Managing to spring forward and land the first punch, Ulfric grinned to feel the cartilage of Ancano’s nose snap satisfyingly against his fist. Following up with an elbow sweep and another punch, Ulfric
curled his lip to see the elf weave like a drunkard. Completely dazed by a couple of taps? An
unworthy opponent.

“I cannot stand by and let you hurt my friend here.” The other elf spoke calmly, just loud enough to
be heard above the rabble.

“Whyever not?” Ulfric shouted, feeling absolutely unhinged. This, this is what he had been waiting
for. A full out, no holds barred brawl! “He hasn’t won any friends in this tavern besides yourself, it
seems!”

The elf made an elegant leg, then slid it into a fighting stance that reminded him vaguely of
something southeastern. A Khajiit boxing pose, perhaps...for the hands were extended in a come
hither pose unlike any style Ulfric had seen outside of a skooma den. Lurching behind his protector,
Ancano gasp-choked something that made the other elf sneer in revulsion at the Jarl.

“Come and be taught a lesson then, boorish Nord. For it seems my friend is not the only one present
lacking in civility and manners.”

“Here! Test your White-Gold fists on me, invader!” Shrugging off his pelt and shirt, Galmar flexed
his arms. The movement rippled across a scarred and hairy chest. Heavy with muscle over a solid
paunch, it was a testament to the decades the man had spent drinking and fighting. Ulfric almost
wished he was a spectator, just to see Galmar take their elven pride down a peg.

“I’ll take anything you sissy leaf-lovers can dish out! Blood an’ vinegar an’ deaaath!”

Somewhere to his left, an orc picked up an entire bench, squealing patrons sliding off of it and
scrambling away as it was tossed pell mell into the fray. “Shut yore prissy gobs and start fighting
already!”

“Eastmaaarch!” Someone sucker punched him in the lower back. Grabbing them in a headlock,
Ulfric laughed like a maniac as he knocked what turned out to be a bearded Nord unconscious. Then
straightening, he dodged one swooping kick from the green-eyed elf, avoided another thrown object
(a half-full barrel of mead this time) and put his fists up.

A circle had opened up around them, the tavern patrons struggling between their desire to brawl and
their urge to bet. Gauging the other’s responses, Ulfric and the elf walked in a careful round;
disregarding the shouts and occasional screams as their attentions narrowed into a hairline focus. Just
them, hands squeezing and loosening into ready fists, then-

Ulfric had the barest chance to see the elf mouth the word fuck, followed by a string of unintelligible
e lvish as Galmar seized Ancano and bodily rolled over them both.

“Hahah hah! Take that, you pointy-eared bastards! I’ll show you no man shall be your slave, now or
ever again! Taaalos!”

Someone doused the firepit, smoke rising in a choking cloud of black. The goat-horn chandelier spun
wildly as yet another bench was catapulted into the air. A woman screamed, high and frantic.

What had previously been an isolated feud spread into a tavern-wide war that Ulfric launched
himself into, body and soul.
The following morning dawned bright and cold, short on everything but ice. Reflecting Nemain’s current black mood to perfection.

“You blithering, twatwaffle-brained eedjits! Jobby manging bampots! Can I not leave you two alone for an eve without some bodging calamity taking place?

Beneath her hands, flesh pinked up from a dark violet bruise. Sickly green and red swellings eased back into smooth somnolence, as Bear slowly opened his very bonny, fool blue eyes. “Shut them. I am nae finished, ye rank dobbing knapdarloch.”

His voice was hoarse but relaxed. “Run out of insults yet?”

“Hardly.”

*There. Almost done.* “Nelacar. You be up.”

The older Mer moved gracefully, only the smallest limp betraying the exciting night the males before her had indulged in.

Laying hands that lit up with the gold of a restoration spell on the Mer’s wide shoulders, Nemain sighed. “I really thought better of you, Nelacar. Though I be sure you are the only reason Ancano still draws breath. Hold still - ugh, such a nasty gash on your forehead. What-”

Galmar interrupted from where he was sprawled face down upon the splintered remains of a bench. *As was his wont*. “Say Nel, what was that last night? Your kicks and punches - damn lethal, they were.”

Nelacar gently lifted his good eyebrow, causing the fine wrinkles to smooth out. Giving the elderly Mer a veneer of youth, further helped along by the mischievous glint in his green eyes. “Whispering Fang boxing, from the monastery of Jodish teachings in Elsweyr.”

A whistle sounded from the Stone-Fist’s prone proximity. “Shit. Well you certainly held your own. I haven’t had a fight like that in an age!”

As Nemain continued to heal the assorted scrapes, bumps and bruises - considerably fewer than Galmar or Ulfric, to be sure (Ancano had been a groaning, walking wound) she glanced about the thrashed wreck of the tavern.

A smattering of local Nords were wandering through the broken beams of the firepit, pulling out bits of table and bench that had ended up half burned and splintered. The inkeep Dagur kept his beady eye upon the proceedings, scolding when the men’s movement devolved into idleness.

Further in the corner, two orc males played knucklebones. She had bought them tankards of ale upon learning that they had shouldered the brunt of the damage meant for Ulfric and Galmar last night.
Their handiwork now decorated the disaster that was the Frozen Hearth. *Should ask them to come along to Mzulft and Blackreach as meat-shields. Wonder if they accept payment in pearls.*

Turning back to her task, Nemain could feel Nelacar’s wound nearly close beneath her hands; like a flower blooming in reverse. The open, seeping scar was shutting at the seams...requiring all her concentration. For Nel was the last of the group to be healed.

She should have let them all stew with their headaches, bumps and bruises. *Would serve the blighters right, indulging in such a fight. Now I must needs mop up what manly pride has been spilt against the floors and walls.*

Speaking of flowers, the giver of her last bouquet was slumped almost sideways in a chair, smoking something that smelled more like nightshade leaves than moon sugar. Stealing a glance, Nemain watched as Ulfric sucked in a lungful of smoke..then held it. His pupils dilated noticeably. Catching her staring, Ulfric winked.

_No! Bad bad bad. You be leaving in a mere few minutes. Dinnae give that fear thuaidh any further reasons to swell his head!*

Nelacar made a noise beneath her hands. Patting the Mer’s cheek fondly, Nemain stood and brushed off her travel robes. “There. Right as rain.”

Unfolding to his full height, Nelacar dipped down to kiss her wrist. Wherein she scrubbed it against her thigh and scowled. “And it is all thanks to you, my dear. My lord, you are of course aware that smoking the dried fronds of skooma production rarely yields the full benefit of the drug?”

Busying herself with packing up her various potions and creams, Nemain heard Ulfric finally release the smoke in a barely audible exhale. “I am aware. In fact I prefer it to being addicted, for smoking it provides a small source of pain relief as well as comfort. Though I have also been informed that the skooma distributed to Skyrim is not the full potency expected or sold in Morrowind.”

“No, it is not. And praise Phynaster for that.”

As she hurried over to where Ancano was fussily sorting their things, Nemain cursorily examined what had been her first patient of the day. Her safety - and sanity - in the next few months depended upon it.

When she had stomped into the tavern first thing at sunrise, Ancano had been laid like a broken doll upon a spare scrap of what had once been a very nice enchanted set of robes. His elongated face had been a veritable patchwork of contusions, and it had taken all the blisterwort and elves ear salve in her inventory (along with a fair amount of restoration) to bring back the lugubrious Mer’s looks. Fully set for travel, the Mer had swaddled himself in so many scarves, wraps and layers that he must have doubled in bulk.

_Cannae wait to see you waddle about like that, Cano,_ Nemain thought in amusement. There were no horses available in Winterhold, so the two of them would be walking a fair distance until they came across a stable willing to sell.

_I give him two days afore he rips half that numpty business off. Or drowns himself._ Reaching out, Nemain grabbed one of the two staffs leaning up against the wall. “Ready?”
Her elven companion sighed and took the remaining staff. On her, the weapon towered above her head a good handspan. Next to Ancano’s height it had all the substance of a tree branch. “As I shall ever be. What passes for springtime in this wasteland would hardly qualify its title in the isles.”

“Tis what it is, you complainin’ ponce. Get used to it.” Snaking her knapsack straps around her shoulders, Nemain clicked her tongue. “I forgive you, you know. I did so the moment I saw your face o’er my bed, holding a healing potion. I know you didnae mean t’draw so deep from the Eye.”

Bundled in a peddlar’s pack of wool and furs, Ancano’s amber eyes flashed. “You play a deep game, Dragonborn.”

“Takes one to know one, An-Can. Best that we get some toehold over the blighty Ball of Magnus though. Let’s be off.”

“Indeed. The glorious muckery of Skyrim’s rutted roads await.”

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

Stepping over the wreckage of the tavern (she could hear Dagur muttering still, a constant stream of oaths and bemoanings) Nemain and Ancano picked their way towards the door where the two orcs, Nelacar and the Nords stood waiting to send them off.

She turned to the orsimer warriors first. Cor, they were beasts of mer; it was a miracle they did not scrape the ceiling. Was the air thinner up there? “Malacath bears witness to your bravery, orc-kin.”

The taller of the two smiled, his sharpened teeth gleaming in the dim light. “Blood runs cold when it stays still too long. I prefer it boiling. Ghorbash gro-Dushnikh at your service.”

Reaching up, Nemain could barely clasp the orc’s shoulder as a heavy paw descended upon her own in the traditional longhouse greeting. It had been some time, but she knew the protocol. “Nemain, friend of Moth gro-Bagol.”

"It be a long shot, but I must ask...have ye heard ought of him? Since you come from the west?”

The two orcs exchanged glances, then the smaller of the two spoke. This one had rather lovely eyes, she thought. If one looked past the black warrior’s tail and the mossy skin, the male had eyes that minded her of a glass of brandy. Clear and warm. “I am Ogol of Largashbur. Moth and his birth sister Ghorza’s souls reside in the Ashpit now, she-Breton.”

No. A queer numbness tightened her throat. Curling her toes within the leather boots that Moth had crafted for her; the boots that had endured rockfall and captivity and countless leagues of walking, Nemain sucked in a quavering breath. “I...I thank ye for the news. I didnae know.”

Leather squeaked as Ghorbash stepped back a pace. “...Thistle? Moth’s Thistle?”

The brandy eyed orc Ogol sniffed, then snorted. “Yes. It is she. Smells of blood and juniper. Seen her with him at Dushnikh Yal during the holy days.”
If Nemain’s eyes had not teared up at that precise moment, she would have seen the varying expressions of the other inhabitants of the room at such news.

“Thistle?” Galmar’s snigger was quickly cut off, doubtless by whatever Ulfric had done when he sauntered past to take her hand in his. “Are you all right?”

Slow and steady, the tears horrified her even as she scrubbed them away with her free hand. “M’fine. Wasnae expecting them to...to fall. They were mighty fighters.”

“They faced the end together.” Ghorbash gro-Dushnikh rumbled. “Moth defended his liege-lord Igmund to the end. Brother Verulus was there - says he saw it all. My chief bade me deliver this news to the other strongholds. Weep not for him or Ghorza, Thistle. They have earned their reward.”

“And yet the sorrow does not end upon hearing such words.” A silken handkerchief waved itself beneath her nose. Accepting it gratefully, Nemain wiped her face and smiled her thanks at Nelacar.

“Cor. You lot are quite sweet. For a bunch of brawling jeggie galoots.”

Still holding her hand, Ulfric’s fingers tightened like a vice. “Honor demanded it. You could have died, Nemain.”

Pulling herself free, she stepped back shakily. Thankful that her vision had at last cleared from the filmy blur tears had cast. Enough salt in the sea without adding to it. “Honor be damned. You punched Ancano’s lights out for fun, Bear.”

His mouth slanted in wry acknowledgement. “That too. I trust the elf shall now be further inspired to keep you alive and well. And that is worth any amount of knocks to the head.”

“And yet such good intentions matter very little when said maiden has settled things to her satisfaction already.” Nelacar retorted, shooting Ulfric a dark glower.

*Gods bless his violent, ancient heart.* “’Alright, Nel. I know you lot have my best interests in mind.” Mostly. “We really ought to be moving on. Daylight is burning.”

The orcs were the first to leave, tipping their green heads in curt farewell. Galmar followed, drawing on his shirt with a drowsy yawn. Nemain shivered a bit, watching him go out of doors so unclothed. *Oh, to have a fear thuaidh’s resistance to the cold.* Stepping outside herself, Nemain closed her eyes against the abrupt brightness of sun against snow. Did it ever melt, this far up north?

Pulling his fur trimmed hood up around his ears, Ulfric stopped in front of her. Ancano and Nelacar moved off aways, trying to give them the illusion of privacy. She could see them speaking in hushed Eldar tongue, the lilt of elven like a quiet song. Waiting for her to bid the Jarl of Eastmarch goodbye.

“So.” Ice crunched beneath his boots as Bear stepped down the stairs of the tavern. Placing her at exactly the same height as he. “I will see you in Windhelm soon?”

Nemain laughed, then coughed. Smoke still clung to his clothes, the smell not wholly unpleasant.
Rather like Bothela’s drying rack at the Hag’s cure. A smell both pungent and acrid. Bittersweet.

It would be, she reminded herself, incredibly uncouth to liplock the leader of the Stormcloaks in full view of everyone in Winterhold. Bad enough that the secret of her being Dragonborn had now made the rounds. She could no longer walk in the College or in the city proper without whispers following her, hushing as she turned to see who gossiped about her so. It was the end of a season of reading, wine and obscurity.

The errant thought of it made her grief all the more potent. She would mourn Moth later. Mourn him proper. “I wouldnae plan on seeing hide nor hair of me until high summer, Bear. T’will take at least two weeks to reach Mzulft. And that only if we manage to secure steeds.”

Tucking a tendril of hair back into her hood, Nemain blew out a misty gust of breath. It hung in the air, a cloud of her own making.

It gave her an idea. “Ulfric. I wanted to give you something as well, though I’d urge you not to overindulge.”

“Oh?” The man looked intrigued. “And what is that?”

Concentrating, Nemain summoned her fading memories of the correct runes and drew them by fingerpoint in the air. The three words glowed faintly, fire gold so bright against the whiteness surrounding them. “Yol Toor Shul, Bear. I would nae leave you cold, ever again.”

She had a moment to see his mouth part, before she clasped his face in her hands and pushed. His newgrown beard prickled the pads of her fingers, until the light moved and she felt nothing but fire, the burning.

_Yol._

The knowledge of the Shout drained from her, through her hands and into him, rushing winds and a murmur of Dovahzul that hummed and sighed between.

_Gods._ Sharing power like this was downright taxing. And Arngeir had made it look sae simple. Her knees wobbled; Ulfric catching her as her legs bent like limp noodles.

Too much. She had given too much, in too short a span of time. Unwise.

Unconsciously, her fingers tightened around the soft wool of his cloak as Bear gave her a tight hug. No words were needed. She could feel him quaking around her, a tremor so fine that only she -snuggled up so tight against him - could tell.

Mashed up against his front, Nemain managed to speak through the lump wedged in her throat. This close, the smell was overwhelming. _Snowberries and incense and man._

“Stay alive, Bear.”

What wind remained in her lungs was squeezed out, as he embraced her. “You as well. I have every
confidence in your abilities, Nemain. Watch the skies.”

After he set her down on the steps, Nemain awkwardly patted out the wrinkles that had pressed into her robes. Not daring to look up, for surely her face was a picture. One could boil an egg on her forehead for all the flustering womanish heat coming off of her. And how old are we, exactly? You be acting like a wiffly virgin, all weepy eyed an’ wilting!

“Right then.” Tossing her head back, she bit at the inside of her cheek. Tasting blood. “Doon get yer knickers in a twist, Ulfric. Mind that you dinnae use the Shout too strongly. It casts a fair pillar of fire if you be careless.”

“I shall keep that in mind.” That look he was giving her...

To her left, Galmar coughed. Of course. They were never alone.

“Fascinating.” Nelacar whispered, gifting her a wide smile when she pursed her lips at him. Adjusting her staff and pack, Nemain spied Ancano who had already taken off down Winterhold’s single thoroughfare. “Oy! Wait for me you plonker!”

Throwing back one last wild wave, Nemain saw Nel and Galmar return it. Ulfric had already turned away.

Ignoring her disappointment at his inattention, the witch uncapped one of her stamina potions and guzzled it as she hustled to reach the Thalmor. He had gained a decent headstart, helped along by those spindly longshanks. Reining in her jealousy at the sight, Nemain stuck to the holes his boots had already made in the snow. Better to take advantage of what existed than wear herself out postholing in the deep drifts.

Hopping from indent to indent would save her thighs from burning with exhaustion...and keep her from being left behind. As it seemed Ancano was trying his utter best to do.

The sun had fully risen, though she could see nothing but grey sky merging with a slightly bluer sea. Still cold, for all that it was full spring. And all around them was white, white white. She squinted against the glare and grinned. That sound. Was Ancano panting already?

Cannae hold his own in a fistfight. Cannae walk for long stretches. Cannae sing...oh, I have sae much to tease the snoot about already!

“Ey, Annycan. Got a new limerick for ya.”

Hustling along, she heard a muffled groan of relief as they reached the hardpacked road. Wind had blown away the snow from the road, revealing only a slight dusting upon the cobbled stones. “Save your breath for walking, Breton.”

Piss on that. “You don’t know what you be missing. Ahem. An Altmer I once knew did say ‘I cannae be kilt by man!’ Sae I tossed him through the air with me magicka, to see where he might land!”

Ancano stopped stock still, causing Nemain to boff right into him. Weaving unsteadily in the holes
his feet had made, she was blindsided as the Mer turned and pushed her. Hard.

Windmilling her arms, Nemain fell off the road into a snowdrift, the snow swallowing up her screech with its blanketing weight. White! Nothing but cold, wet white.

Pfthwt! Spitting out a mouthful of the stuff, she breathed a thin stream of fire. Softened, the snow sloughed away, wet dripping into her woolens as she stood once more. Huffing like an elk in rut, she faced off with Ancano who stood nonchalant and smug. Obviously enjoying her discomfort.

“Oh look.” His voice was syrupy sweet. “Why, no magic required to reduce the Dragonborn into a sniveling pile of furs. Where is your knuckle-dragging lover to save you now, puling mongrel?”

Smiling nastily in return, she pretended to walk a wayward gait back to the road. As if such a toss could damp me doon. Upon reaching Ancano, she noticed him tighten his shoulders. He was anticipating something, then.

She would not balk. She would not be dictated to. And this bullying brute would know it, or this trip would be a damn short one.

“Fus Roh Dah!”

It had been just a wee Shout. Tiny, intentionally leveled...hardly enough to knock the elf over. Yet flat on his bony ass he lay, blowing as though she had gut-stomped the weedy bastard.

Good.

Straddling Ancano’s waist with an open stance, Nemain folded her arms and fixed him with a superior smirk. “I dinnae need Ulfric to fuck you up, Thalmor. But I do need you to get over y’self. And help me get that bloody staff before Faralda and the rest go mopsy on the whole of Winterhold. Savvy?”

Ancano wrinkled his nose. Yet when she offered him her hand, he took it without reservation. Standing with a belabored sigh, a hank of his white hair escaped his hood. Fluttering like spidersilk against the ochre yellow of his skin. If the elf was injured, he showed no sign of it. “Does the ridiculousness of your speech ever cease, manner?”

“Only when you impel me to greater heights of foolery, Altmer.” Lifting her staff, she prodded his nonexistent arse. It barely made a dimple in the fat stack of his robes. “Onward, then. To the nearest stables. I find meself greatly desiring a snuffly steed for this journey, if I’m to be stuck with you for such a span of time.”

“The feeling is quite mutual.”

"Bosh. I'm the picture of a perfect travellin' companion. Just ask Bear."

"I think not. Having my nose broken, and then rebroken again is rather unpleasant. I shall take your word for it."

A muffled snigger greeted his complaint. Glaring suspiciously back at her, Ancano sniffed. Then
turned his face back into the wind.

Nemain held in a sigh of her own. *For sure, 'tis going to be an eternal spring. Carting along a moaning, whining elf in dragon territory...ignorant of all Skyrim's pitfalls and prowlers...his smooth, elfy skin likely allergic to everything...*

Facing forward, the elf missed a truly wicked grin that slowly sprouted over the Dragonborn's face.

*Ooh! I can hardly wait!*  

Chapter End Notes

The onion soup thing is a real remedy used historically by northern Europeans. If a healer smelled onion, it could be assumed that the gut wound was fatal. No antibiotics meant no way to be sure that infection would not set in.

There's your useless trivia for the day, hah.
The Bee and Barb

Chapter Notes

Ancano's theme song. 'Aldmeri', by Matthew Shine.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukSo-fZYLHk&list=RD7Pe2zVegBT4&index=35

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

He itched.

Itched, chafed, tickled. Trudging along next to a similarly disheveled Dragonborn, Ancano plucked at the dried sludge coating his robes and grumbled wordlessly. Second Seed had brought a surge of welcome, albeit sticky heat along with a bloom of color and life. Heat, grit and wet that had stirred new activity from animals and bandits alike. Bandits, frostbite spiders, wolves, the Falmer and their acid-spitting Chaurus...gods. He could practically taste the foulness wafting off of himself and her. And small wonder; their robes were practically soaked in gore, no matter how they had scrubbed and scoured at every ide and bend in stream. Their pitiful supply of soap had run out long ago.

And nought to show for the long road to and through Mzulft save for a new directive. A pinpoint of light upon a stonewalled map, with the Synod and Dragonborn ‘in ructions’ (as the Forsworn termed aggressive vocal negotiations) over the exact parameters and usage of this Staff of Magnus. Apparently it was located in someplace known as ‘The Labyrinthian’.

He had read of this place during the stifling prison sentence that was his advisorship at the College. Bromjunaar, ancient Atmoran capitol of dragon-priests. The final testing grounds of Arch-Mage Shalidor’s pupils. Ancano cracked a yawn, squinting as the light of the setting sun lanced his tired eyes. From the texts he had already studied it sounded about as welcoming as his young companion had looked, booting Paratus Decimius out of the dwarven oculary so that they could study the glowing map further. He had seen glaciers present a more welcoming countenance.

Ancano recalled feeling rather smug about it all. Obscure as the Psijic Order had been in haranguing them on their way out of Mzulft, an elven order of mages was much to be preferred over the grasping desperation of the Imperial Synod. Even Nemain, careworn and frayed, had looked slightly reassured at the appearance of the Psijic monk Nerien. Though the message had been rather lackluster. Return to Winterhold with all haste, for trying times are ahead? What did the Psijics think they had been
doing all this time? Laying about in a skooma daze?!

Phynaster's beard. What a time of it they had endured.

As silt and pebbles rattled around in his hole-studded boots, Ancano sighed at the very thought of an inn. A hot bath, a full spread of skillfully prepared vittles and a bed...a real bed! Awaiting them not far in the sprawling settlement that was Riften. Rising just ahead, the city walls were almost hidden in the dense foliage of bright green-sprung aspen leaves and the more muted birch and pine. He could practically smell the woodsmoke. Could taste the Blackbriar mead, sweet and golden in a mug kept chilled just for him. Oh, how his kin would laugh if they knew...if they only could see the depths to which Ancano; second in line to the lordship of Firstthold of Auridon, had sunk!

There had been no horses. No steeds available anywhere in the vast stretch of primordial wilderness they had traversed for the last two and a half weeks straight south of Winterhold. Nothing to save them from the mud, slippery and churned underfoot. Nothing to spare his feet from the blisters brought on by leagues traversed.

He rather thought it suspicious; vocally blaming the lack of mounts upon typical Skyrim xenophobia - until Nemain directed his attention to the hanks of meat currently smoking in Narzulbur’s drying racks. Their first real rest in what passed for habitation in this wilderness...only to sup upon tough, gamey meat that the Altmer nearly wore his jaw out chewing.

Meat that looked rather like the haunches and forelegs of an equine quadruped.

The Reachwitch had confirmed the horsey origins of their meal later when she had smilingly offered him a spoon upon which rested a boiled eyeball, rolling around in the gelatinous muck their orc hosts dared to term 'soup'.

“C’ Moff yer high dudgeon and eat summat o’ this dinner. Else the orcs shall think ye terribly impolite, for they’ve hardly got meat enough fer themselves much less us. Hence the dining upon horse, y’ken? Been a rough winter, an’ me status as orc-friend only holds so long as you dinnae balk at their customs. Eat!”

Ancano did not care if it was a delicacy or desirable practicality: he absolutely refused to try the soup. Nor did he accept a taste of the grinning horse-skull boiled in marrow, whose jellied flesh (spckled liberally in frost mirriam flakes and slices of potato, peasant fare) had been greeted with orcish grunts and sighs of appreciation.

Crunching the young shoots of salad greens, the Altmer had picked at hardened bread and drank his remaining wine sparingly. Watching in fascinated disgust as Nemain downed organ meats and tripe while singing right along to the bawdy drinking songs of the orc warriors, tune for tune. It nearly made him sick watching the little manmer stuff such things down her gullet; washing it all down with tankard after tankard of rotgut ale. Ale that, by the smell of it, had been brewed in a tanning vat. Or a privy.

Yet he had been raised - trained from birth to be unerringly polite. No matter what smells and slurps surrounded him, he would escort Nemain through the very thick of this churlish festivity. Ugh, the crunch that eyeball made, when the Dragonborn’s jaws chewed and champed! The squirt of vitreous humor...the small ecstatic moan she had made when presented with a plate of dark, wobbling blood curd, onions and liver!
His innards trembled at the very thought. *No.* Parsimonious though his meals had been, he was simply not hungry enough to be culturally adventurous. Tease him for his fussiness as she might, the Dragonborn truly had a stomach of stone.

*And the tastebuds of a golem.* He shuddered delicately, recalling the variably odious things the witch had harvested along their treacherous journey. Fried dragonflies, small eelfish roasted and eaten whole...even the wild onion bulbs that had caused the tiny woman’s breath to reek for a fortnight had not affected him as deeply as that orc cook pot had.

**Damnation.** No horses to be had, no decent victuals...just the road, him and Nemain Stonetalon of the Forsworn. Master of Illusion and Conjuration. Lover of Ulfric Stormcloak (he had failed to wheedle the entire story from her, though by now he was ninety two percent certain that they had been intimate at some point, judging from her angry flushes), foster mother, Seer.

Dragonborn...and against all odds, his friend.

*Not,* he mentally deferred, *that the she-Breton had endeared herself in action these last few weeks.* Quite the contrary, Nemain had done her utmost to make him absolutely miserable. Boon travel companion indeed.

The problem, Ancano thought while tonguing out a sliver of fish bone from his gums, was not merely his lack of physical endurance or ill prepared gear (it had taken all of an hour on their travels before Nemain had mocked him whilst ripping off his layers of warm woolens. Redressing the chilled elf to a more flexible state that allowed further freedom to walk, though he complained for the rest of the day that it was much less warm).

It was that in all his life, Ancano of First Hold of Auridon had never - *not once* - traveled without horses, carriage, ample provisions and a retinue of servants and lackeys to await his every whim. The Thalmor may have had strings attached to every favor, but they did not stint when it came to luxury. This venture had opened his eyes in more ways than one.

To be sure, he had slept in tents of variable size, all over the lands of Cyrodiil, Hammerfell and Skyrim. But the elven paravels set up by silent servants (well padded with cushions and stocked with wash water, books and wine) were a far cry from a muddy sleeproll often lain over rocks and (if he were less lucky) beds of rash inducing greenery or biting ants.

*Not to mention the other pesky crawlers,* Ancano grimaced as he surreptitiously itched his arse. The warmer Skyrim’s spring became, the more the flies, ants and bees came out in full force. Every dusk and dawn the tiny vampires clouded the air with their resonant humming. Swarming them to the point of madness, until Nemain began slathering them both in a mud ointment that absolutely *reeked* of lavender, hyssop and blisterwort.

He would not complain. Not vocally at least, until his face, hands and neck recovered from being swollen and stiff with blotfly bites. He could endure smelling like an herbalist’s hut, if a dank and smelly paste was all it took. It was not as though he had not suffered every other indignity at her hands these past few weeks.

Concerning pranks, she had started small. Tripping him with her staff in the snow, then feigning ignorance. Singing with mulish glee almost constantly - bombarding his delicately tuned ears with coarse and repetitive limericks until he was near ready to wring her neck, if only to make her cease.

Then, it had gotten worse. He had *made* it worse, not realizing until after seeing her features twist in
malicious fury that perhaps scoffing at the Dragonborn’s subpar looks, intelligence and - worst of all - poor choice of bedmate was not the wisest course of action.

And she had paid him back for his errors in spades. Herding him knowingly into a grove of beehives, Nemain had left him at a dead run (laughing like a mad thing) as Ancano blasted clouds of fiendishly stinging insects with whirling gouts of fire. His face and hands had been near unrecognizable (again) for all the swellings he’d earned that day. Only plackets of cool mud laced with elves’ ear had soothed his irritations.

Yet that was not the end of such tortures. Only the beginning.

If there was but one good facet of this journey, Ancano pondered as they pushed past the gates, it was that Nemain was as quick to laugh as she was to tease. The Forsworn was a delight to be around when in one of her more dreamy, fanciful moods. Yet her temper was a thing to be feared, and Ancano found himself tiptoeing around the woman for a span of days when she grew wrathful. Leaving scads of bloodstained bundles of moss behind their tracks in the woods and rifts as they wound on, snapping at even the most innocuous of questions.

A breeding woman at her time of month, armed with Nordic Thu’um and an impressive arsenal of spells. Gods preserve him for when her fair moods turned foul, for no one else in this forsaken hinterland would. The Thalmor had made silent prayers of thanks when the Dragonborn’s monthlies had ended at last, bringing back his more staid and good natured companion. He would welcome a fight with a dragon over another week of the woman on the rag.

Her next prank had brought the Thalmor agent down into a true depth of misery that he never would have guessed existed. After a particularly offensive argument pertaining to magical ability (as though a Breton’s latent abilities could ever measure up to a superiorly bred Mer as he) the Forsworn had laced his stew with unripe jazbay.

I should not have given the yn fytyn such free reign with our cooking. The bitch had kept a passively straight face when she innocently informed him that they were merely ‘for flavor’. That he could enjoy the rabbit stew all by himself, for she suffered from an allergy and was thus unable to partake. How he had not noticed her concealed glee as he wolfed down the cauldron was beyond him.

That incident had caused him to stop their progress near every hour to crouch by the wayside in gut-wrenching pain. By the second day of his embarrassing discomfiture he had used all their linen rolls that he had packed for wiping, yet the witch adamantly refused to wash what she termed his ‘shit-rags’ in the river. Claiming that he would run out soon, and wouldn’t it be better to do as the natives did, and wipe with moss or leaves or (Auri-El save him) his bare hands??

Barbaric simpletons, all. Ancano was truly beginning to loathe Skyrim.

And now at last, after untold days of mucking through the most dreary, weed and beast infested wilderness Ancano had ever endured in centuries of travel (but this was Eastmarch, so perhaps the land reflected the vicious mien of the Jarl who presided over it. His front teeth were still loose, damn that man) they had plunged into the depths of Mzulft.
Only to leave annoyed and footsore. Left with far more questions than answers.

“Never done an honest day’s work for all that coin you’re carrying, eh lass?”

“Sod off.” Nemain glowered at the smiling Nord who backed off, hands raised in tacit retreat.

“I can take a hint. Come and find me if you feel light in the pockets. I promise - you'll not be disappointed.”

Ancano watched the red-headed charlatan saunter away with a twinge of nostalgia. He had not thought of Tildanwe in so many decades. But that shining, fiery hue! How the candlelight reflected the warm burnished sheen, just so...

His musings were interrupted as the Argonian innkeep placed steaming bowls of beef stew before them, plunking down bottles of mead next to sawed off rounds of bread that smelled absolutely divine. Her gruff voice bore a trace of hiss in its boredom. “No free seconds. Privy is down the hall to the left. Start a fight, and Talen-Jei will toss you out.”

“Thank y’much.” Nemain muttered, busily transferring all the carrots and leeks from her portion to Ancano’s bowl. Drinking deeply of his mead, he managed to spoon out every clump of beef from his stew and place it into hers with the same rapidity.

Stew, stew, and yet more stew. Stew on the road, stew in every hovel, inn and shack. His tongue yearned for the delicacy of shellfish powdered in pepperoot and glace. Yet as Nemain switched his mead for a sweeter version, his stomach rumbled in glorious expectation. Even as he leaned over to pry her mead cork free for her without a thought.

Strange, how they knew one another’s tastes so well now. They had exhausted near every conversational outpost in the month and week of travelling alone together. Nearly, but not quite all. Nemain still managed to deflect any inquiry into her relationship with the Bear of Markarth. “Mm. I be thinking of going through Raldbthar instead of trekking north to Alftand for Blackreach.”

“Truly?” Scanning his near-encyclopedic knowledge of Skyrim’s territories, Ancano recalled that it lay somewhere west of Darkwater Crossing. A smaller Dwemer ruin. North of another that lay untapped by any known traveller as of yet. He wondered if she would turn up anything of note in the rotting depths, for they had recovered a lady’s ransom in jewels down in Mzulft. “No rest for the weary?”

“Aye. Nothing for it. Remember when I showed you Kynesgrove? And that crater what used to be an Imperial camp? I cannae put it off any longer. The dragons - this errand? Craw. It be far too important to delay any further.”

Ancano recalled with perfect clarity the charred bodies, twisted and bent like sticks emerging from
the melting snows. If not for the Imperial dragon emblem embossed upon the wreckage of armor strewn about (and the occasional shining dragon scale) he would never have guessed it to be anything other than the site of a massacre. Or a heavily delved graveyard.

“I understand. I shall return to the College on my own, then. Savos Aren will doubtless be gratified to know where the Staff of Magnus resides.”

Nemain grumbled, throat working as she swallowed a pull of mead. Dark circles stood out against her wan skin, a peevéd expression pulling her sharp features into taut displeasure. “Hmph. Cannae say that fer certain - the Synod seem to be poking their pricks into business they doon understand. And if those buggers be making me testy, then Savos is sure to be more wroth than not. The quicker we find some way to get rid o’ that blighted orb, the better.”

Scraping her spoon against the wall of her bowl, Nemain licked at it. Still giving the Mer a beady eye, even as he struggled not to plunge his face into his emptied stew and do likewise. *Gods, it had been far too long since my last decent meal.* “But what do I know? I be just a stupid woman, after all. Of skeeverish intellect and...what was it? Inferior judgement?”

“I did apologize for that statement, Nemain. Several times, in fact.”

She sniffed, a strange look spreading over her as she leaned back to look behind Ancano.

Turning to see what was so damn enthralling, he spied a massive white haired Nord in full heavy mail leading a young girl into the Bee and Barb.

*Or was it the other way round?* He began to see why Nemain had tensed to full alertness. Heedless of their difference in size, the she-child tugged at the great paw of the man’s hand, scolding him even as he stomped and snorted in distemper.

“...my way, we could be sure of an easy entrance and exit. Oh hello, Nemain! What a pleasure to see you here of all places!”

The Dragonborn inclined her head the slightest bit, grey eyes watchful. “Babette.”

Though Ancano could hardly take his eyes off of the wild Nord who practically bristled with sharp metal bits (even his tangling snowy beard bore rune cuffs and chains amidst the braids) his companion’s attention was all for the youngling alone.

“So. What brings you and your…” Nemain gave the warrior a slow head-to-toe stare, somehow prompting a sharp chuckle from the man. “...father tae come visit fair Riften?”

The girl tossed her lank mousy hair with regal nonchalance. “How crude of me. Nemain, this is Arnbjorn. We’re all part of one big happy family, and we’ve decided to expand our numbers. We’ve come to Riften to look into adoptions. Right, Papa?”

Even over the chattering noisy din, Ancano could easily hear the leather strips of the Nord’s armor squeal as his biceps flexed. His voice was a dark growl. “Headed to Honorhall. Hear the headmistress is a kindly sort. Good with children.”

Suddenly he smiled. The effect was jarring. “Got a gift for such a woman. Has to be delivered all personal like.”
“Indeed.” Babette pursed her lips, giving Nemain a sly glance as the Dragonborn remained completely immobile in response. “Such a gift has been deserved for quite a long while. Wouldn’t you agree, Nemain? Do give Aventus my regards when you next see him.”

There was an undercurrent here that seemed to be escaping his understanding at the moment. Daring to dart his gaze between Nemain and the grinning yet guarded duo, Ancano settled back on his stool and frowned.

The Reachwitch softly coughed. It might have been in scorn or admiration. It troubled Ancano that he did not know which emotion it was; he now prided himself on being able to recognize all the Dragonborn’s tells. “I wish you Hircine’s own luck in your venture, then. I’ll be the first t’assure ye: no one be more worthy of your...unique gifts.”

The little girl grinned brightly, a glint of merriment enlivening the flat, almost potato-like face. “Oh, you are such fun. Please do consider dropping by if you are ever in Falkreath. I can see you fitting in so well...with Astrid especially. Ooh, the family would just love to work with you.”

The one named Arnbjorn flared his nostrils, cold blue eyes sizing up Nemain in a way that had Ancano mentally preparing a fistful of chain lightning. “The...hmph. My daughter is always right. Come by sometime, if you’re tougher than you look.”

Taking one clanking step forward, and then another, Arnbjorn leaned over until tendrils of white hair brushed Nemain’s shoulders. She did not move, merely fixing him with what Ancano recognized as her bitchiest glare as they engaged in a blink-free staredown.

“You might hear her, in your dreams.” That hoarse growl now had a smoky undertone that might have been classed as seductive, had it come from any other mouth.

Arnbjorn’s lips compressed into a tight, knowing smile as Nemain’s eyes slowly widened. Not in fear, Ancano mulled. Noting how her pupils remained undilated, yet her breath quickened, ever so steadily. Chest heaving, fingers digging into her robes. Mouth parted.

*Trinimac save her.* Arousal?

“Our sweet Mother. She’ll call you. Listen, and follow. Listen and come, priestess of the wild ways. Servant of the Threefold Goddess. Never know...you could be the one.”

The spell was suddenly broken, as Babette reached up and smacked what she could reach of the Nord’s chest. Hard. “Arnbjorn! Heel!”

The man barked a laugh, and the bubble of silence that had somehow enveloped the four of them cracked. Yelling, singing and noisy chatter spilled into Ancano’s senses once more.

The only sign he could see that Nemain had been similarly affected was a slight jerk of her elbow. Without missing a beat, Nemain smiled widely. All graciousness and crooked teeth - her tongue a pointed dagger behind the cage of that awful smile.

“Perhaps. I do be in great demand, after all. Mayhap I will take a trip south sometime soon.”

A pale eyebrow lifted as the Nord’s small charge tittered girlishly. “See that you do. Think there’s a slew of benefits you might miss out on otherwise, niblet.”

If anything, Nemain’s smile grew more dangerous. “Niblet? Och aye, suppose I resemble that
comment...to you an’ you both.”

She then winked playfully. “...you sly dog.”

Both laughed then, their rasping tones layered with Babette’s tinkling chime of a voice. Ancano continued to stare, feeling inexpressibly dumb as the trio ignored him in their farewells.

“Fare thee well, sorceress! If I see another scaly house-sized problem, I shall be sure to think of you!”

“Dinnae have too much fun, giving this long awaited gift. The others at Honorhall might not be quite sae understanding.”

“Oh don't trouble your head about it, chicken wing. It's to be a surprise.”

“Well then, be on your bloody way already. And good luck.”

Nemain sucked upon the inside of her cheek as she watched the two leave after picking up some sweetrolls from Keerava. Looking unusually thoughtful. And spooked.

The faintest breath from her twitched Ancano’s sensitive long ears. He almost did not catch it amidst the ruckus and would not have; were his attention not solely fixed upon the Dragonborn.

“...Hail Maiden, Mother and Crone. Hail them with great praise.”

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Not wanting to seem overly curious, the Thalmor watched Nemain brood out of his peripheral sight as they both silently finished their mead.

*Just as well she was in no mood to talk*. The report to his Thalmor supervisor remained yet unfinished, and Ancano found himself somehow reluctant to pen all of what had come to pass, this last month.

None of which made him out to look good.

Standing with a crack of his spine and a suppressed groan, Ancano tilted his head to where the Argonian inkeep now awaited with her burden of fresh laundered towels. “Ah, look. Come now, *gysail*. Bathtime.”

“Och, yes!” The tiny witch practically leaped up from her stool. “I’ve been looking forward to this since Narzulbur.”

Their shared room, while not the grandest by any stretch, still bore signs of tidy upkeep. Clean linens had been laid upon the straw ticked beds, along with an assortment of fur pelts and blankets. Best of all, two tubs of dwemer worked metal had been filled, tendrils of steam coming off the water in a
clouded haze.

Shucking off her robes with deft eagerness, Nemain hurtled towards the baths like a sweat soaked arrow as Ancano followed suit. It had been a pleasant surprise, finding that the Forsworn treated nudity rather as the elves did - with blasé disregard. After the bee stings and berries, weeks of treating one another’s wounds and sleeping practically entwined for warmth, the sight of the Dragonborn cavorting in stubby, mud-smeared undress barely triggered a second glance.

Avoiding the splash as Nemain hopskipped into her tub, Ancano bent his lanky frame more slowly into his own. Warmth surrounded him, replacing stiffness with floating laxity as he felt the tension slowly seep away. “Ahh. Bliss.”

“Shee warm!” Water spilled over as the Dragonborn dunked her head repeatedly beneath the surface, spluttering as her unruly mane poured into her mouth instead of air. “Pfhtb. Och, one o’ these days I’ve a mind to hack all this off!”

“You shall regret it.” Ancano wiggled further down into his tub, until only his yellow knees were showing. “Long, lustrous hair is a beautiful thing on a woman. I’d wager your Nord lover thinks so as well.”

“Ulfric’s nae my lover.” Nemain replied, scrubbing her hair with soap. Almost by rote, so often had she refuted the implied connection.

Deciding to ignore her, Ancano reached for his own bar. Lathering up his limbs, the faint scent of snowberry almost canceled out the filth they had brought in with them. Glancing down, Ancano sighed to see the water already blackened with grime. “Do you think Keerava will refill our tubs if we ask?”

Nemain grunted, a ferocious scowl barely visible as her comb did battle with the snarled mess of dark hair. “Um, dinnae think so. Tis loads of work, hauling up buckets of hot water like this. We’ll probably have t’pay the Argonian double just to clean out our muck. Bloody damn Dibe’s drawers, this hair…”

“Do you need some help?” He asked finally.

Whipping her head around, Nemain snarled at him. Water sploshed out of her tub, almost more blackened than his bath. “And what makes y’think you can do a better job of untangling all this flummery? I dinnae see that your hair is sae very troublesome!”

Shaking his head at her stubborn nature, Ancano clicked his tongue. “Come on. Up. Get a towel on, and I shall see what I can do with oil and perhaps a spare garden rake.”

“Hah, hah. Think you’re a canny one, doon ya. A real Mannimarco.”

“I have my moments.”

Settling himself upon the bed behind Nemain, Ancano poured a liberal dollop of oil upon his hands and summoned heat. Warming the oil he pulled through her strands to a level that friction could not, as he took the ivory comb from Nemain’s fingers and carefully drew it through the tangled ends.

He worked in silence for a time, gradually pulling the comb higher and higher through the wavy mass of dark that dripped less as time went on. Nemain’s breathing became more subdued, her head tilting forward as he neared the nape of her neck.
Finally, she spoke...her brogue softened by curious wonder. “Crivens, I’ll be malkied. You have done this before.”

Adding more oil, Ancano tilted his head critically as the comb picked out what looked to be a dead beetle. He tossed it to the floorboards. “I was married once.”

Nemain’s abrupt inhale nearly dislodged the comb. “Cease to move. Your scalp is a horrid crusty mess, and I shall have to go over it with a far finer comb if you will not hold still.”

Amused at how meekly the Dragonborn obeyed, Ancano listened to her jagged breathing for a minute more, then took pity on her obvious curiosity. The comb made a rough scritch-scrich as he pulled out even more dead insects and what looked to be a dried weed from somewhere behind her ear. “Her name was Tildanwe, and she had hair that shone like the sunset made silk. Her red tresses hung nearly to her knees, and it was one of my fondest pastimes - brushing the length of it out for her before we retired to bed.”

“We grew up together in Auridon. Underwent the same schooling as mages. Moved in the same social circles.” The passage of his fingers through soft, straight hair was as soothing as Ancano remembered. Though the color was dark ash, and not the fire-gold he wished was before him. “She had given birth to our firstborn, a fine son. We had just blessed him beneath the Eldar tree in front of all our kin, when…” He exhaled, the memory as raw as it had been two hundred years before. “When the Great Anguish occurred. And Oblivion gates opened up like red wounds at every city, forest and port.”

Nemain hunched her shoulders. Bird thin, her scapula flared against the thin skin of her back as she cleared her throat. He could see the raised scar ringing her neck like a collar, the thickness of it scraping beneath his fingers as he swept more hair away from her neck. “Oh, Ancano. They died?”

“They drowned.”

Such a simpler time, with only the waves of daedra to contend with instead of rebellions and revelations. Both equally unpleasant in Ancano’s eyes. How curious to think so, after so long. When once nothing could have been worse. “I had joined the resistance in defending the Crystal Tower, where the bulk of the refugees hid from the unrelenting attack of Mehrunes Dagon’s forces. It was not enough. I was not enough.”

Gently angling Nemain’s face further up, Ancano began parting the hair near her forehead. Her wide grey eyes blinked up at him, patiently waiting for him to continue. “I must have taken quite a blow, because the only thing I recall after the last surge was a Thalmor warrior shaking me awake. Offering a health potion and a dull sword...not that I knew how to handle it. My training was primarily in the schools of Destruction and Alteration. Still, it was a kindly gesture.”

“Snhgr. I couldae guessed, what with how pathetic you be at fisticuffs.”

Ancano waited for Nemain to stop sniggering, then cleared his throat pointedly.

“Sorry. I’ll teach ye how t’throw a decent punch soon. Continue.”

Ancano frowned at a knot that would not budge. Untangling it proved impossible, so with a small spark of fire he cut it out. “It took very little encouragement on their end to have me serve the Thalmor in their exigency, as they maintained the defense of the Crystal Tower and all who hid therein. They had saved me, and it was clear that I had a debt to repay.”

He swallowed, the memory sharp-bright even as his throat closed over. “I found Tildanwe and Orron
floating in the reefs, after the gates closed and there was a space to breathe. Like so many, they had fled to the shore when the walls were breached and the tower had fallen. Do you know what that means? The Crystal Tower fell, and I...I…”

Nemain’s voice was soft. “You dinnae have to go on. S’alright.”

Lashing his hands more severely through her hair than was needful, Ancano set his jaw and finished combing out the last handfuls of loose hairs and dross. Setting the comb aside, he twisted four pieces into the beginnings of a spiderweb braid. “I do not know why I tell you this. I have not spoken of them for...oh. Practically a century.”

“Grief can do pucklesome things to the mind. Bet it feels bonny, sharing the pain of it at long last.”

“It does, at that.”

Feeling the tacky dampness of his towel slide off of mostly dry skin, Ancano shrugged it down until he was as barebacked as Nemain. “I will be done shortly. This braid will keep the tangles from becoming as a thorny thicket for a time.”

A quick chuff of laughter. “Thank you.”

He had nearly braided the entire crown when Nemain spoke. Haltingly and quiet - as unlike her usual boisterous self as this mellow submissiveness was. “Bear - Ulfric. He asked me to marry him and I said no.”

“No?” Ancano felt a faint twinge of surprise. “And here I thought you were willfully ignorant of the closeness between you both.”

“What’re you jawing off aboot?”

Sucking in a breath, Ancano affected a girlish coo. “Och, he’s nay me lover Anny-can! Stoopid skelpit luggy, Bear be my teacher and nothin’ more!”

Laughing breathlessly as Nemain tried to elbow what she could reach of him, Ancano tugged at her braid. “Stay still! You will ruin it, and I shall have to start anew. For shame, Nemain. You are fooling no one. Why ever would you tell him no?” He would keep his opinions of the suitability of the match to himself. His stomach rippled at the very thought of jazbay induced cramping.

“Should stop telling truths t’you, Thalmor.” A hiss, then a huff. “Quit yankin’ quite so hard! There be nothing more dreary than a conversation laden with veracity. Especially to a spy such as y’self.”

But Ancano was enjoying said conversation in which the truth was compromising and every word mattered. “The most dreary conversation is one in which all the truths are unspoken. We have not quite reached that point of no return as of yet, Dragonborn.”

She remained silent as he continued weaving her hair into a thing of beauty. Even the unimpressive ashen shade gleamed like polished wood when done up so finely. “A truth for a truth, then? I highly doubt I shall ever marry again, so why bother engaging in the tedious, messy business of love?”

A rough, rasping breath greeted his statement as his fingers flew down the bulk of the main braid, tying it off with a bit of leather cord. “So. Yer a lolly dreamer when it comes to memories, but a cynic in contemporary affairs.”
Patting her back, Ancano heaved himself up off the bed and padded over towards his knapsack. *Certainly he had at least one robe that was not disgustingly soiled.* “Aren’t you?”

“Nay. At least, I used t’not be.”

Tying his last, somewhat clean robe around his waist, Ancano turned to see Nemain had laid herself in her bed still wrapped neck to toe in towels. Her pale eyes were bleak, and she bit her lip as he tilted his head. Entreating her without words to continue, even as he sat upon his own place of rest to attend to his own hair.

“I think,” she began, twisting her fingers into one of the fur pelts near mindlessly. “...that something be wrong with me. Bear and I have been dancing round the issue of...of. *Pah!*”

She made a disgusted sound and closed her eyes. “– *love*, for sae long that I feel only comfortable with the - the physical part. He caught me off guard last time, for I think. Though I be nae sure, that he was entirely serious about marrying me.”

“...and not just fer the pleasure of having me Shout down his enemies at will.”

“Are you quite sure about that?” Ancano grinned as Nemain lollled her head towards him, eyebrows raised. “Your lovelorn beau is one of the most devious military masterminds the Dominion has ever gone up against. You do recall, yes, that colloquialism that true Nords never back down? He sacked Markarth. Single-handedly gutted almost an entire squad of Altmer scouts in Chorrol through duplicitous means. Even now, his hit and run tactics are causing my superiors to fill parchment with swathes of inked apoplexy. It is very likely he is using you for his own ends, shielding true intentions with those oh-so-sweet words.”

A sigh. “Tis possible. But then, I’ve been using him too.”

“We all use one another, *gyfaill.*” Ancano shifted his shoulders, grimacing at the tension that yet remained in his neck from carrying the travel pack. “To stroke our egos, to soothe our fears. Whether or not the using converts into something more selfless, well. That determines the level of affection present. As well as trust.”

A pause. “D’you think he may be telling the truth? Does he truly want me?” A ragged breath. “And not just the Dragonborn?”

Ancano curled his lip in speculation. This journey had been a rivened wellspring of revelations. “It is possible. You should grow accustomed to being noticed, Nemain. It is not the first time, and it shall not be the last that your birthright determines the quality of your allies.”

“Cor, but how does anyone know! How can they be sure that it truly is love, and not some shoddy trick? I’ve been burned sae sorely before, Cano, that the thought that...that Bear should prove false.”

A tremble went through the small woman. She closed her eyes.

“It makes me afraid.” Nemain admitted.

Thinking upon the best way to reach through the Reachwitch’s obvious despair, Ancano stepped away from his bed and headed towards the cheap desk that held the most basic of writing supplies.
His mind meandered back more than two hundred years ago to a far distant shore, where Tildanwe had ran laughing down the silt-black shores of Firsthold. Their child a mere suggestion of a bulge, strangely hard amidst such soft skin. Her hair a silken tease; a waterfall that had wrought such weakness upon him, as they moved together in silent and harmonious union. He could not forget even if he tried. No one touched his heart quite like his wife had.

“You remember what I told you of the Auger of Dunlain, Dragonborn?”

Turning when he heard no reply, he saw the witch peeling off her damp towels. Her braid swayed between small, perfectly rounded buttocks and not for the first time, Ancano reflected on how marvelous it was. To not be hampered by such animalistic urges such as lust.

Instead, he felt a warmth more akin to brotherly affection as Nemain yawned widely, swaying in place. “Aye. A disembodied seer what gave up corporeal form for greater powers. What be your point?”

“Great achievement is more oft borne of sacrifice and pain than selfishness. And relationships are no different in that respect. A certain loss of freedom is to be expected when vows are made, though it has been my experience that the benefit far outweighs any perceived deprivation.”

Walking over, Ancano helped tuck the Dragonborn into her blankets and furs. Her eyelids drooped shut as Ancano placed a long fingered hand and silently laid a spell of healing upon her. The golden glow of it made her look ethereal. Transcendent. More like a spirit than anything so common or terrestrial upon Mundus.

He would protect her, if he could. “Think upon that, when you ponder what it is exactly that you want for your life, Nemain. The lives of men burn fast and bright. Loathe as I am to recommend any sort of tie with your rebel Greybeard, I would find it tragic should your light go out without having flared brighter...fed by the nourishment that can only come from a deep and abiding love.”

She slumped beneath his hands, childishly small fingers interlacing with his own. “Oh gods. I was such a fool, to reject him so.”

“That can be remedied.” He would not be informing Rulindil of these new developments. Though he had grown weary of the constant reminders sent from the Embassy concerning his cousin’s tenuous grasp of the Lordship in Auridon, he would still send a regular report. Blackmail only went so far in securing his loyalties.

It simply would be missing snatches of their current conversation. He had plenty to wax lyrical about...the state of the dragon-ravaged Imperial camp the shining star of what would be the most distortedly truth-leavened parchment he had ever written.

Nemain was more important. Her task? Utterly vital. Again, Ancano thanked whatever gods had been watching for the distraction she had posed from the beguiling puzzle that was the Eye of Magnus. The eerie siren song that had dogged his steps every which way in the College had eased in the raw experience of taking to the road. He did not look forward to being near the insidious thing again.

Yet he would go. He would do his duty, as he ever had.

Pulling away his hand from hers, the Altmer felt uncommonly old. And suddenly weary of
concealing so very much from everyone and everything. “My gender may hold the ridicule of being inconstant in love, but I can attest to the truth that devotion once given from a male is seldom revoked.”

"For when my sex proffer love, we love with everything we are: nothing held back. Without complication."

Tapping her on the nose, he smiled to see Nemain’s sleepy eyes flutter open, then shut tight once more. The tightness around her mouth told him that she was still listening. “It is you womenfolk who seek to pick apart such simplicity, to warp a tapestry into a multitudinous mash of threads.”

“Bosh and bollocks, AnCan. Bear never mentioned a word aboot love.”

Laying himself down upon the ticked mattress, Ancano stood up and laid down another layer of furs. His skin still smarted from being scrubbed so thoroughly, and the straw pricking from the bed would do him no favours. “He did not have to speak it for such sentiments to be true. It was obvious to me...in the few seconds I saw you together before he sought to take my life.”

She snorted, more in amusement than anger. "Like you didnae instigate such violence."

"As though I could be so uncouth. I merely stated a truth commonly known. Your Ulfric could not handle the truth."

"I'll handle you if y'ever taunt him so again. Plenty more beehives to run into on your passage north, Mer."

"I...shall keep that in mind."

Blowing out the candles, Ancano blinked in the darkness and yawned as he adjusted himself to be more comfortable in this, the first real bed he would enjoy after what felt like an age of camping in the rough. A rustling across the room revealed that Nemain was doing something similar.

“Goodnight, Ancano. You know, you surprise me at times.”

“The feeling is reciprocal. Nos da, gyfaill.”

A soft sigh. “Sweet dreams.” And a pause. “And should any shred o’ what we chunnered on about here make its way to your Thalmor’s weedy ears, I shall dye your hair carrot orange while ye lay asleep.”

He chuckled, nearly lost at that point in his reminiscence of his wedding day. As well as other, happier memories to which he clung to like a beacon. Shards of happiness that dotted the bloody politics and ennui that so far had defined his life. How few there were, to hold back the gloom.

“And that is no more than I’d expect, though I’d save your energy for trawling Blackreach if I were you. Not many emerge from the old Dwemer capitol alive.”

“Och well, I plan to be one of those few. A good invisibility spell, some potions...those rotty Falmer willnae even know I be there.”

“Hmm. Good. A sound plan.”
Right before he drifted off, Ancano stirred as a beam of moonlight passed over his face. Somewhere outside in the night, a high pitched scream sounded. Cutting out as the moon darkened once more, plunging him back into a deep, dreamless sleep.

A wolf howled. His plaintive song keened of blood, claw and fang.

*Of victory.*

Chapter End Notes

Welsh, which is a shoo-in for Elven

- *yn fytyn* - little fool
- *gyfaill* - friend
- *nos da* - good night
Chapter Notes

Chapter music: Fylgija Ear by Heilung.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn7nsIv38no&index=18&list=LLG-HL7kxL8qmdqzzalpxQ6w

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brothers will fight
and kill each other,
sisters' children
will defile kinship.
It is harsh in the world,
whoredom rife
—an axe age, a sword age
—shields are riven—
a wind age, a wolf age—
before the world goes headlong.
No man will have
mercy on another.

-Poetic Edda poem Völuspá

“...with a screeching herd of Falmer hot on my heels, beset by the thralls I continued raising 'til the road through Blackreach was damn near to bursting! What with wailing creepers and the undead, picking them off like gooseberries. What luck to have that waterfall so close at hand to the bridge! They ran straight off of it like lemmings. Might have been quite done for, otherwise.”

The Greybeard Borri followed the Dragonborn as she stomped through High Hrothgar's courtyard; fingers flying as he scratched upon his writing slate with charcoal. Handing it over with a smile and a bow, he was gratified to see Nemain laugh at his short response.

'Name your first child after me?'
“Och, gods no! Can you imagine it? I love you, y’auld codger, but no. And what if it be a girl? She would not forgive me for naming her Borrilla, I think.”

Keeping his laughter restrained to a dim rumble, he embraced the lithe form of his young friend. Curling his tongue into the corner of his mouth, the Greybeard copped a squeeze of her pert ass, his chuckle a dull roar as the witch swatted his hand away.

“Hands off, you perverted monk. First bawdy terms, now wandering mitts...whatever shall I do with you?”

Ducking a hastily thrown snowball, the Greybeard merely grinned in response...miming a lewd act well enough that Nemain flushed a deep pink, even as she scoffed. As Borri patted her head in fondness and thought nostalgically upon his long dead wife, Nemain swallowed. And spoke.

“Please. Take better care of yourself and of Arngeir from now on. You ken? Dinnae make me climb the seven thousand steps just to ensure you’re nae malnourished.”

Meddlesome little minx. The Reachwitch was fortunate to possess such an obvious heart of gold, for the spectacle she had made tramping through the doors of the monastery (heavily burdened, accompanied by five hulking farmhands who carried what he later found out to be fresh victuals and healing supplies) had come as quite a shock to both himself and Arngeir. The other Nord had almost Shouted down what had been perceived to be intruders...before Nemain had unhooded herself, causing Borri to wrench Arngeir’s shoulder near out of its socket in the haste of gaining his attentions.

As Nemain drifted away to look up at the Throat of the World, Borri scrubbed his slate clean and began writing anew. Arngeir (who had had lingered after bestowing the Clear Skies Shout to the Dragonborn) gave their student the barest suggestion of a bow before settling himself on his knees to meditate.

Scratch-scratch. You have brought enough provisions to see an entire monastery of teenaged students fed through the next few months. Do not fear for us. Meet Paarthurnax and learn what you must learn. And return soon - I do so enjoy our visits. Lok Thu’um.

Nemain laughed, then coughed as strands of her hair whipped wildly against her face. “Do you be planning on inviting more Greybeard initiates up to Hrothgar? T’would do you both good...and when I say both, I truly mean Arngeir. I expect he longs to divest himself of those longwinded lectures, now that I be unavailable to sit through them.”

Borri nodded passively, mulling over the thought of training a new Greybeard. Surely it was time; Kynareth would Speak to them of whom was worthy to ascend into their priesthood. He felt a slight pang at the thought of a younger Ulfric, and the rambunctious carefree lad he had once been.

Lad indeed...the Jarl of Eastmarch was no longer young. And last time Borri had dared look in a reflective surface it had been his own white-whiskered father staring bewilderedly back at him. Though he rather hoped he had been a better patriarchal figure to the young Ulfric than his own hard drinking da had been. It was not too late to dust off his latent playfulness, no matter how soured such joys seemed after the losses of Wulfgar and Einarth.

More brethren. More people to talk to! Children and stripling youths to climb the steps and fill the
rooms, to erase the profound silence of Hrothgar with peals of laughter. A future generation, to pass on what had been learned...his heart warmed with the thought of it.

Nemain spoke again, disrupting his woolgathering. “And of course I’ll do my best to return to you. I have to pass this way back down the strunmah anyhow. Though the possibility of returning to Windhelm, much less marrying and bearing babes be wholly dependent on my success here, you ken. Chicken before the egg, and all that. And Ulfric, well. A Bear once stung be twice as leery of dipping his paws in the same beehive. I dinnae know what will happen. Ugh.”

Shaking her head, as if to dislodge some unwelcome thought, Nemain gave him one last crooked grin. “Wish me luck, never-boring Borri! Sky above, voice within.”

Good luck, young lady. Making his final hug chaste and comforting, Borri whispered ‘Su’um ahrk morah’ into the Dovahkiin’s shell of an ear, then released her one last time. Squinting at the path that lay concealed behind gale-force winds, Nemain sucked in a deep breath and Shouted.

“Lok Vah Koor!”

When the sky above showed nothing but a bowl of clear glass blue, Nemain stepped out of the safety of the courtyard and onto the path that led to the peak. She moved with purpose, looking neither right nor left as she mindfully Shouted every time the skies grew dark; her steps loud in the crunch of snow that lingered. Ever present here, at the top of the Throat of the World.

Borri sighed, watching the small figure of the Dragonborn trapipe off into the distance. There was no warmth left in the sunlight. The winds had turned without his noticing, bringing with them a coolness that settled into skin and bone and breath alike, and Borri turned his back to it in futile protection. There was little he could think to write under Arngeir's steady gaze, acutely aware of both the respect and the trust the Dragonborn had offered with her recounting of the past several months.

Wars, and rumors of wars. A kingdom fallen, as another rises in its place. Borri lifted his face further into the crossing breezes; a sigh slipping from his older companion as he too resettled himself against cold hard stone.

"I had thought she and Ulfric…” Arngeir made a gesture in the air, meaningless and uncertain. "Perhaps I was mistaken."

"No ," wrote Borri abruptly, steadfastly writing upon his slate. Damn this blighted cold, for stiffening his knuckles into lumpen rocks. "They're both carrying torches as though they'll die without them, but they're too stubborn to do a thing about it. The witch entangles Ulfric into bed, and nothing but argument ensues afterwards. Our boy proposes marriage? She spurns him. It is," he paused in his scribblings, a drop of true annoyance coloring his breath as he blew out the misty spikes of the rune of unrest, "intensely frustrating to hear. Particularly now that she regrets her hasty decision to turn him down."

"A lifetime of well-seeded resentment caused by violent clash of culture," Arngeir waxed piously, "is not easy to overlook. Not when there is little hope of relief over the next hundred years. Ulfric took the safety of her childhood away when he sacked Markarth. As Forsworn, Nemain can never forgive him for that. And he'll never forgive her for caring less about his causes than he does."

A depressing evaluation. But was the Dovahkiin truly Forsworn still? He had detected nothing but a trace of wistfulness when she had spoken of Markarth’s new ownership. Indeed, Nemain had been far more jolly than jaded, singing and dancing with the Nord farmhands last night as they celebrated
their arrival with the finest Blackbriar Reserve and Honningbrew mead.  

Shrugging his arms even more deeply into the long sleeves of his robes, Arngeir blew a wisp of hot steam as Yol hummed deep in his throat. His deeply lined face sagged in weariness. “I rather doubt this marriage will ever take place, Borri. Regardless of how many slates you fill with optimistic ramblings.”

The charcoal nearly cracked between his forefinger and thumb. Scowling at the uncooperative writing utensil, Borri managed to scrawl out a condensed version of what was running through his head. Sometimes, lacking the ease of common speech was truly vexing. ‘We will see, won’t we? I am hopeful of a wedding writ to be delivered soon in the coming months, Arngeir. Judging by that scene we witnessed in the wine cellar, I’d bet fifty septims and a bottle of Wulfgar’s oldest brew that a child will not be long in the offing! If only the lad were here, so I could find some way to help the two young fools along!’

The wind blew Arngeir’s hood off of his hoary head. Grimly, the Master of the Voice clapped it back on, passing back Borri’s slate as the sky grew ever darker. “Doing nothing can be the wisest choice, although strangely often the most difficult. Release your mind from such ponderings, Borri. It shall be occupied by more pressing issues soon enough.”

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

As she turned to face the view west, she stopped for a brief moment to catch her breath. All of Skyrim was flung out before her, marbled green and blue and brown. Like finely polished chalcedony, the land seemed more fantastical than anything solid. The world was so much larger than it had seemed, locked as she had once been in her staid pattern of delivering messages, threats and baubles in Markarth. Why had her family not contacted her? Máthair, why did ye let them kill Moth gro-Bagol? You knew he was mine. Calcemo, Aicantar, Ondolemar...did they yet live? And Galan...

Shivering, Nemain pulled her furs and leathers more tightly closed and Shouted for clear skies before the weather could turn foul. So many years since she had seen Deepwood Redoubt. So much poisoned history and still she found herself – wanting, feet turning west, west to the sinking sun and lands now ruled by undead masters— but before the thought could root too strongly in her heart she shook her head. Forced her feet to move, to ascend the Monahven. She could spare no time to waste on hopeless dreams — no hope to waste on impossibilities. She was what she was, and she would not pine for something she could not touch. It was enough to be what she had become.

The voice that now touched her dreams nightly caressed the innards of her mind as she walked. A soft voice. A kind voice...more warm than Máthair had ever been. But if it was not her mother, then who spoke so sweetly, so seductively? Telepathy was not a skill that came easily to hagravens.

Lifting her hand, Nemain flicked her ear; the pain doing nothing to erase the insistence of the voice. She could hardly forget the phrase, so oft had it been repeated that she found herself murmuring the words at random. Darkness rises when silence dies. The gods only knew what it meant.

The voice had grown stronger, these last few weeks. Whispering in her waking hours as well as her dreams. Solidifying the errant tug she felt more and more—a pressing sense of doom that loomed, encroaching upon the horizon. Whether it was Markarth to blame or the dragon threat, Nemain could not tell. So many twisting ends to tie up, so many in dire need.

So she ran and her own thoughts hunted her, following her ever upward through winding rock switchbacks, ice crunching at each step, her focus straining towards the peak as the winds slid fingers of cold down her neck. Teasing the heavy leathers with which she had wrapped the long cylinder of the Elder Scroll.

Such precious cargo to carry, after months of arduous scholarly pursuit. She would be happy to be rid of its weight, once and for all. Once Paarthurnax did his dragonish dues, him and whatever this Time Wound (how could time be torn? Was it possessed of form, rather than an immaterial construct? She’d have to ask Ancano) was supposed to accomplish, teaching her some new Thu’um.

As her lungs burned in the high thin air, Nemain snorted at the irony. Not a few days past, and she had been traversing the humid bowels of the earth, deep underground. It had been peaceful in Blackreach. She had not expected that.

Nor had she planned on discovering new species of plants that she had never before heard of. Bioluminescent fungi, roots...glowworms and flying chaurus that were the size of foals. The nirnroot that was wadded up in her pack, for example. It was red. Crimson red to boot, and the humming seemed louder than the greenish variety for some reason. With so little sound to detract from the ringing, singing tones the heightened perception of sound might well have been an illusion.

’Twas a right shame that the Falmer were no such mirage. Nemain had boasted to Ancano of the ease in which she would sneak through both Raldbthar and Blackreach in pursuit of the Elder Scroll. She wished she could retract her haughty statements now. Escaping via the creaking, rusted elevator had been the greatest rush Nemain had experienced since bending both Ulfric and Ancano to her will.

You be too proud, you piss-poor excuse for an Illusionist. Couldnae even make it through the bulk of Blackreach without curiosity dragging you to that creepy green Dwemer sun. To see what - a city of Falmer and their benighted captives! Poor sodding slaves and fallen Mer, for all that they be blind as bats. I cannae imagine having no eyes to see.

Yet it had dawned on her quite quickly that what the descendents of the Snow Elves had lost in sight was eminently made up for by superior hearing and smell. Lurching forward from their oddly chitinous huts whenever her feet made a squelching misstep, Nemain remembered how quickly she had tired of killing the screeching smelly beings.

They were sentient. They were savage. And she could not help but pity them, even as she raised their corpses to fend off further raids from their brethren.
Abruptly, the path no longer rose so steeply. Spitting out a mouthful of hair, Nemain looked round. To her left, a sheer cropping of peaked rock and boulders rose several leagues higher, the tip of it lost in the clouds.

And to her right, an ancient and broken Word Wall had become a place of rest for Paarthurnax. Paarthurnax, who hunched within his tattered wings like a wary hound as she approached the strangely blurred space. A nothing, yet there was something - something that was simply off about the air.

She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but it was almost as though the sky itself was moving around this gash that was near invisible. Tiid Keld.

Time Wound. She was here, at last.

“There is no question. You are doom-driven. Kogaan Akatosh! The very bones of the earth are at your disposal.”

The clouds that had been silver were now shot through with leaden blackness. Thick snow filled the air, crusting her robes as she staggered through the drifts towards the old dovah. Releasing the straps of her pack and shrugging her burden down from her shoulders, Nemain sat in the snow with a grateful sigh.

“Dreh ni fass, Greyscales. Dinnae fear. If I be doom-driven then so be it. The Greybeard’s prophecy states that only the Dragonborn can stop him.”

A mucoid membrane flicked over the dragon’s cloudy eye. *An eye that be bigger than my hand. Why must all my opponents be sae much bodging larger than me?* "True…But qostiid - prophecy - tells what may be, not what should be. *Qostiid sahlo aak.* Just because you can do a thing, does not always mean you should. Do you have no better reason for acting than destiny? Are you nothing more than a plaything of *dez…of fate*?"

Nemain allowed *Yol* to thrum through her breath, the fire stoking her inner reserves as she recalled another place of warmth many months before. The sauna; where Ulfric had fed her honeycomb and spoken of destiny.

*Only a coward, unsatisfied by his condition...unwilling to fight for what he wants will choose the easy way. Say that it cannot be helped. That fate has stuck him in the hole he could easily climb out of, if he would but apply himself to the task.*

"...I dinnae believe in destiny. But I will stop Alduin."

"And so, perhaps, your destiny will be fulfilled. Who can say? *Dez motmahus.* Even to the dov, who ride the currents of Time, destiny is elusive. I have spoken of this to you before, yet it bears
repeating. Alduin believes that he will prevail, with good reason. *Rok mul. And he is no fool. *Ni mey, rinik gut nol. Far from it. He began as the wisest and most far-seeing of us all."

Nemain snorted, smoke spiralling from her mouth as she opened her lips. *Hope this doesnae singe my nosehairs.* “Well for such a braw brilliant beastie, he is not doing his job well at all. I thought the World Eater induced Ragnarok after a slew of natural disasters and a world war? Tell him to come back later. Much later. Try a millennia, mayhap.”

Paarthurnax’s deep voice scored her ears with its disdain. “And what do you call the battle raging down below among the *joore?* The eruption of *Dagoth Ur,* the *Sahqo-Strunmah? Winterhold sinking into the Sea Of Ghosts? *Pruzah?*”

Nemain sucked hard upon her inner cheek. Blatantly ignoring the small scream that threatened to tip out at the dovah’s words. *Natural disasters, a war that has spread across Tamriel, signs, omens..."

“Go then. Fulfill your destiny.” The dovah’s cavernous growl seemed to rasp upon the last word, even as Nemain stiffened in response.

“Take the Scroll to the Time-Wound.” A battered wing the size of a sail stretched free as the dovah arched against the wind, snout uplifted. Seeming to drink deep of what secrets the sky held.

“Do not delay. Alduin will be coming. He cannot miss the signs.”

She would ignore it. She had to ignore the implications that the end of the world was nigh, and that Arngeir and Paarthurnax and all the naysayers had been right. *Well, if not right then at least more bloody right than you were. Fucking kalpa egg-of-the-next-world. Sodding world can take care of itself. I like this world, damn it. I doon want it to end!*

Digging out the Elder Scroll, Nemain unwrapped the weighty thing and dragged herself to the unnatural ripple that was the Time Wound. In comparison, every line of her figure seemed sharp as glass. Her shoulders curved high and tight as she began to unroll the mystic artifact, only to see-

She frowned and pulled the scroll wider. Blinked twice. *Hmm.* Was an Elder Scroll supposed to look like a star map? All circles and symbols lit up like soul gems? It didn’t seem to be written on any parchment Nemain recognized, for it was far too thick and silken. Nearly blemish free, for a scroll that had rotted in an oculary deep in Blackreach for centuries.

A high tinny whine sounded in her ears. She blinked once more, a glare coming from seemingly nowhere making the snow burn white. Shining, blazing white. She could not see…

*Until she could.* A window into the past, trapped in a vial of red tinted memory, as the Time Wound held her like an insect trapped in amber. Prey to a blood soaked parcel of memories from a time long since passed, when dragons and man warred and the Voice was a weapon of renown. Three Tongues and three words. Three awful, terrible words.

“A glorious day, is it not? And Skyrim shall be free once more!”

“-cannot be slain like a lesser dragon!”

“No Felldir! We agreed not to use it!”
“Meyye! Tahrodis aanne! Him hinde pah liiv! Zu’u hin daani!”

“JOOR ZAH FRUUL!”

“Nivahriin joorre! What have you done? What twisted Words have you created? Tahrodis Paarthurnax... my teeth to his neck!”

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

The release from the memory, when it came, was sudden. Nemain fell back on her arse, completely stunned at the searing sensation that was the Dragonrend Shout.


Even in the thinking of it, she could feel her body slow. Feel the inexorable ticking of time as her vessels pumped life-giving blood, sense the minute wrinkles that were forming at the corners of eyes, lips and neck. Lifting a shaky hand, Nemain pulled out her wispy braid to check that it indeed had not turned pure white at the shock of it. Joor Zah Frul! Mortality made word, leeching into her soul with such poisonous hate she almost swooned. Her will fading in the shadow of legendary spite. Three words, one meaning. An eon of enslavement and sacrifice and pain...

It would have to work. For the World Eater had somehow appeared; detached himself from the blistering cauldron of stormclouds, and was descending...blackness blotting out what light remained. He was even more massive than she remembered from so long ago at Helgen.

Pulling herself upright, Nemain stalked to meet him. She stopped at Paarthurnax’s side, facing Alduin with a glare meant to incinerate by its strength alone.

Hanging like a noxious vapor in the air, the Firstborn hovered before them. His jaws moved, their booming emission nearly rupturing Nemain’s eardrums with maleficent strength. Clapping her hands to her head, the Dragonborn could not help but hear the World Eater’s taunt. Hear it, and cower.

“Bahloki nahkip sillesejoor. My belly is full of the souls of your fellow mortals, Dovahkiin.”

A throaty gurgle rippled his dark scaled throat, precursor to more of that damning speech. Paarthurnax hissed beside her, snow melting beneath the elderly dovah’s limbs as great muscles flexed. Waiting to pounce, to spring aloft.

Cracking her spine, Nemain rigidly stood upright. Each and every vertebrae resisted, but was she not the master of her own body? It would not do to appear afraid in the face of this, the greatest predator she had ever seen. Prey ran. Prey died.

She was not prey. She would fight.
“Die now. And await your fate in Sovngarde!”

Lacing her hands in streams of lightning, Nemain made no pithy comeback. Instead, she allowed a breath of wuld-na-kest to speed her limbs. She would have to be swift, silent and deadly.

...And though the words were bitter as rue, Nemain tasted blood as she forced herself to prepare to speak Dragonrend. Paarthurnax had roared something about it before taking to wing...he and his brother were now sporting in aerial combat. Darting, swooping as they engaged in a verbal battle for the other’s mortality.

Her head ached. The present seemed to be flashing by in short, sharp increments.

Nemain carefully shook her head, freeing her eyelashes from a rime of frost as she struggled to focus. To lift her hands, and take careful aim at Alduin alone. Lightning flashed; their winged forms silhouetted against the storm as ozone snapped and flared from her fingers, yearning to mate with the forked tongues of fire arcing across the sky.

*Krif krin. They fought courageously.* Nemain tongued her chapped lips. No dice...the brothers were too tightly entwined together. There was not a straight shot to be had.

Paarthurnax cried out as one of his wings crumpled, bitten to the bone by Alduin’s dagger teeth. “*Dovahkiin, vosaraan!* Use Dragonrend before Alduin consumes you!”

How long had she stood there like an idiot? It was time to act!

The Shout wrenched something deep from within her, as she rasped out the words she almost wished she had not learned. Something wet trickled down from her ears onto her neck. “*JOOR...ZAH FRUUUL!* Come down here, Al-Du-In, and...and face me, damn it! You’ve never balked at killing *joore* before! Be a Dragonborn too much for ye?”

Bars of violet energy wrapped around the World Eater, dragging him down, down down to the ground. The great wyrm lashed out, howling in eerie shrieks as the Shout pummeled him even lower, until his snarled wings and limbs were plastered awkwardly against the snow.

Paarthurnax screamed in triumph. “Now, when he is vulnerable! This is your chance, Dovahkiin! Strike with all your force!”

In her peripheral vision, the witch could see Paarthurnax limp away to hide behind the broken Word Wall. *Or was it another sledge of rock? Hard to say, with such weather;* the snow was blowing sideways, shards of harder ice interspersed with the grit of smaller snowflakes. Cutting every place they touched, a rough rasp. “Hurt him while he is grounded!”

It took every sliver of bravery Nemain possessed to walk towards Alduin and not away, but she managed it. One boot slid forward. Then another, slowly bringing her closer to the writhing mass of black.
"You may have picked up the weapons of my ancient foes, but you are not their equal!"

"Feim Zii Gron!"

She was equal to the task. For her gods were just as thirsty for blood, if not more unforgiving than this Nord undertaker. Turned ephemeral, translucent, the Dragonborn staggered towards the dragon. Weaving like a drunkard against the gale force wind, her boots no longer sank into the snow to impede her progress. And with one last lurch, she took that force of momentum to plunge her arms elbow deep into the World Eater’s chest.

The Dragonborn held his giant heart in her hands. Thankful for her long, talon like nails, Nemain squeezed with all her puny womanish strength; holding tight as the dovah roared and flailed. Panting as the Feim Thu’um wore off and she became solid -enclosed about by acrid brimstone and the scale-rot smell of his evil- she sent another pulse of electricity into the organ; waiting for the heartbeat to skip forward, to drum out an unsteady staccato that would hark its end. But all she felt was a deep, broken ache and the old bite of both hatred and terror.

Somewhere high above her fleshy prison, Alduin laughed! “Meyz mul, Dovahkiin. You have become strong. But I am Al-du-in, Firstborn of Akatosh! Mulaagi zok lot! I cannot be slain here, by you or anyone else! You cannot prevail against me. I will outlast you... mortal!”

Something slammed into her gut, stabbing so deeply she was unable to breathe. A whip snapped somewhere near - his tail? The ground pitched wildly sideways, tossing her away as her head hit the dovah’s sharp talons with a loud clack. The blood was hot! So hot, the snow felt almost pleasantly cool against the burning of the World Eater’s life force coating her arms.

Managing to skitter away in a shambling crawl she went to one knee, unbalanced, half-blind with sleet and the red thudding in her side and the back of her head. She tried to push herself up again, but her hand slipped on a snow-slick rock; somehow the rest of her followed as the mud and gore churned mountain rose to meet her cheek. Snow slid over her nose, wind pushing flurries of it insistently inside her half-open mouth – gods she struggled to open it wider, to draw in air that seemed suddenly far too thin and too cold.

Nemain watched dumbly as Alduin turned towards her, smoke wreathing the narrow black snout; those red eyes twin pits of fury. She blinked against the slurry and the blackness blurred, grew larger...swallowing up the dovah and darkening the world around him, breath by slow-drawn breath, until it spread across her vision like a silent, starless sky.

Her last thoughts were not profound. Gods grant me strength to die in his jaws without pissing myself. My ancestors would weep at the indignity of it.

I wish I didnae have to die alone.

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"Dovahkiin. Lot krongah... You truly have the Voice of a Dovah. Alduin’s allies will think twice after this victory. Vopraan... awaken!"

For an instant every muscle in her body tensed at once – the surroundings were unfamiliar, and to be disoriented meant death – but piece by piece Nemain’s memories dropped into place again. Of Alduin and fury, fighting without hope in the dark; of Paarthurnax and the crack of lightning. Her best efforts insufficient to stave off her own defeat and eventual collapse. The sky was dimmer now even without the storm clouds, the last vestige of light hanging low on the opposite side of the Monahven with the sunset, and her back ached where she lay crookedly against the stone.

Yet it was not so cold as she might have thought. Wrinkling her nose at the rankness of her sweat soaked robes, Nemain rolled her shoulders – then stilled utterly, because somehow without her knowledge Paarthurnax had moved. Slipped to curl on the ground beside her, blanketing the Dragonborn in rough-scaled, fetid comfort that made Nemain feel rather like an egg cocooned in a nest.

Indeed, Paarthurnax had curled around her until his scaly wedge of a head rested almost between her legs. Blowing smoke rings of superheated breath (that reeked to high heaven of carrion and flame) right into her face.

"Bleugh! Geroff me, y’great big lump! You stink like a charnel house!"

"Drem. Is that any way to give thanks for tending to your wounds, Dovahkiin?"

Squirming over and across the dragon’s broad, bony forelimbs, Nemain managed to stand and take inventory of herself. Though she was wobbling like a weak-kneed calf, the spiking pain that she had remembered in her side had receded to a distant throb. Her head was much the same; only a mild headache as a souvenir of her ludicrously one-sided battle.

Flecking away dried bits of snot and gore, the Reachwoman sighed. All in one piece. What a blooming miracle. And he calls this a goddamn victory?

“I suppose I do owe you gratitude, you gobbity lizard with wings. Though you have a fair amount to answer for. How can it be a victory when Alduin escaped?”

Scratching her hair irritably, Nemain advanced upon Paarthurnax. Another set of robes ruined beyond repair, and Alduin gone once again to terrorize gods knew what unsuspecting village or town. Her mood was not further improved by the discovery that even a shredded heart did not kill Al-Du-In, World Eater. Akatosh’s Firstborn.

The crotchety tar-black lodge.

Yet not even her ungrateful glowering seemed to deter the Elder Dragon. Preening his good wing, the dovah lifted one scaly forelimb and inspected his claws. “Ni liivrah hin moro. True - this is not the final krongah, or victory. But not even the heroes of old were able to defeat Alduin in open battle.”

Verrah reassuring. I suppose I should start thinking upon what weapons I should like to accessorize with, once I’ve been wizened into a draugr dragon priest. Ugh. “Grand. Just grand. I expect there be summat else I might do in your expert opinion, to chase down the blighter once and for all?”
“Alduin always was pahlok - arrogant in his power.” Scratching his snout with the tip of his tail awkwardly, Nemain stretched up and began itching the errant spot for him. The dovah’s eyes rolled back in his head as she scritched even higher, right in the smooth space that spanned the distance of his curling horns. “Ahhhh. Genazend! That is...hrmmm. Uznahgar paar. He took domination as his birthright. This...should shake the loyalty of the dov who serve him.”

Tamping down her annoyance at the dovah’s lazy drawl, Nemain focused on scratching even harder until her nails dug as deeply as they would go against the hard mail of Paarthurnax’s head. Briefly she imagined scooping out the old one’s brains and picking piecemeal through them. It might be the only way to obtain a straight answer from the sly serpent. “Hmph. Matters little what his lackeys think. I need to find out where Alduin went.”

“Yesss...one of his allies could tell us. Motmahus - but it will not be so easy to convince one of them to betray him.

No shit, Sanguine. Holding back her reply, Nemain pulled at one of Paarthurnax’s horns. The better to reach the itchy flakes behind the largest of his neck scales. It was the least she could do, after he had healed her wounds so thoroughly...and the dragon behaved almost as a barn cat would. Arching his spiked back, making obscene faces of enjoyment. It was almost...cute.

Nemain idly wondered which Shout it was that he had used, to knit her flesh back together in such a short span of time.

Something to ask later, when the dovah’s thought processes were running a bit swifter. “Perhaps the hofkahsejun - the palace in Whiterun. Dragonsreach. It was originally built to house a captive dovah.” His long ear twitched, the curved shape more akin to a goat than any sun-basking lizard Nemain had ever seen. “A fine place to trap one of Alduin’s allies, hmm?”

“Yes. A right brilliant plan. Yer a genius, Paarthurnax. How do I go about trapping a dragon in the most densely populated trade center outside of Solitude? For I doubt the Jarl of Whiterun will see the necessity for such actions in his Hold.”

“Hmm, yes. But your su’um is strong. I do not doubt that you can convince him of the need.”

Snorting, Nemain pulled away...a low croon betraying just how pleased Paarthurnax was with her ministrations. “You have not been entirely truthful with me, Greyscales. How could an Elder Scroll cast Alduin through time? I thought this was all about learning a Shout to defeat him - I dinnae wish to send him back to terrorize our great-great grandbabbies after gloaming about in the ether for an age!”

Paarthurnax shook his head, the action rattling his neck spikes. "Vomindok . I do not know. The Three Tongues you saw - my friends. Hrrm...perhaps in the very doing they erased the knowing of it from Time itself. The dov are children of Akatosh. Thus we are specially… attuned to the flow of Time. Perhaps also uniquely vulnerable. I warned my students against such a rash action. Even I could not foresee its consequences. Nust ni hon. They would not listen."

Nemain chose to ignore the more insensate ramblings and focus upon what was pertinent to the here and now. "You mean you were there?"

The dovah nodded gracefully. "Yes. There were a few of us who rebelled against Alduin’s thur … his tyranny. We aided the humans in his overthrow. But they did not trust us. Ni ov. Their inner councils were kept hidden from us. I was far from here on the day of Alduin's downfall. But all dov felt the… sundering of Time itself."
Nemain bit back her sharp retort, swallowed too the frustrated sigh that followed. She wanted to be furious with him – was furious with him, even now, both for nearly killing her (he had known! He knew Alduin would seek her out should she open the scroll at the Monahven!) and for his counterproductive advice, but she had little defense against the raw regret in his voice and none at all against the sight of his suffering. When the dovah hunched further into himself at her long silence, she blew out an exasperated breath.

"Damn you," she told him even as she bent to sling her knapsack (battered and unharmed, thank the gods) across her shoulders. Trying desperately to ignore the bone-deep ache Alduin’s attack had left in the pit of her stomach. She could still feel nausea creep up like a mist, every time she moved her head too sharply. "Next time I’ll be leaving you to fight your daft brother alone. Keep me informed, would you please, the next instance we shall be fighting for our sodding lives? It would be good to know beforehand, so I could have stocked up on healing potions and poultices rather than hot-footing it here with that blasted scroll."

-and she fell in an ungainly heap upon her arse as Paarthurnax took to the air; his wings flapping. Stirring up great piles of snow to float in shimmering diamant flakes as he hauled his bulk even higher. So high that his voice sounded nearly human, from the far distance he had propelled himself to.

"Dov wahlaan fah rel. We were made to dominate, Dovahkiin. The will to power is in our blood. You feel it in yourself, do you not? It is why I dare not tell you all."

Holding her hair back from where the loose tresses flapped against her face, Nemain cried out, “But why d’ye not tell me of what is needful? Blast it, Paarthurnax, we be on the same side! If anyone should not be trusted, mayhap ‘tis you being the Dark One’s fucking brother! How’s that for full disclosure!"

He was so high up now that she strained to hear his response over the susurrus of his flapping wingbeats. “I can be trusted. I know this. But you do not. Onikaan ni ov dovah. It is always wise to mistrust a dovah. I have overcome my nature only through meditation and long study of the Way of the Voice.”

This turn of logic was not what she had expected. “What are ye calling me then? A rogue force? A mortal with a dragon soul that succumbs to its draconic whims of chancery at the drop of a hat?! Since clearly I havenae the self control…” oh, she practically spit the last sentence out, she was that furious.

“…to be trusted with the slightest tidbit of pertinent information. And what does that make of you?!?"

Paarthurnax stretched out his long neck. “No day goes by where I am not tempted to return to my inborn nature. Zin krif horvut se suleyk. What is better - to be born good, or to overcome your evil nature through great effort?"

He had her there. Stumped, Nemain yanked upon what was left of her braid and bit her cheek until she tasted blood. Watching Paarthurnax wheel away towards the dancing auroras in the east, a faint cry of Lok Thu’um drifting back in the eddying winds.

Looking about her at the sudden stillness, the clearing now filled only with churned and blood spattered snow, Nemain huffed a smoky laugh. And sighed.
“Well. Shit.” *Time to start all over again.*

******

Nemain had been making excellent time down the mountain path when the harsh slap of reality smacked her upside the face. And all because she had chanced upon a bear.

*Bears plural* she thought, modifying her initial wary observation to include the two smaller, snuffling cubs that grappled and yowled. She was not overly familiar with the species, since the Reach tended to host more mountain wildcats than bears, but the slow shuffle they moved with was endearing.

And really, the bears seemed completely and utterly devoted to eating. To the exclusion of noticing anything else, so fervent seemed their attentions upon slurping as many bilberries down their gullets as possible. The big female lipped at the blue, bulbous fruits which grew abundantly in this curve of thicketed brush, crunching down entire branches and spitting out the leaves and twigs as Nemain stopped to watch them for a bit.

...and felt a big, foolish smile split her cheeks as one of the fuzzy cubs blinked black button eyes at her. Really, it was near criminal for a wild animal to be so damn precious, and when the wee thing released a quavering bleat; almost a hoarse *bla-aaa-aat* - she laughed. And, like an idiot, she reached out her hand to touch the baby-soft fur as the cub lifted its dark moist snout to sniff the air.

The mother bear took that opportune moment to strike.

Nemain had only a moment to see what appeared to be a wall of brown fur rush in her direction, and then the mother hit her with open paws the size of warhammers, roaring all the while. It felt as though she had been steamrolled by a Dwemer Centurion, and she had the barest presence of mind to curl up in a ball and play dead.

*You blithering stook. Survive an altercation with Alduin, and suddenly you be immortal?* Nemain knew. She knew that approaching bears -or any wild mother with bairns- was an invitation to be dinner. Or to at least be very badly mauled.

She remained curled up in a tight little ball, thanking Ancano silently in her mind for teaching her the spell *Stoneflesh* as she cast and recast it. Waiting for the she-bear to lose interest.

Which the hulking beast did, after her quarry stopped being so interesting; choosing to soothe one of her cubs who had slipped off of a tree trunk, with a grunt and squeal.

Keeping her eyes tightly closed shut, Nemain loosened her body only when the wet-dog smell of rank fur and shit had moved out of any discernable scenting. Unfolding her limbs like a mudcrab, the Dragonborn winced. *Gods. I do hurt all over.* The mother bear had been making more of a statement rather than any earnest desire to wound, Nemain thought, or she might have borne more than a few bruises and a sore jaw for her stupidity.

“By Hircine’s codpiece, you be lucky to be sae damnably cute,” she muttered as she spied the trio sauntering off further down the mountainside. Ivarstead was visible from here, and as she began the slow task of healing herself - picking bilberries to fill her robe pockets when it became apparent that the pulping she had taken would be a long while to heal - Nemain found herself glad that she had
harnessed her initial desire to slay the bear.

To kill the beast that had not wanted anything more but to be left alone; to eat and cuddle and sleep with her fluffball cubs. Nemain would not have approached...truly, had not meant to come closer. But the way the mama had grumbled while chewing minded Nemain so very much of Ulfric...the playful cubs living reminders of the two adopted younglings she had waiting for her back in Windhelm.

It had not been her intention to be gone so long from them.

Later down in Ivarstead, Jofthor and Boti opened their cottage door to her with surprised calls of welcome. Still walking with a bit of a limp, Nemain held up two damp and stained pockets heavy with bilberries. “Might I be welcome for dinner and a sleep in your straw in exchange for some verrah fine berries? Had to fight off a gaggle of bears for these beauties.”

It was astonishing how every one of her newly minted friends opened their hands to help her without a word of recompense. Nords were truly the kindest of hosts, for no sooner had she spoken the daughter Fastred (with a plump, babbling Iona on her hip) took her burden of berries in exchange for a fresh frock and ushered her to the table where dinner was served.

Almost falling asleep in her chicken dumpling soup, Nemain remembered once decrying the concept of depending on another to keep safe – no safety when to trust another meant certain betrayal – but now, it seemed a simple thing. An offer given and accepted almost without thought. An easy thing. A natural thing.

If, she thought, someone had told me a year past that I’d be supping with Nords at their table and fair entangled with the Bear of Markarth as his lover, I’d have jeered and called them a boorish fool.

Regardless of whether she lived or died in the months to come, Nemain thought - she was no longer the woman she used to be.

“Nemain! Look!” Fastred clapped her hands. “Iona just crawled to the fireplace and - oh no. Stop! Ack, baby, ew...She’s strewn ash all over everything! Take that firepoker out of her mouth, Da!”

Lulled into a placid complacency, the Dragonborn sighed as her full belly strained against the laces of her bodice. Watching as wee Iona was carried off red-faced and screaming to be washed by Boti, it brought a smile to her lips, to see the obvious tender care with which the Fellstar farmers treated their bairns. Sounds of conversation rushed past her as though she were a rock parting some stream. Words babbled that meant nothing beyond the audible noise of it. Soothing and safe.

“-you hear? About Korvanjund?”

Smearing chicken grease even further across her cheek, Nemain suppressed a yawn. “Whorrahuh? What about Korvanjund?”

“Dearheart, she is too tired for gossip,” scolded Boti. She rocked a now-clean Iona in her cradle near the hearth, her knitting in a tangled snarl upon her lap. “Let her rest.”

“No, I want to hear it. What gossip?”

“Well,” Jofthor continued, “There’s been a sort of standoff at the spot between soldiers of the Legion and some of those Stormcloaks. Seems they’re both keen on finding that crown of old King Borgas. Y’know...” his aged blue eyes twinkled in the darkling light. “The Jagged Crown? Crafted of real
dragon teeth and bone? Perhaps you’ve heard of it in songs and tales, Breton?”

“Maw unleashing razor snow, of dragons from the blue brought down. Births the walking winter's woe, the High King in his Jagged Crown.” Nemain drawled. Scooping up a handful of bilberries, she accidentally squished one while bringing the lot to her mouth. She was going to make herself sick, but shit if it didn’t feel good to have a full stomach for once. “Aye, I know of it. But why the rush? Doesnae a Moot determine the King, after all?”

“...if there’s to be a Moot, what with the war and all,” Jofthor muttered. “You a scholar or something? Can’t say I’ve ever heard an outlander quote the entire stanza without guessing. Well, my people have a hearty respect for their legends...and what is more goddamn legendary than the crown of kings?”

“Shh, Joff! Little pitchers have big ears!” Boti hissed, tilting her head towards Fastred. The teen rolled her eyes, occupied washing dishes.

“Right.” Jofthor looked not a bit ashamed. “As I was saying, talk alone has made the taking of the crown more weighty than it might have normally been. Goodwives and warriors alike are clucking from here to Riften that whoever seizes the crown from ole Borgas must be blessed by the gods. And whoever holds such favor with our deities…”

“...has that much more oomph when it comes to legitimizing who wears the crown.” Nemain finished, feeling no longer tired but excited.

“Here - I’ve a map, though it be a terribly shoddy one. This one’s from the Greybeards, and they doon get out much. Can you mark where Korvanjund be?”

The Nord farmer and his wife gaped at her incredulously. “Lass, I’ve just been telling ya that two armies are fighting over the barrow and an undead king’s crown. Why in Kyne’s mercy would you want to go towards that battlefield? You should be fleeing far south and west, where your kind flourish!”

Carefully wiping her mouth, Nemain flattened her map on the table and fixed both Nords with a tart look. “Och, and I thought you weren’t like those numpty Stormcloaks, thinking Skyrim be ‘only for the Nords’ and such twaddle.”

“I did not say that, I merely-”

“Really. Thought you were more even keel than that. More...understanding. Plenty of folk been born and raised in Skyrim what are nae Nords. Myself, for example.”

“She’s right, Da, if you’d only let me leave this dreary farm I could show you! Take you all to Riften where there is juggling and bards and Dunmer men and-” Fastred yelled, only to be silenced by a quelling look from her father.

Sighing, Jofthor shook his head as Fastred left - her cheeks burning in indigent youthful rage as she carted out the washwater. Nemain heard the young Nord curse as water splashed out, more sloshing accompanied by oaths that raised her eyebrows high. Creative, that swear. Didnae learn that from any soul in Ivarstead.

“Talos save us, I’ll mark it for you. But I will not be held responsible for what happens to you, Nemain. You’ve been a good friend, so I’ll pray for you to take care. I’d join you to guard your back, but I have responsibilities.”

The man groaned, as Boti ceased her knitting and gave him a compassionate smile. “Raising a family
in these dark times, traveler? Gods, it is hard.”

If her mind had not been so linear, she might have caught her slip. For draugrs and undead kings were fresh in her thoughts, not the travails of family life. *I’ve raised aplenty of buried kin for Samhain, for the ancestors to speak to their progeny. Tis hardly a strain.* “Huh. Not if they’re buried close enough to each other,” Nemain murmured, intent upon the symbol she had scratched that indicated Korvanjund Barrow.

*If she took a wagon, the travel time would be cut by more than half. Thank Dibe’s tight pert nipples for the fortune she had gleaned from Mzulfit and Blackreach. God it was good to have money. Idly she squeezed the small pouch that held a sachet of pearls, hidden close to her heart.*

Jofthor scratched his head. “What?”

*Oops. “What?”*

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**BLAAAUOOOM!**

The fireball impacted with a satisfying *thwop*, ensnaring the being that had bitten through his boot almost to the bone. Leaving an icy, searing pain that must be ignored. For more of the ankle-biters remained.

Caught aflame, the agile speck of bluish-white light exploded in a boom of concussive magic. Shaking the nearby hovels upon their stone foundations. And there were yet dozens more of the creatures darting around the empty thoroughfare of Winterhold. Not a soul in sight, man or Mer.

Just the whistling wind, the sea. Snow and whatever these odd anomalies seemed to be.

Wiping the sparkling dust from where it coated his cheek, Ancano growled at the sight. *Too late!* Something obviously had occurred since they had left more than a month past. Some ill craft that had augmented the Eye of Magnus...he could *feel* its influence from here. Like a crawling, creeping presence taking up space in the crevices between his eye sockets and skull. Trying to have its way with him.

He would *not* allow it. Spurring his horse from hobbled trot to a full canter, Ancano leaned low as they blew past more of the shrieking, hissing wraiths. At least they looked like wraiths, from afar...at closer purview it was obvious that they were more amorphous than that.

Almost like streaks of light. Pure aetherium given form, though it was not possible. Nothing he had ever read had prepared him for any of this. The Eye, Saarthal, these creatures.

Ancano was out of his depth, though he was loathe to admit it.

Slowing his steed as they approached the cracked bridge, an ominous rumble shook the entire structure. Frozen, Ancano waited; listening carefully for any signs of life. Muffled sounds and screams of fighting were up ahead. Surely at least a few of the students yet lived.
He dismounted and began tugging the mare by the reins towards the college, praying to Phynaster, Trinimac and even Sheogorath that the bridge would stay intact. This entire situation minded him too well of the Crystal Tower’s fall some two hundred years prior. The abandoned town, invading creatures...though thankfully this foe fought with ice rather than fire.

Cold was unpleasantly damp, yet he had grown accustomed to the chill. Ancano did not think he could ever adapt to the smell of burning flesh. To the raw ache of burning; scars that healed in thick, weeping weals. A pain unlike any other. Almost by habit, the Mer scratched his shoulder where his scars puckered the cloth. Taking a deep breath, he entered the courtyard of Winterhold college. Casting a protective ward, just in case. It did not hurt to be cautious.

Blood, spattered on the snow. Still steaming...fresh? Bodies like ragdolls flung at odd angles. And sparkling dust everywhere, coating everything. None moving but Mirabelle Ervine, crouched as she was over one of the dead.

Ushering his mare into a side storage room, Ancano stroked the horse’s soft nose and whispered soothing words in Eldar to it. Retrieving an apple from his pocket, he allowed the animal to lip the treat...washing his hands with snow so that the juices would not stain his already wrecked robes. Closing the door carefully, he swept towards the Breton mage with waxing concern. “What happened here?”

Her short hair flopped as she turned on him, bloodshot eyes hard. “You!”

“Yes, it is I.” So Savor Aren is dead, then. Pity. The old Dunmer looked almost passed out in slumber, if one ignored the telltale signs of frostbite. Part of his grey hand had been practically blackened, and as Ancano stared in an inert stupor the rest of the Mer’s fingers dissolved into ash. Shock damage, evidently. What next? Atronachs, daedric kynreeves, a dragon?

“Let me guess. Someone here in your assemblage of doltish pupils thought it a brilliant idea to prod the Orb of Oddity, yes? To perhaps pull upon the obvious aura of power emanating from the artifact to better their own spellwork?” Five to one odds that it was one of the Altmer females who had instigated this mess, as his race was ever so much more sensitive to the vagaries of magic than any man or lesser Mer could be. The sibilance of sheer power roiling from the Hall of Elements made his teeth clench. Made him hard.

Mirabelle wrung her hands, the carved lines around her mouth deepening as she scowled at Ancano. “Please - tell me you managed to track down the Synod, or the Staff of Magnus?”

“You were told to find it, weren't you?” Ancano remained silent as the woman choked back a sob. “You, and that Dragonborn Savos thought was so damned clever - you might be our last hope. Where is she? Did Nemain come with you?”

“No. I know that I lack your good graces, Mirabelle, but I urge you to tell me everything that has transpired since my absence. It is my duty as advisor to the College and an emissary of the Thalmor to ensure the safety of its mage subjects. What. Happened.”

The woman sniffed, yet her expression remained watchful. “Faralda and Nirya happened. They always argue - really, I thought little of it until their squabbling interfered with one of the lectures and...oh merciful Zenithar.”

Ancano continued studying the Breton as her words cut off with a tired cough. Staying alert, aware of the every movement in the abandoned courtyard. It was only a matter of time until the light-wraiths stuck once again. “Ancano. I don’t like you. I think it the worst of circumstances that it is you here, and not the Dragonborn. Yet I will not turn away help if it is offered, even from such an
unlikely source. If the stories about the staff are true, if it really can absorb a tremendous amount of power, maybe we can break through the...ward that lies within."

Flexing his fingers, the Altmer allowed a spill of flame to flare from each fingertip. At this rate, he doubted any would remain alive inside. He knew how pleasing the cloying hooks of power were, the sorrow they entailed.

And how deep they could dig. Surely my cousin is yet alive in Auridon. They would tell me, if only to brag were he to be deposed. Would they not? “I know where the Staff lies. Through the efforts of myself and the Dragonborn we discovered it to be in the place known as the Labyrinthian. Tell me about this ward. Does it repel you physically from entering the College, or can one communicate through the barrier? Who is responsible?”

“What?” Mirabelle covered another cough with an ash-smeared hand. “Are you... Are you sure? The staff is there? That can't be a coincidence."

They both whirled as one, casting both firebolts and lightning at the aetherial wisp snaking towards them. Shriveling, its death scream seemed to echo as it disintegrated.

"The Arch-Mage. Savos. Before... before he died." Stepping around the small pile of twinkling dust, Mirabelle extended her hand.

In it lay a circlet of fine make, the gemstones glittering like ice despite the grey skies above. Taking the circlet, Ancano immediately felt a surge of mana course through him. A powerful piece of jewelry indeed.

"He... He gave me something just a little while ago. He told me it was from Labyrinthian, and that I would know what to do with it when the time came. I think... I think he meant this for you, then. Or the Dragonborn. As she is not here, I will entrust it to you."

Brushing back the limp, unwashed locks of his hair, Ancano placed the circlet upon his forehead. And smiled wanly, for it fit as though it had been made for him. He could practically hear Nemain’s rolling brogue now. An’ who’s a pretty wee princess now, Anny-can can? Pluck some posies and dangle them round yore ears, for it does inspire me to sing this song aboot an elf maiden I heard once. Or be it a dirty limerick? Oooh, do yer ears tingle when the magic of that eyesore rubs against them so? Purrrr!

He amused himself by imagining what else the Dragonborn would have had to say about the entire clusterfuck that was this tragedy, while Mirabelle prattled on. “I'm not sure why, but there was something very personal about it for him. He went to the Labyrinthian when he was but a student, I think. Why can’t I remember what happened that kept him from speaking of it, beyond a bare mention now and again? Huh. Now get out of here. Bring back that staff before the Eye brings the whole College down around us."

Flicking the length of his hair - it had grown past his shoulders, he needed to cut it soon - back and away, Ancano looked around at the bodies decorating the courtyard. Making what had once been a serene place to read a moldering tomb. “I can leave within the hour. I must visit Birna’s post to pick up some fresh supplies, but my horse has been rested - I can cast Courage upon her if needs be, to break through the city. The faster that ward around the Eye is dispelled with the staff, the sooner you may see your mage students to safety.”

“First we must clear Winterhold of those blasted frost wisps. The Nords must have been sensible enough to batten down inside their homes, but their reprieve will not last long. Will you join me?”
Ancano curled his lip in something that might have been a smile. Judging by Mirabelle Ervine’s shudder, it was not a pretty sight. “With pleasure. Lead on.”

As they strode off towards the bridge, Ancano looked down at Mirabelle’s fervent whisper in mute surprise. "If we can't stop this, what happens to the rest of Skyrim?"

Keeping his eyes straight forward, the Altmer stretched his arms. Rolled his shoulders in preparation to do battle.

“I do not know what will happen if we fail. But that’s never going to happen.”

The Breton paused at the cusp of the bridge. Staring out at the city filled with floating blue lights, she waved her hand in an elegant arc. Casting Stoneflesh upon herself. “And how can you be so sure?”

“Because I will not allow it.”

Shielding himself in turn, Ancano offered his arm to escort her. Giving him a lifted brow in return, Mirabelle slid her small hand to rest upon his forearm. In this way, they walked in dignified unity down towards Winterhold. To wage war.

“I have an old friend in the tavern who likely is more than willing to help us clear the area of these pests. You are not alone, Mirabelle Ervine, in the protection and defense of this College. Now before we become distracted, tell me everything you know about Faralda and Nirya, and the unfortunate altercation that sparked all of this rot.”

Chapter End Notes

aaand a little something-something to make you laugh.

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/807833251879927228/

And I know this is Mannimarco, but this is just how I imagine Ancano with his pretty little tiara to look - kind of like LOTR's Thranduil. 'I am pretty, but mess with me and I'll fuck you up.' LOL.

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/678002918872415681/

As ever, read and review!
The Remains of the Day

Chapter Notes

A Celtic song for Nemain: Clannad, singing Caisleáin Óir
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHEoJ0jbA4&index=39&list=PLEVV7DK00mJJVlu-ndqE-OsUIB5OJnQyE

And a Viking song for Ulfric. Tyr by Wardruna, from their album Ragnarok.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co8Qo4hTyb4

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The fir decays
The one that stands in the hamlet:
Neither bark nor foliage protects it.
So is a man,
Who is loved by no one:
How should he live a long time?”

-Viking Havamal prose

The sun beat down against his bare head and shoulders as Ulfric maintained a repetitive, loose sweep with his scythe. The aches gained from toiling in the field had receded, for there was nothing but the sweetness of brisk wind and damp earth in his nostrils. The heat of the cornflower blue day, the golden sweep of wheat rippling like cresting waves all around him. Peace settled deeper inside Ulfric with every twist of his elbow, every stack of wheat he bundled into a sheaf.

Lift, swing, twist. Sweep, shear, swathe. He was surrounded by gleaming piles of wealth, grain yet unwinnowed. Gold more priceless than any ore a miner could salvage from the rocky crust of Mundus. Treasure perishable, vital to life. Wheat.

Standing straight, Ulfric placed the scythe upon the ground and pushed his thumbs into the aching divot of his lower back. Sighing, he mopped his brow with the rag he had pocketed for such purposes, smiling when he saw Belyn Hlaalu approach.

The Dunmer’s grey skin was also heavily beaded with sweat. Offering him the unused portion of his rag, Belyn dipped his head in acknowledgement as he scoured his own forehead clean. “Old Adisla says we are to make ready for the war council soon.”

Wandering over to where the trough of fresh water lay, Ulfric scooped up a dipperful and poured it over his head. Though scything through foes with a sword was significantly more interesting than
cutting grain, Ulfric preferred the simplicity...the edible rewards of reaping to the more inconclusive aftereffects of strategy.

And this council was to be one of epic proportion. Every Stormcloak general from Windhelm to Haafingar would be there, along with all his thanes and trusted advisors. He only hoped that it would prove a productive meeting...and not another night of squabbling dignitaries, wasted mead and bruised feelings. The Jarl of Eastmarch was thoroughly done with the over-delicate sensibilities of bleeding heart courtiers. *So what* if he had not yet taken a wife from the fifteen Nord maidens whose fathers had sent portraits (most too flatteringly depicted to be true) to his hall? The Hold had not fallen apart quite yet in the absence of a Lady.

Let the sycophants try to balance the needs of six different ethnic groups and four differing landscapes in famine and wartime. He’d gladly hand over the reins for a week, just to watch the odious prats that smirked and spoke such venomous barbs be felled by the daily tasks that were the purview of the Jarl.

*See how well they do in my stead. Horkerfuckers.* “Did Adisla receive such summons from Hatti and Skjora? Or is this a clarion call for the noon meal, for I confess I did not think the hour so late.”

As the Dunmer farmer took his turn drenching himself to cool down, Adisla popped her head out from the cottage. Her wrinkled face was crumpled in a disapproving sniff. “Master Hlaalu! My Jarl,” she squawked, granting her lord the barest courtesy of being slightly less huffy than she was with her own employer. “You’d best be cleaning up. I’ve had my orders from Hatti and Skjora themselves. See my missive! From the Palace of Kings, by thunder!” She waggled a scrap of parchment in the air like a flag.

Ulfric groaned. It was official. His brief tenure as a farmer was over. “Thank you for the use of your fields, Master Hlaalu. It was...rejuvenating.”

Belyn grinned, his sharp white teeth stark against the dark grey skin. “Think nothing of it, Jarl. Not much a spot of sunshine and hard labor can’t cure. Here.” Clapping his hand to the Jarls’ own heftier paw, Ulfric broke free with a fistful of gold that earned the Dunmer a confused look. “What’s this?”

“Honest pay for honest work. Probably the most honest thing we’ll do this day.” Dipping his head towards the city walls, Belyn refused to take back the septims and merely scoffed; scratching at the faint black hairs that curled against his chest. “No. Keep it. Put that lot towards wooing one of those fair lasses that are turning up their skirts your way. All the Hold will breathe a bit easier once an engagement has been announced.” Bobbing his head one last time, the Dunmer began walking towards his cottage house.

“Best be moving along. I’ll see you soon enough. Enjoy the ladies.”

“The enjoyment will be entirely yours, I fear.”

Belyn scoffed. “Wasted on you, then. Send them my way. I’ll ensure their hospitality...personally.”

“Their fathers may have something to say about that. Until later, Steward.”

Walking barefoot through lush green grass towards the bay, he could not help inhaling in great gusts the salty aroma of the sea. Despite Nemain’s mockery, the Sea of Ghosts was not in the least bit fishy.
Well. At least not here, away from the docks and his trawling fleet’s latest catch. Savoring the sun on his back one last time, Ulfric jumped into the bay with a loud whoop...

-and promptly began to swim for the dockside doors. His arms sliced through the water, the shock of the cold water pleasant. As he pulled himself through the sea, arms slicing in an even roll, an Argonian bobbed up to the surface right next to him.

Shireena? Shiva? No. “Shahvee.” Spitting some of the salty liquid out, Ulfric raked back the wet hair from where it covered his eyes. “How’s the oyster catch this season?”

The Argonian bared her teeth in what Ulfric hoped was a warm smile. It was hard to tell with the lizard folk. “Oh yesss.” She lisped, maintaining her buoyancy with an ease that Ulfric envied. “Great harvestss thiss year. Your table will be bursssting with ssshellfish, my Jarl.”

Ulfric despised shellfish. But it did not hurt to be polite. After moving the location of the Argonian Assemblage from their tumbledown warehouse into the updated manse of Hjerim (skipping over the middle class straight into the Valunstrad, to the horror of their wealthy neighbors) he had been given all sorts of ‘treasures’ discovered underwater. Rare shells, jewels from shipwrecks....an Argonian child had even brought an entire cauldron full of clam and seaweed chowder and had watched, black eyes unblinking, as Ulfric was forced to choke an entire bowl down to show his appreciation.

What would Nemain have had to say about that? ‘Chowder still be vittles, ye daft knucklehead. Ye be lucky it wasnae bugs. Or dirt! Or rotten stinking scow! Eat it up right quick, or I’ll scoff the lot!’

Losing his momentum as he treaded water, Ulfric received a wave in the face for his troubles. Where was the Reachwoman now? It was well into the third Fredas of Mid Year. He found himself growing ever more anxious as days passed by and no news of her whereabouts reached his ears.

And Galmar had not returned yet, either. Such delays never boded well.

“And thank you for your efforts, Shahvee. Here,” he threw her the small sack of gold Belyn Hlaalu had given him. “See if you can’t find some more of those black pearls, yes? Good hunting.”

“May you alwaysss danesse upon the water, Jarl Ssstormcloak.” Barely rippling the water, the Argonian shook the clinking bag of septims in farewell and dove under the surface; a mere flick of her scaly tail betraying where she had been.

Climbing up the algae-softened ladder to the docks, Ulfric squared his shoulders and made his way towards the double doors that would lead to the palace.

He had dawdled long enough.

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“-no! The Grey Quarter might well be the Snow Quarter once again, but a new coat of paint and some masonry work cannot change the fact that we Dunmer are treated as second class citizens in Windhelm! My daughter cannot even play in the market without being eyed by the guards as though she is a thief!”

“-the Argonian Assemblage, in the Valunstrad? My noble ancestors are rolling in their graves! Surely the Jarl has lost his wits. Those pond sucking scale-skins shall creep into our houses at night and rob
us blind!"

“...waiting for over a month with my little Gudrun to be summoned, yet the Jarl hasn’t cast a second
glance at her beauty. Perhaps the rumors of his incapability are founded in truth?”

“...Eh. I’ve heard he prefers men. You should give up and head back to your lands...I have it on
good authority that the dwarf hedge mage is truly a lad in disguise. Flat as a boardwalk on the chest,
that one.”

“No?! I-”

“Ships! Bloody buggering ships we are building, when we should focus our efforts and timber into
crafting siege weapons! How will we take down Whiterun without proper ballista and an armored
battering ram?! It is as though nothing flows between the general’s ears but...but hot air!”

_It had begun. Talos save him, but the cynics were having a field day with all the fodder he had
provided of late._

Pushing his way through the gossiping throng, Ulfric stalked towards Ysgramor’s throne. He had
dressed in his usual court garb of chainmail and bear pelt robe, although he had eschewed his sword.
He could not spare the time it would have taken to properly fasten the belt around his waist, settling
instead for knives shoved into each of his boots and secreted about his person. It would have to do,
for now, averse as he was to attending court functions so unprotected.

But it wasn’t as though he ever went anywhere unarmed. Not really. The more his temper twisted
within him, the more meditation it required to calm the ‘Thu’um that arose in the back of his throat.
Always there, always tense in his chest...biding its time until the full expression of the Voice could
be unleashed.

Which was not, he reminded himself, here and now in front of all these witnesses. Were he to make a
show of using the Thu’um to impress, he would rather use it in a more practical venue such as a
battlefield. Fallen as he was in Argneir’s sight, he knew - Kynareth’s gift was certainly no party trick.

The beard that he had allowed to grow in the past months had just reached the point where it no
longer felt sharp, yet he scratched it. _A bad habit, that_. He needed to regain his court mask - that
bland arrogance and hauteur that would not crack, no matter what was said or done in his presence
this day. It did not do, to reveal any trace or tell of nervousness.

_Blood in the water, and the slaughterfish would swarm._ Long years of ruling had instilled into him
this truth. Show no weakness. Show no fear.

The chattering din dropped away as the Jarl stepped up to the stone bier and seated himself with a
silent oath. Motioning for all who had respectfully risen to be seated at table, he laced his fingers
together and looked over the assembled nobles and thanes meaningfully.

They gradually quieted, some with a distinct rumble or cough. They were all here - a glittering crowd
of fine silks, furs and cold eyes. Every Thane, Steward, General and property owning nobility. He
waited for their complete attention before he began.
“Brothers and sisters of Skyrim, welcome. Your presence at this council brings me both honor and gladdens my heart, for who could not be lifted at the sight of such stalwart warriors? I pray to Talos that such hearts remain free and true - unencumbered by the blood that must surely be shed to gain the freedoms we long for, in this the motherland of mankind.”

“It brings me great pleasure to tell you of our triumphs. Forty longships ride the swells in our harbors, outfitted with ramheads, oars and enough weaponry to slay any dogsons who would dare attack our shores. With this fleet, I plan to blockade the port of Solitude - rendering the Imperial base bereft of further supplies, information and reinforcements. The Crimson Wave pirates have agreed to sign on as privateers beneath our flag in this fight. May we honor their bold daring, as we extend a hand in friendship...and keep the other concealing a blade in the event of treachery. For pirates are not to be trusted - perhaps especially in times of war.”

“As for Windhelm herself, all stonework and timber has been fortified. Thanks to the generosity of our Dunmer citizens in paying equal taxes besides their Nord brethren, we have renovated the majority of the Grey Quarter, with updated gutters, doors and drainage. New paint has been applied, and the title of Grey Quarter - what was once a hiss and a byword - shall now become an appellation that denotes pride, not poverty. Our combined taxes and the many efforts of Nords and Dunmer alike have improved the living standards to a scale that even the Valunstrad could be proud of.”

“In speaking of the Valunstrad, the house of Hjerim now stands as an Assemblage for those of Argonian race living and working in our fair Hold. I have thoroughly vetted each and every one of the Hist Children who dwell now in the richest quarter of Windhelm - a symbol of promised prosperity and peace. Never let it be said furthermore that Eastmarch does not care for her own.”

Fixing those who broke his recitation with a pointed look, Ulfric slumped back even further in his seat, trying for a nonchalance he did not feel. He waited for the whispering to die down once more. He could be patient. He had time. These words had been written, rewritten and expounded until he could make a perfect speech of it; he had even murmured it ad nauseum during his daily blade practice.

“Those who are not involved day-to-day in the battle we fight against the Empire for Skyrim should be enlightened as to the current situation of our soldiers. Our eight entrenched camps are fully fitted and manned with the most capable and loyal warriors any man could ask for. In the wake of Falkreath town’s destruction, I have sent an extra fist of Stormcloaks to patrol the area in hopes of gaining new recruits, as well as more merchants and followers to our cause. Praise Talos for the opportunity that awaits despite such tragedy. For if we control the Pale Pass, we have cut off yet another pathway in which the filthy lucre and swords of the Empire could have been borne north. A great victory, and a wise one. May we hold it fast against all who would pull Falkreath from under us.”

“Which brings me to my final statement.” Tapping his fingers against the stone armrest, Ulfric kept his face resolute. “I am of a mind to take Jarl Balgruuf of Whiterun to task for his indecision in the conflict which besets him on all sides. A lesser man might have bowed beneath the strain. I intend for him to break.”

“For, if he could be turned to our just cause, then a mighty ally he would make! But if he be of a mind to join with the Imperial milkdrinkers - those whoresons who bought Skyrim’s peace with trade...
and treasure! Bartering what could never be bought with our honor, our very gods! - then I say we rain down Oblivion upon them. Such as the likes of Whiterun has never seen, nor never will again!"

Standing before the council, many of whom no longer bothered to pretend that they were not rapidly discussing his speech, Ulfric made his voice loud. Lending the Thu’um to give a weight to his words, to influence these - the most stalwart of his supposedly 'loyal' subjects.

His voice rolled around the throne room, a dark thunderclap meant to impress. And to terrify. “What say you? What say you to this, Men and Women of the East?”

Discord answered, as almost in unity the assembled Nords, Dunmer and scattered Imperials and Redguards began to voice their objections. Some waving fists, others flapping papers in the air, as Ulfric crossed his arms and sighed in open vexation.

“My Jarl! Gudrun has been waiting oh-so patiently for your summons, for she is the sweetest of Nord maidens, yet Kyne could weep to see her hand wield an axe, it-”

“Vampires ‘ave attacked my miners and farmers, my Jarl, by the Forebears what are ya going to do about them, eh?! Families dragged from their crofts in the night! Thralls robbing us of wealth an’ workers! Where will the ore come from to build shields and swords if I cannot smelt steel!”

“-Sod off! I can yell if I want, woman! Balgruuf will never see reason, why, he’s in their Shor-damned pockets! Where d’ye think all that produce gets shipped to?! Cyrodiil, ya thick clods! Straight into the bellies of the Empire and all its Legion soldiers!”

“-justice ! It is not enough! We Dunmer will take your snowback scrapings and raise a -”

The iron-bound doors of the Palace of Kings slammed open with a clap-bang.

Thick fog poured into the hall, streaming in like curdled milk as faint screams and speech were hastily hushed, for all eyes were turned to the figures that now walked a stately pace inside. Heedless of the guards who made as if to bar their way; only to wander off dazed and distracted as the leading figure raised a delicate hand one way. Then another.

As taken aback as anyone else, Ulfric remained standing. Amazed to see Nemain emerge like a wraith from curling wisps of mist. Flanked by silent skeletons shrouded from skull to metatarsals in motheaten veils, the Reachwitch was almost entirely concealed by the drooping blue-black folds of her robes. Robes which trailed behind her nearly a half span as she walked, oh so slowly...the head of their odd little procession.

Yet, he knew it was her. He knew. He could not say how, so altered she had become since Winterhold, yet it was in the way the woman - garbed in the traditional garb of a mystic, a Völva mixed with Forsworn accents- walked. The shape of those lips, so familiar - pulled in a knowing smirk, blackened as they had become by some drip-dark dye.

He knew her face.
It was her. Cocky and self assured, like the very statues of Sovngarde would bow before her if she so chose.

Beads, small skulls and feathers sewn into her sleeves clinked and rattled with every step, eerie accompaniment to the snap-dry stepping approach of her summoned thralls, for none else in the hall dared make any other sound. Further behind, Ulfric spotted Galmar. The man’s face shifted only slightly upon locking eyes, and the Stone-Fist gave the barest shake of his head when Ulfric entreated him with a look. In his arms, he carried a cushion upon which sat an object veiled in black.

A fine rage caused Ulfric’s fingers to tremble. Remaining vigilant, he squeezed them into a fist. Apparently, his general and his lover thought it unnecessary to inform him of this...this latest stunt. He would have words with them, later.

_I am glad they have come back, but...what is the meaning of all this? What are Nemain and Galmar playing at now?_

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Raising the bird skull staff she carried high in the air, Nemain brought it down to snap against the stone floor with a resounding _clack_! Beneath blackened lips, her rope-wealed throat bobbed, as the rasping sound of her shaking inhalation filled the stillness.

Then, words.

Words that echoed, as sibilant and quiet as his previous roars had been loud. Yet none failed to hear her. None could avoid hearing her.

She spoke.

“Silence I bid ye! _Ragnarök_ be at yore door!

Shield low, run fast! Kill first, die last!

What was once shall soon be, ever as it was before.”

With a wide sweep of her arm, the Forsworn rattled her bones and wailed a keening dirge as Galmar walked past her. The skeleton maids flanked him, men and women parting wide to admit the grim threesome all the way to stand before the Jarl of Eastmarch.

Turning to Galmar as one, the skeletons lifted bony hands towards the cushion he held. Delicately lifting the veil, they disappeared into dust with a dim pop...the thin black cover fluttering to the ground with their ashes, out of sight and out of mind.

-For there went a soft sweep of sound around the fogbound room at the viewing of it. As the aged patina of what could only be the Jagged Crown was revealed!

He scratched his beard. _Well, I’ll be damned. I owe Galmar a drink. Old Borgas didn’t lose the crown during the Wild Hunt after all._
Reappearing almost at his elbow, Ulfric nearly bit off his tongue when Nemain began to dance around the stone bier of Ysgramor’s throne. Spinning, aggressively lurching towards her captive audience as they shied away, she twirled her robes...further parting the dignitaries from them both as she ululated and howled, wild and tameless.

...Playing the part of the crazed seeress to perfection.

He would have smiled at her theatrics, but that would have belied her efforts. So he remained stoic, as the tiny woman lifted the relic from Galmar’s hands and turned to him, fingers poised around the heavy circlet.

Her hood had slipped back in her exertions, and Ulfric could now see - her grey eyes were practically glowing with elation. He felt a bit breathless, himself.

Again she spoke, no longer a whisper but a shout. A Shout without Thu’um that crashed against the walls, that visibly impacted with a shivering ripple all who were audibly affected.

“A new era shall rise from the ashes of the auld,

Give oaths rejoicing, with nary a groan!

All hail Ulfric Stormcloak and his proud Easterling folk!

True High King of the Jagged Throne!”

No longer content to remain meek observers, one of the Thanes yelled from the back of the crowd. Scanning for the speaker, Ulfric thought it might have been Siggy Wargclaw. *Ah...the older of his Thanes; the one with a horsey face and a sharp tongue. Pity she gave the former to her daughter.*

“And who are you, to bring our Jarl the Stormcrown? How do we know that a filthy Forsworn hasn’t done somethin’ to it, to bring us even more trouble in these wicked times?”

His inquiry was met with grunts and cries of agreement. “Who are you?” was joined with “Why?”, and even a shriek of “Kill the spy! Kill her dead!”

Almost as though she were ignoring them, Nemain lifted the crown with staid ceremony and slowly handed it to him. Clumsy with adrenaline; he felt like a fool as he barely managed to extend his hands in time, to catch the damn thing.

The crown was yellowed with age and warm to the touch; all lumpy with bone hammered carefully into what appeared to be some ancient grade of iron. Looking at it critically, Ulfric thought that what seemed to be fangs could also perhaps be horns. *Was he holding a dovah’s skull or a mandible? Why did thinking about this shit matter, at such a moment as this?* For he held the crown, the Talos-kissed Jagged Crown! Harald’s helm, Borgas’s bane! The crown that was said to be imbued with the wisdom and power of all the royal heads who had previously worn it!

His mind whirred with all the possibilities that this strategic maneuver had made available. Plots bent and unwound like spinning wheels, the threads knitting together...so close... *Focus!* For Nemain had turned, and was speaking again.

“Who be the one who calls, who seeks - the prophetess’ vision, to see?”
Peering at the illustrious ones gawking upon her, Nemain frowned and folded her arms. “Enough it be that I come to y’here, t’ye now. Nae longer an enemy, you sodding gits - so mote it be!”

It didn’t seem right to wear the crown now. There had been no Moot. Skyrim was still at war. And he...Ulfric was not High King. Not yet. Not ever, a dour voice in his head sneered. Your fate likely ends in a hangman’s noose, or the chopping block, Butcher. Your guts spilled upon some godsforsaken field of war. Think you deserving of such rewards?

Shoving his doubts aside, Ulfric made himself lower the crown to rest reverently upon Ysgramor’s stone seat. A fitting place of display...and it made an excellent reason to finalize the meeting on a high note. Turning to stand and face Nemain and Galmar, he realized the fog was slowly dispersing...the magic that must have created it fading along with the crowd’s patience.

No longer being entertained by poetry or speeches, his guests were steadily growing restless. There were dark mutterings among the whispers he heard, and in a sudden stupid panic Ulfric realized that a small gaggle of young Nord women had congregated near the front. Making cow eyes at him, and giggling behind their hands.

Shit. Shitshitshit! He nearly scratched his beard in agitation, managing to stop himself by clasping both hands just in time. He had avoided them thus far, he could continue dodging the more determined ones still.

And speaking of time, it is high time to make an end of this pageantry. “Thank you for this mighty gift, Galmar Stone-Fist and Nemain - our newest court mage! Long may Windhelm be blessed by your eminent and enviable talents.”

Galmar bowed, and Nemain bobbed her head almost perfunctorily. With a flick of his fingers, Ulfric gestured for them both to stand one step below him on either side. As he parted his lips, frantically searching for words that would appease the mix of emotions he saw clearly upon the faces of his constituents, Nemain beat him to the chase.

Again.

At least, he pondered, the woman is finally with me. Finally on my side. But what is she exactly to me now?

He listened in growing agitation as his mage finished the show with a decidedly apropos rhyme.

“Aedra watch, Daedra plot
Mer believes where Man forgot
As Alduin flies in black winged rot
The death-making of all we be!

Hark! The World Eater comes!

Fight back! Dinnae stint! Bang yore drums!”
For we be the homelands own daughters an’ sons,
                      In Skyrim’s defense shall we flee?’”

Where before had been outright hostility and fear, there was now battle-pride. A fire in their eyes that Ulfric himself knew very well. Drums were indeed pounded, horns pulled from pockets and blown. Fists pumped in the air, punctuated with axes and sword tips as the crowd hollered and roared.

“-Nay! We’ll fight! One shot, one kill! Skyriiim!”

“King Ulfric! King Ulfric! Stormcloaks rain down blood, guts and gore...kill kill kill!”

“Hah! ‘One shot, one kill,’ eh? No luck, all skill - ya fool bastard! That’s how the couplet goes, aye? For the Nooords!”

And out of the corner of his eye, Ulfric could see Nemain struggle not to smile; the black substance she had smeared upon herself leeching the whiteness from her teeth until they were ghoulishly gray. To his right, Galmar had joined in with the battle cries with a yell that contained more obscenity than words, hoisting his battleaxe and nearly braining Ulfric with it as he waved the weapon and screamed.

-Which seemed to tilt Nemain into fully giving up the fight, for she now grinned broadly up at him; her smaller fingers winding into his in a welcome hold.

His chest thumped oddly out of beat as he gripped her hand tightly in return.

Realizing they were both standing there - grinning beatifically like fools - Ulfric began dragging Nemain away from the crowd, towards the safety of the war room where they could make their escape. Galmar is standing right there...he’ll keep watch over the crown.

He grinned even more widely at the thought of any thief being stupid enough to steal the very Jagged Crown from where it lay. For where could any man pawn such a thing? What would the going rate be...ten thousand septims and huge tracts of land? I really must ask Galmar how they managed to plunder all the way through that moldering ruin. For truth, I did not think the crown even rested in Korvanjund at all.

More war cries followed them, as heavy hands patted his shoulders and back in well wishing. He grabbed as many hands as he could touch with his free hand...avoiding surprise kisses from the maidens with alacrity, though a few managed to snag his chin. He was utterly sure that he wore that stupid smile still pasted on his face. For truly, there was no more composure to give.

Not on such a day as this!

“Blood and steel and vinegaaaar! We'll teach those faithless dogs who this land belongs to!”

“Hail King Ulfric and the Stormcloaks! Hail ‘em with great praise! Hail!”
He managed to shut and lock the war room door with some effort. Leaning against it, Ulfric sagged in abrupt exhaustion at the suddenness of it all.

_Talos preserve them all._ The council had gone better than he had ever dared to dream.

“Whew! Didja see their cods-damned faces?! Cor, what a riot! Haha, I think we whipped them into a right frenzy, Bear! Wha-”

In the middle of wondering just what exactly she had eaten to give her lips and teeth that disgusting tar-black dredge (and if it would stain him permanently should he kiss her) Ulfric was trampled by two Nemain-seeking projectiles.

Namely, Aventus and Sofie, who had snuck down from the second floor (where Hatti and Skjora had been instructed to cloister them). Seemingly without much success. “Ma! You’re back! Hey, I can’t really remember the story of Red Eagle, you - whoa, ack -ew! Gross! Don’t kiss me! What’s on your lips?!?”

“Miss Nemain! Miss Nemain! Did you get my soul gem? Didja!?”

Sinking to the ground in a furl of cloth, Nemain’s hood bunched around her neck as the two children clung to her furiously. Her rasping voice was hoarse with high emotion, yet Ulfric noted that the adopted Nord youths were not much better off. Though the girl openly wept, the boy betrayed nothing more than a mighty sniff and blotchy face. Ulfric nodded approvingly as the boy grinned openly at him and waved.

She _had_ saved them from the orphanage and the street. It certainly explained why the two children were so goddamned overjoyed to see the Reachwoman... though he found it hard to ignore the pang of jealousy that lanced through him upon being roundly ignored during their reunion hug.

_You’ll get over it._ Sauntering over to the war table, Ulfric began righting small placemarkers that had fallen to disarray - eavesdropping shamelessly as Nemain and her two foster children chatted in a furor of tangled conversation.

“Aretino you scampious pip, how you have grown! I daresay ye’ve grown at least a hand since I’ve been away!”

“Hah, I’m eating everything I can, like ya said Ma! Jarl says I might be able to join the guards or the army in a few years, if I keep practicing with the warriors every day!”

“Och well, good fer you Aventus. I dinnae doubt you’ll be a force tae be reckoned with not long in the future. And hello…”
Pulling back, Nemain grasped Sofie’s face in her hands. Despite the death tokens and smeared makeup, the woman’s expression had become uncommonly soft.

It was not an arrangement of features Ulfric was used to seeing on the Forsworn he knew. It made her look younger, somehow.

More tender. “Sofie, ah Sofie my darling mo chroi. I know we havenae gotten tae know each other well quite yet, for I had tae leave sae quickly after your adoption papers were signed. But I pray that’ll change soon enough, aye? C’mere and give us a real hug this time. Yer quite the chipper little lass now...all canny an’ powerful from what Wuunferth says.”

The rather plain faced girl perked up at her words. “Yes! I love learning from him! He’s real grumpy, but he sneaks me honey nut treats when cook isn’t looking! Says I’m a prodig- er, a prodi-gee at magic!”

“Hah! A girl after me own heart. I always wanted a girl child....and a boy, Aventus, dinnae sulk. Cor, an’ a prodigy at that! Come o’er here, ye adorable wee fear thuaidh; and give yer adopted Máthair a big sticky kiss! We’ll go and freeze all the noblelady’s frilly underpants later, you and me. Pfoar, t’will be a lark!”

Muffled by Nemain’s sleeve, Aventus made a disgusted sound. “Ewwwh...unnerpanns! Grosshh!”

Overhearing Ulfric’s stifled laughter, Nemain flicked the Dunmer obscenity-sign at him. With both middle fingers, which did nothing to halt his snorts. “Ye may no think sae in a couple a’ years, laddie boy. Please direct all such questions to Milord Bear at that opportune time. Gods, I’m nae ready t’mother a teenage boy just yet.”

Shying away, Sofie twisted her fingers in her lap. “Ooh! Teach me a frost spell and we can go right now! But I - I don’t think I can say that. That um...Forsworn word. Can...can I call you Ma, instead?”

Resting against the war table, Ulfric folded his arms and remained watchful as the woman hugged her foster children tightly. “Of course, dearies. Whatever rolls off the tongue the easiest, little pips. My taisce...wee little treasures! Of course.”

And when her glassy eyes finally found him, he winked and mouthed two words.

Welcome home.

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He was undressing, hooking his fingers into the hem of his pants later that evening when Nemain barged into his bedroom unannounced. Making him jerk in surprise - and nearly Shout her into the wall. “Trolls blood, don’t you ever knock?”

"Bear!” She exclaimed from where she stood in the doorway, freshly scrubbed and dressed for sleep. Astonishment colored her voice as if she had not expected to find him in his room, and then she grinned. "Yffre’s thumbs. You oughtta have seen yer face."
"You ought to have knocked."

"Why? Were you up to something naughty?"

Ulfric lifted an eyebrow. "And if I were?"

Nemain's lips pursed at that as if to keep back a smile, but Ulfric did not miss the way her eyes flicked to his half-made bed and back up to his bare chest again. "That sounds quite like a challenge, milord. Isnae there some saying aboot imagination no living up tae reality?"

"Then satisfy yourself with your imagination, Nemain." He had meant it to be a challenge; instead it came out like an invitation. And when Nemain’s face cracked wide with an evil grin, he coughed. And shifted his stance to lean casually against his desk. "Er...did you have a purpose in coming here?"

"I be ever-sae slightly drunk from making merry with Galmar and his brandy. It doesnae happen very often anymore. I tend to say things."

"What things?"

Her gaze cut to his as it had earlier, hot and dark. Without artifice. His mouth went dry between one breath and the next, and in another he was on his feet, across the room without knowing he had begun to move. Nemain watched him stride towards her, grey eyes lidded against the firelight.

His housemaids had dressed her in that white shroud of a nightgown again. Her feet were bare, her long dark hair undone. Ulfric saw her swallow; then she said, quietly. "Ulfric."

Before he could reach out and seize her, the woman spun to take in the clutter that consumed his desk. "What be these?"

Reigning himself in with a screeching halt, Ulfric collected himself until he was more or less calm. Though it was difficult, having her here. In his room - finally alone. His cock twitched pathetically at the idea.

"They are here as prospective brides. These," he swept his hands along the paintings laid out upon his desk, "are their portraits. Now, what was it you were going to say?"

Her expression changed somehow, though her smile never ceased. "Nothing important. Not right now, at least. So.” Clucking her tongue and strutting like one of his generals, Nemain began studying the paintings. He fell in step with her, taking the time to peruse each one as he had not before. Wondering what she saw, through her eyes...and immensely enjoying just how goddamned translucent that nightgown was. If he looked a bit cross-eyed, the fireglow lit up her legs through the cloth, and there a bit higher he could just nearly see...was that shadowing really ...

"-This one? I think I saw her earlier in the throne room. Hmm. Her nose was a tad more beaky in person. Nae very honest, be these painters?"

“Highlighting beauty where there is none is practically a pastime for artists these days. If anything, Siggy’s daughter - that one, there - could not be more improved by paint.”

“Ooh, harsh, Bear. Not everyone's meant tae be a fashion plate. Now this one. She’s got fine tits, doon ya think?”
Ulfric cleared his throat. He had noticed Solveig’s substantial assets and had dismissed her at nearly the same glance...the girl giggled far too often and too shrilly in his presence to possess a shred of common sense. “Not bad. Yours are much perkier.”

“Flatterer. You be lying, but points shall be granted for flumming your way out of that one. How about her?”

Chewing his lip, he found himself utterly focused on the darkness of Nemain’s nipples and the curvature of her breasts. Now made highly visible as they pebbled against the sheer cotton of her nightgown, thanks to their distance from the fireplace. “Huh?”

“Oy. Bear. Ulfric !”

He looked up in confusion, only to flush practically to his hairline as Nemain grabbed his hands and lifted them to her breasts. And made his fingers compress into an awkward squeeze that he half-heartedly resisted, while she made a beep-beep sound. “Right. Now that I’ve got that elusive attention of yours, Bear, mayhap I’ll get through to you. Bosh. Tits truly be your weakness...but doon worry. I’ll never tell the Empire. They’ll have tae torture me first.”

She left his hands where they were. Almost involuntarily, he squeezed her chest again as she snickered. Feeling an odd mixture of despair and hope, Ulfric cleared his throat as he slid his palms further down to rest at the curve of her slight waist.

He felt completely alive, the warmth of the fire pleasant in the stone coolness of his bedchamber, the woman he loved pliant and happy in his arms. Swiping his thumb against the hardness of her hip bone, he watched her swallow, and it occurred to him that he couldn’t remember having such a vivid experience for some span of time. Everything seemed heightened - sharper than was usual. He could smell the snowberry soap she had used, and the pine of the cleaner Skjora must have laundered her nightgown with.

Around her, he felt truly awake. “Torture, hmm? I thought the elves were your bosom friends and all. Since when do you ascribe to the Stormcloak beliefs, witch?”

“Since I decided tae grab that bodgy old crown and nae kill ya, Bear. Surely tis obvious, y’ken? I told ye of my dreams, the visions and their truth. There be precious few lines I willnae cross, but the eradication of the Nedic peoples and the enslavement of all of Tamriel do be one of them.”

Looking down at her bare feet, he could only see the top of her head as she muttered rebelliously. “Now, doon go all soft on me and thank me profusely for my pains. Galmar and your warriors did most of the work of clearing Korvanjund...I merely greased the wheels a bit. Other things still havenae changed. I’ve held some fine punishments in reserve for any of you stuck-up fear thuaidh what still think they be better than others, aye?”

Peeking up at him through her hair, she smiled wanly. “...an’ though I dinnae think I shall need it, the threat does remain. You really gave the Argonians the house Hjerim?”

Ulfric was not sure what Nemain considered punishment, but he had few illusions that he would escape with his dignity intact. Yet he felt no unease, for her hands had lifted to rest upon his chest. Tracing near mindlessly one of his many scars, as he thought about how to respond.

“I did. A wise woman once told me that a Jarl is concerned with every class of citizen, and seeks to improve their lives through judicious leadership and allotment of resources.”

A dimple popped in her cheek. “I said that.”
“I know.”

“And what d’ye think about being High King and all?” Pulling away from him, Nemain began scanning the portraits once more, lingering upon one or two of the finer ones. “Does it still hold any appeal?”

“It would be the end of many troubles,” he answered honestly. “And the start of several new ones. I cannot pretend to be unhappy that I have gained even more support from the people - you’ve seen them, divided and quarrelsome as they are, having that crown has swayed the more superstitious ones and cemented the loyalty of those who already believe. Uniting the Holds would strengthen Skyrim and keep her borders secure, but I fear an entire host of ills await should I ever be called to rule.”

“A double edged sword, to be sure.” Nemain nodded.

He waited, increasingly expectant to hear whatever it was that she had deemed necessary to invade his privacy for, dressed only in a nightgown. Mentally, Ulfric reminded himself to talk to Skjora about her choice of dress for the Dragonborn’s nightclothes. It wouldn’t do to have her traipsing all around the palace in such sheer stuff...it bothered him that he wasn’t the only one able to see practically everything the woman had on offer. It would help if the woman kept to her rooms at a decent hour.

He was both disappointed and relieved to find that her request was not at all sordid. Though it did cause him to blink in surprise. “How would you feel about galloping over to Whiterun with me, Bear? Since you were going to engage in chatting up Jarl Balgruuf soon anyhow?”

Itching his beard, Ulfric thought about it. “I was planning on sending a delegation to Whiterun in order to parlay for an alliance. Why would you need to travel so far?” He raised an eyebrow. “This doesn’t have anything to do with Dragonborn business, does it?”

“Spot on. Borri says hello, by the way, and he wants ye tae visit soon. I ne’er did tell ye what happened on the Monahven, but long story short...I need tae trap a dovah in Dragonsreach. Since I did indeed learn that, ugh, that horrid Dragonrend Shout. And it did work - sort of - on the World Eater, but now he be gone snaffling souls off in Sovngarde and I must be chasing after him tae stop his greedy feast. Somehow. What would a soul e’en taste like, anyway? Do different personalities have differing flavors? Ghosts do look rather like bogs. Bogey-flavored spirits! Bleugh.”

Nemain shook her head irritably, stray hairs floating like a halo above her head. Her sober gray eyes were rimlit by the firelight. “Cannae believe I survived that encounter, by the way - cor, that black dragon be absolutely terrifying, and I dinnae scare easy - but there ‘tis. And you know Balgruuf. He’ll be far more likely tae listen t’you than me, a Reachwoman nobody. What d’ye say?”

For the second time in their conversation, Ulfric found himself at a loss for words. And could only stare as Nemain turned once again to look around his room. His head spun with thoughts of death and blood and old stories; he needed silence of his own to sort them through, to lay each thread neatly beside the next until he could see the picture they made between them.

Alduin. Dragonrend. The Throat of the World and its Time Wound. When had his life become the stuff of bard songs and legends? He still could not believe the Jagged Crown now rested in his treasure vaults, deep below in the secret crypts once designated for Ysgramor and his kin. A crown
without a king.

He would need to remedy that, soon. Skyrim could not endure another such winter as they had last year. It would be the death of them all, by famine and by the sword.

But he could find no reason to deny her such a small thing. Indeed, he had toyed with the notion of going himself, to make a show of strength that might cow the recalcitrant Jarl where mere talk might have failed. “Yes. I shall go with you to Whiterun. I’ve known Balgruuf since the war...and you’re right. He will be far more likely to speak plainly with you if I am in the company.”

Her smile came back, brighter than before. “Grand. I’ve always wanted t’see Whiterun, y’ken. It will go even better, to have you there with me. You’re a good travelling companion.”

He could not resist prodding her. "What about Ancano?"

She made a face. "Ugh! If we have some spare hours tomorrow, remind me tae tell ye aboot the many trials of traveling with such a poncy, persnickety creature. It’s a bloody miracle we survived to part ways at all. Though he does grow on ya after a while...like a fungus. Heh heh."

The fire snapped and crackled as they looked at one another in the ensuing quiet. Yet the silence was not uncomfortable. “It has...been a very long time. And I fear I am out of practice - and greatly in need of some tranquility. Care to meditate with me on the roof?”

Seeing her hesitation, he added, “The stars will be out tonight. And it is warm. Not a cloud in sight.”

Her thin shoulders slumped, even as she shot him a reluctant eyeroll. “All right then. If it truly be warm...”

“It is Midyear, Nemain.”

“Pssh. When has the season ever made a difference in the temperature this far north, Milord? Y’live in a polar icebox. Dibe’s sacred snatch, I’m a’shivering just looking at you walking round shirtless like that.”

“Look all you want. You can take off your gown up here -watch your step, the ladder is loose - if you want. No one will see you this late at night, especially not at this height.”

“But you’ll see, ye lecherous dodger. I think I’ll be keeping it on, if only for the comfort of it. Eyes forward and to the front. Doon fall.”

The stars were indeed bright as diamonds, pinpoints of light in a stretch of black velvet. Stretching lazily, he nearly laughed as Nemain caught sight of him and tripped inelegantly upon the hem of her nightdress. “Whoa. Careful there.”

Sitting on the ground, he settled her back to his as the Dragonborn growled something uncomplimentary. Though he could tell that she was more embarrassed than upset. “Watch yerself. One of these days, I’m going tae do something right nasty if ye keep making fun of me so.”

“And yet you make it so easy.”

“Ugh. Just...shut up and breathe, Bear.”
They settled into an even, steady rhythm, a push and pull that immediately slackened his shoulders and brought heaviness to his eyes. The pressure of her shoulders reached him roughly mid-back, and he could feel every knob of her spine dig into his back as their combined Thu’um swelled and retracted.

She had gained true mastery of her Voice, at last. Each inhale seemed to take an age; every exhale even longer as a familiar and bone-deep lassitude took ahold of him. All the world seemed to breathe with them, a harmonious symphony that wiped every trace of darkness from his mind. Clarity that he prized, even as sparks flared along the edges of his calm.

Sparks that only flared into a deeper longing, as later they lay together upon the flat of the roof, content to say nothing at all as they stared at the stars. He had pillowed his head upon his arms, and Nemain had wadded up the bulk of her hair beneath her neck and was idly kicking her feet in the air, one by one. The skirt of her nightdress had slid scandalously low, though he wasn't going to mention it if she wasn't.

Such peace was broken as Nemain rolled to her side, her face utterly serious for once. “Bear - about what you said back in Winterhold.”

He shifted away from her, training his eyes upon the constellation of the Serpent. If he did not look at her, he would not be tempted to renew the proposal that had been so distasteful to her, before. “You need say nothing that you have not before. I was wrong to pressure you.”

“Nay, it be...ugh. I want tae say this correctly. You’ll be needing a Nord wife, y’ken? To rule your new and emancipated Skyrim.” Sitting up, Nemain began parting her hair to braid it. “They would never accept me as your Queen, Bear. A Forsworn and a mage? Pah….they’d be sharpening their shields an’ calling for your head on a pike. And I be far too viper-tongued to be suitable as a stuffy head o’ state. Tis only sensible that you choose one of those lovely portraits doon in yer quarters, instead.”

He scoffed. “With most of those lasses, I am old enough to be their father. A more cloud-headed and vain group of females I have never seen, and after the last few weeks of evading both their fathers - and other suitors- I am half inclined to write off the entire exercise as a pointless endeavor. What makes them more suited to be Queen than you?”

“Lineage and dowry, Milord. Lands, money and influence...things ye’ll sorely be needing, if you’re to challenge the might of the Aldmeri, the Empire and keep everyone else in line. See reason for once, a rínsearc ...I’ve seen many a young maid married off tae older men. S’not sae unusual.”

Rolling over, he glared up at her. “Don’t call me that. Don’t separate us by calling me milord. You know I hate being called that when we are alone.”

Finger combing out her snarls, Nemain fixedly looked anywhere but at him. “Tis what you are. And what I am most decidedly not. I’m nae noble, Ulfric, nor do I bring anything but the dubious honor of being Dragonborn. Which likely will end with my remains rotting on some blighty barrow ground, or in the belly of Alduin himself. My days be numbered. I have seen it...seen my death in the red eyes of Alduin himself.”

“But you…” his chest tightened as he beheld the pain apparent in her face as she spoke. For she was not as untouched by her words as she made herself out to be. An ancient sadness deepened the fine lines he had not noticed before, giving a gravity to her expression that before it had lacked. “You have sae much t’live for! Take a young wife, Bear. Get married, have some adorable towheaded
royal bairns. Fuck, I’ll even help ye. Bring some of them along fer the ride to Whiterun and we’ll see what they be made of under the duress of long days a’travelling and fighting for their lives on the road.”

Reaching over to pat his belly, Nemain smiled weakly. “Tis good preparation for marrying you, I’d think. Any woman who can stand yer snoring and fashed oxhead stubbornness be a good choice.”

“It will be all right, in the end. I know it.”

Nothing else emerged from the witch as he groped for words. Ulfric could scarce tell if he merely did not know what he meant to ask her, or if the words were even there at all. For everything the woman had said was cold, uncompromising fact...impacted with a kindness he had not thought to see directed at him, for all that he had seen her lavish it thoroughly upon the orphans taken under her wing.

It wasn’t fair. He wanted this...nights spent gazing at the stars, meditating. Speaking about anything and everything, from politics to books they had read, and books he wanted to read just to discuss them with her. He wanted her, though he could utter nothing but a shaky breath blown more in resigned angst than anything benevolent.

He was not so altruistic as she, to see the benefits of an arranged marriage over what his heart urged him to take for himself. No, it was not want - Ulfric needed her. Friend and companion and lover, all in one. It splintered inside to even think of choosing any other future than the image he had so painstakingly crafted in the solitude of his own imaginings.

...that of Nemain round and ripe with his child, laughing as they both chased a toddler around the Stone Quarter marketplace. A boy he could not help but see, with his fair hair and her beautiful pale eyes...

But somehow she knew, all the same. She scooted closer, hesitating, and then put one hand lightly on his cheek.

"Sometimes," Nemain spoke quietly, like she could read his mind. “Friends forgive each other their failings. Because sometimes y’ have to rise above what you are, to do what is best for the many rather than just the few. Aye? Shall we remain friends after all we have endured together, Bear? For I care too much to cut you completely out of what remains of my life, selfish though it may be.”

A small but heavy parcel was placed upon his chest. Lifting the sewn bag the better to see it, Ulfric squinted in the scattered light from the stars, grateful to avoid answering her question. “What is this?”

“Tis the loan y’so graciously offered me the way doon from High Hrothgar. Paid back, with interest.”

Rolling the bag in his fist, he could feel the pearls rolling inside, interspersed with larger edged items that might have been gemstones. He handed it back to her, placing his larger hand over her own and squeezing gently. “Keep it. Consider it a gift, for all you have done and will do. I could not do this without you Nemain. Please,” his throat caught at the words, even as Nemain frowned down at their hands laced together.

“Please. Stay with me awhile longer. Don’t leave.”
Her face was solemn in the darkness. “All right.”

Laying herself down, he tucked her into the crook of his shoulder as they both resumed their study of the night sky. Rooting around until she was comfortable, Ulfric closed his eyes at the sensation of her hair sliding against his bare skin. Tangling her legs with his, he held her even tighter and willed himself to enjoy the moment for what it was, as he listened to her breathing slow...nearly holding his breath until the woman finally lay fast asleep.

Carefully removing his arm from beneath her head, Ulfric propped himself up on his elbow. The better to study her face in repose.

She was not beautiful, except perhaps to him. There were far more nubile and voluptuous maidens resting in his guest rooms than the woman who now slumbered beside him. He could see all the tiny blemishes up close like this; the moles and subtle wrinkling around her eyes and lips. Pushing the weight of her hair away, Ulfric counted at least seven strands of silver that stood out against the dark mass, and amusement touched him, to see how her ears were slightly pointed at their peaks.

A moment of peace. They had shared a rare understanding, unspoken though it was this past night. He knew it would not happen again.

Fetching a blanket and a rolled up fur to use as a pillow, Ulfric rearranged them so that she was cradled in his arms once more. And fell asleep listening to the Dragonborn breathe, her gentle sighs soothing him to sleep.

With only the stars above, to bear witness to the truth of things.

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“Brynhild answers, "Thou knowest me not, nor the heart that is in me; for thou art the first and best of all men, and I am become the most loathsome of all woman to thee."

"This is truer," says Sigurd, "that I loved thee better than myself, though I fell into the wiles from whence our lives may not escape; for whenso my own heart and mind availed me, then I sorrowed sore that thou wert not my wife; but as I might I put my trouble from me, for in a king's dwelling was I; and withal and in spite of all I was well content that we were all together. Well may it be, that that shall come to pass which is foretold; neither shall I fear the fulfilment thereof."

-Völsunga saga. ‘Of Brynhild's great Grief and Mourning’

Chapter End Notes
Read alot of the Poetic Edda to prepare myself to write this chapter. Interesting stuff...and heartbreaking. It's a goddamn soap opera of gods and men-if you can stomach the old-fashioned style of writing, try reading it sometime.

We'll just have to wait and see where our heroine takes it from here. Even as I write her POV, I'm still shaking my head. Like, 'you're an idiot, Nemain.'

But more on that later.
So, to inject some much-needed levity I have added a few new characters.

One is an original Dragonborn of mine. Two are based upon popular characters from our current culture (trust me, if you haven't lived in a hole for the past decade you'll know who they are, though if you are struggling you can skip down to my notes at the end of the chapter for a sneak-peek). Reader beware: one character I hate to love, and the other I love to hate. Read accordingly.

Author's note: This scene simply grew too long for me to put in one single chapter. So I have hacked it up. I have two more chapters in the offing, so if you read this and think 'wait, there must be more!' Well there is. I just have to edit it.

Read on, and as always...comment, critique and coo over plot, dialogue and ships. So. Many. Ships.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Solveig Windrime was beautiful, and she knew it.

Without even glancing at her reflection in the pond they had stopped nearby, she knew that her hair was shining (red as the dawn’s rising light, said doting swains) and her eyes were shining (bluer than the sea, said her doting Pa), by Tsun’s bridge even her teeth shone nearly as luminous as pearls, if she had scoured them well that day with rag and chalk.

She was just the sort of milk-skinned, bosomy female to inspire warriors to do heroic feats, or to spur a Jarl to propose marriage on the spot (insisted her Pa, though she had quite given up asking him to reconsider). None of which changed a basic fact: as of yesterday, she had determined to return straight to the docks and sail to Solstheim at the earliest opportunity. By Hel’s anchor, she would swim if she had to.

The sea she had been born upon seventeen years ago and grew up sailing across was never overheated or thick with biting insects. It was cold and clean and perfect in a way that the trackless forests of the south most decidedly were not. The Sea of Ghosts did not have bands of roving brigands who attacked with screams in the dead of night (though it did have pirates, who were far more amenable to be bribed with grog or rum, of which her Pa kept a goodly stock of just for such an occasion.) The bandit encounter had driven away two of the five wives-to-be who had elected to join the group traveling westward for Whiterun, and while she was sad to see them go (for the duo who remained annoyed her to no end) she reasoned that at least now there was less competition.

*Competition for what?! A man old enough to be your grandda to bed, where instead you have a chance to see more of the wide, wide world?*

She picked out bits of tundra cotton from her hair and practiced smiling at a nearby porter, who nearly dropped his load at the sight. Hook, line and sinker...she still had it. The smile that Da boasted
could stop hearts and launch ships.

Not that it did her much good, now.

Rubbing her arse where her saddle sores were being abominably chafed by the relentless scrape of the saddle, Solveig added the necessity of riding astride to her growing list of things she despised about Skyrim. *Where was the freedom of tacking a sail and walking along a wide deck,* she thought with nostalgia. She even would have preferred keel hauling to the rigid monotony of riding, for her smelly mount tended to doze off mid-clop. Forcing her to slap the reins more and more urgently, until she caught up with the rest of the Stormcloak entourage. *All this heat and noise and stench!*

Her family had plied their trade as merchants for several decades, sailing from port to port to deliver goods such as silks, alcohol, timber and spices. She was well traveled for her age, and Pa had trained her to be expert in the art of both swordplay and speechcraft; useful skills in their line of work. Few of their clients, if any, remembered that her great-grandfather had been a Deathbrand corsair; that before his semi-infamous retirement from the family profession they had shaped up to be little better than legal privateers.

Yet the Windrimes were now fabulously wealthy (both from honest and ill-gotten gains) and it came as no surprise when an invitation was offered for Solveig to attend the Palace of Kings as an intended bride.

Solveig had been among the first to arrive of Ulfric Stormcloak’s potential spouses, invited with as much decorum as any noble whose lineage spanned centuries. And she had been so eager to explore the foreign city and landscape of Windhelm, to adjust her rollicking sea gait for a more stolid land-based swivel (that still drew every eye from dockworker to housecarl, as she by now had perfected the shashay of hips to maximize their erotic potential). Eastmarch seemed wealthy enough, though in comparison to Stros M’Kai or Vvardenfell it was still rather primitive.

Yet despite her initial misgivings Solveig began to look at the suit her father had pressed upon her with some expectation of enjoyment. Windhelm was prosperous in all ways that mattered, there were taverns on every street corner and it was crowded with life in a way that was both exotic and comforting. Her father so desperately wanted a title to add to the family coffers, well then, she would agree to try for the part...simply to shut him up. The trip down south was merely a boon atop that rare commodity.

But after that first boisterous, mead lubricated dinner at the high table of the Palace of Kings, the shine had rubbed off the stern. For she had looked upon her future husband, and had found him...wanting.

Oh, the old Nord was handsome enough, she supposed. Many tough salts exhibited such similarly scarred and flinty exteriors, and she was not put off by him. He still had all of his teeth, she noticed in the rare instances where the Jarl laughed, with only a few patches of grey in his red gold hair and beard. And he bore the barrel chest and taut muscle tone of a man who depended upon the strength of his body for a living. She would not be forced to service one of those rot-jawed, boar-bellied noblemen her father’s sailors so often jeered at. There was that.

Yet though the Nord’s lips had smiled warmly upon her introduction, the blue eyes above them had
remained sharp and cold. Like the icebergs she had grown up learning to dodge and sail sloops expertly about - impassive and immovable. *This* was a man who was used to getting his own way, a man whom she would have great difficulty winding about her finger as was her wont.

Which simply would not do.

And so, she ended all hope of ensnaring him in wedded bliss. *Pa will be disappointed, but it is not he who shall be chained to one city and one man for the rest of his life!*

Her smile was a weapon all in itself. Devastatingly effective, or so many sailors at countless ports of call had teasingly informed her. She had wielded it expertly to catch and hold his attentions...pairing it with a shrilly penetrating cackle and a flippant shallowness that would choke any spark of love that might have caught flame.

Solveig was nearly insulted to see that it had worked so well. Though the Jarl had continued to be nothing but courteous (after his surreptitious glance down at her generously exposed bosom, highlighted to perfection by the scandalous neckline she had sewn in that day) the light of genuine curiosity in his eyes had died out.

The man obviously valued intelligence in his future spouse. She was safe.

But not, as she soon groaned to discover, from his grim accomplice: the Bat.

“Gerrup, y’tarmadiddling pirate spawn, and shift yer stumps. Ye be wanted tae haul supplies like the others, fer we’ve lost some mounts from that bandit attack and all hands are t’report and assist! Move!”

_Privateers and merchants. Not pirates, you Forsworn stick!_ Dimly comprehending perhaps every other word of the court mage’s atrocious accent, Solveig nodded as though she understood and nudged her horse to follow the fiercely scowling midget she privately referred to as the Bat. A term which had immediately caught on with her fellow brides to be.

...who had beaten her to her unwanted task, it seemed.

“I don’t like it.” Gudrun (*call me Snygg*, she had simpered) whined as she dragged a sack of potatoes along the rutted ground. “This is too heavy. My hands hurt, and I almost fell in the river lugging these over. I don’t like cold, wet things!”

The Bat had overheard her, and swooped over to take a look. “Shor’s bones, girl, yer barely carrying a stone’s worth o’ taters. Get the victuals intae the wagon sharpish. I dinnae like the look o’ these woods...we be too exposed here in the canyons with naught but the river or the path to escape to.”

Privately Solveig agreed. After ten days of bouncing very badly in her horse’s seat (she had actually felt something akin to gratitude to the mage for the healing balm the Bat had handed to her upon the third day) they had come through the forests to a narrow neck of land that had a sheer cliff to their left and a (small, pathetic) river called *The White* on their right.

It would have been the perfect place for an ambush, had she been the leader of those bandits that the Jarl and his warriors had so masterfully chopped up into chum. But she was not. So she remained,
dawdling by the supplies that the drudges and warriors were quickly packing up, casually twirling her knives as she avoided work and the Bat in equal measure.

Brenna had merely grunted upon seeing her, the four sacks of root vegetables hardly weighing the giant woman down. Solveig watched in appreciative awe as Brenna heaved her burden with both hands into the wagon cart without breaking a sweat.

Solveig remembered meeting her in the Palace of Kings more than a month ago, along with Snygg Greygull. The tall Nord had been stuffed into an ill fitting gown of bright posy pink, a color that had done her no favors, but had highlighted Brenna’s floridly mannish features and wispy blonde shag cut. Even the hunched way Brenna stood had betrayed just how awkward the Nord felt in formal dress...an observation that had turned true, for Solveig never saw her out of armor thereafter.

“Greetings,” she had curtsied, silently marvelling at how tall the ugly one was. She must weigh at least ten stone. All in muscle. “I am Solveig Windrime, hailing from Solstheim.”

“Brenna of Karth,” grunted the woman. “Ma is over there....Siggy Wargclaw. I’m sure you’ve met her already. She attends these functions far more often than I do.”

Glancing over at the horse-faced woman whose features seemed set in a permanent pinch, Solveig popped her hip out, ensuring that the jade silk of her gown draped evenly down the curves of her thighs. “So. Why are you ‘of Karth’, then? Is not your Ma from somewhere down south?”

The giant’s watery blue eyes narrowed. “Da is from Karthwasten. I lived with him off and on, until Ma decided I needed some ‘feminine refinements’. She owns most of the wilding lands north of Riften, and so here I am.” Her square chin lifted, as if to dare Solveig to comment on how poorly such lessons had taken hold. “And I aim to win Jarl Stormcloak’s hand in marriage. To prove my worth.”

Solveig shrugged. “We will see, won’t we. Cast a wide enough net, and you’re bound to catch something. Though I at least fear no censure or lack of attention, obviously in comparison with... who gave you such a horrid dress? It makes you look like you have been running half a league in the sun.”

“You could try for a little modesty,” Snygg sniffed, shambling over from where she had been occupied reading. “Beauty isn’t everything. Brenna, is it? Snygg Greygull of Dawnstar, a pleasure. Da still calls me Gudrun, but you can call me Snygg.”

“And you could try for a little maturity,” retorted Solveig before Brenna could answer. “I am not being immodest, merely practical. Men are visual beasts - they think with the eel in their pants above anything else. I fully intend to counterfeit every ladylike quality that exists beyond beauty, until I manage to convince the Jarl or one of his netch-brained peers to marry me and hand over his finances.”

Brenna stared her down from that great height. “There’s a word for women like you.”

“Yes.” Solveig pinched her cheeks and smiled saucily at a passing guard, who promptly walked into a wall. “And that word is happy. Power and gold are heady aphrodisiacs. Do you intend to try your luck for the stables, after your inevitable loss at matrimony Brenna? I do hear the Jarl is looking for a new mare at least thirty hands high. I could let him ride you once or twice, if he can stomach tupping you from the rear so your face does not show.”
Cheeks flaming in shame, Brenna stomped away in that ridiculous dress as Solveig sniggered at her own wit. Shaking her head, Snygg batted her doe-brown eyes and sniffed. “That was ill-done. She could be our Jarl’s lady, you know...and then you would be at her mercy.”

*Unlikely.* Walking along the rim of the throne room, Solveig admired the tapestries as Snygg prattled on. “Did you hear that there might be dancing? I hate dancing. The only time I could ever dance was with Eduard - but oh, I haven’t told you about him yet, have I.” Looking down in surprise as she nearly toppled over her own slippers, Snygg sighed dreamily. “He’s simply perfect.”

Solveig glared at the younger girl in thinly veiled contempt. If the chit could manage to breathe with her mouth closed instead of sucking in air like a carp, she might have proved to be competition. As it was, the outcome of the bride hunt seemed inevitable and Solveig was already bored. “Who is this Eduard, and will we be meeting him at table?” Goddess Hel grant that he be interesting. A bard, maybe. Or a Maormer...those far sailing elves always have such excellent stories to tell.

*If another warrior pretends not to ogle my breasts while talking to my belly button, I shall scream.*

Snygg fanned herself with her book, a dog-eared copy of the Tale of Fjori and Holgeir. “Oh, Eduard doesn’t eat. He’s a vampire, you know. He nearly killed me, but then stopped and said I was too beautiful to eat. Then he visited me every night, just to watch me dream.” She sighed again. “When he left for good, saying I was too tempting of company and that our love was doomed from the start, I was desponded.”

“You mean despondent.” Solveig corrected her automatically, far more intrigued by the unlikely tale than she would have thought. *And such an ordinary girl, to be spared death!*

...Unless she was lying, of course. “I find it hard to believe any nightwalker would pass up such a docile meal. Unless he thought your morose anxiety would give him indigestion. I have not seen you carry any weapon or cast so much as a ball of light, Greygull. What skills do you bring as a prospective Lady of the Hold?”

Snygg twisted her shoulders and huffed. “I...um. I read alot. I used to help Da with his patrols, until I kept falling and had to be rescued from the rocks one too many times. And I accidentally cut myself with the axe Da insisted I carry around for show. Erm...I’m not much for bladed weapons, I think. Or magic, really. I’m really only here because Da thinks it will be good for me to get away from Dawnstar. He thinks I pine over Eduard overly, but I cannot see it. He doesn’t understand our love! Eduard could never harm a hair on my head! Gods I miss him so much, I could...die for the want of him.”

Solveig thought privately that Snygg’s father understood the situation perfectly, but she kept such thoughts to herself. “Perhaps the pursuit of Ulfric will ease your pains at parting from Eduard, then.”

Snygg blinked and frowned, even as the Nord in question passed right by. Completely absorbed in rushed conversation with his huddle of generals and thanes. “Who?”

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Solveig’s initial impressions of the two young women had remained unaltered in the following weeks of close contact. And on the road, the company of blundering Brenna and silly Snygg was nigh unbearable. But (every cloud had a silver lining) at least she was not truly trapped all alone with them. The vast sprawling delegation of Stormcloak warriors, cooks, thanes and housecarls seemed to move like a sea cucumber’s ponderous crawl...one heavy lurch forward, then a long wait as the next section caught up to the first. And so on and so forth, until everyone had been accounted for, upon which it was usually time to break for camp.

It was a slow and tedious way to travel. She had inquired as to why they had not chosen a fleet of canoes to go by waterway, and had been insultingly condescended to about the superiority of horseflesh over boat. Which had made her bristle inwardly, even as she smiled ‘the’ smile at the Jarl. Dimples, charm, sensuality and all.

Damn him. Not a stare, muddled sway or a blink. The man had looked down at her, his chest swelling with an inhaled breath, and he had smiled as though she were terribly amusing. As though he found her funny!

Snapping back to the present, Solveig realized that the Bat was roundly ignoring Snygg’s current rhapsody on the visual splendors of Eduard (her descriptions of his golden amber eyes and overuse of adjectives would have been appalling, if the girl did not reek so of desperation) and had walked off to the woods, to get a closer look at something.

“More wolf spoor?” Brenna inquired, lifting the sword she carried out of its sheath a few inches before letting it slide back with a metallic shiink. “Thought we killed plenty of those. Easier than bandits.”

Peering around the giant’s bulk, Solveig received a noseful of hot fuggy death and promptly coughed. Someone had carved a deer and had hung it in a tree; the insides neatly piled into a mash of guts near the stump. Some unknown symbol had been burnt into the hide; the scent of burning hair nearly as strong as the rot from the corpse. If we were at sea, Solveig thought rebelliously, such stench would have long been taken care of by the sharks and slaughterfish. Gods I miss the ocean.

“Nay. No wolf did this.” Standing abruptly, the mage lifted her hand and send a glowing ball of something green to shoot out against the mountainside. She watched as the light broke upon impact, scattering into thin rivulets of sparkling light as the spell moved in all directions, until it finally dissolved from their view.

Cutting off Snygg before she could go off about how marble-hard her vampire’s arms were, Solveig asked, “Was there a purpose to that? Or were you being demonstrative simply for our sake?”

The Bat shot her a curious glance. Shit. Making her face soft with boredom, Solveig twisted her hair around her finger. It would not do for the Jarl’s pet mage to discover that she was not, in fact, a ninny. “T’was a ‘look not here’ charm, meant tae throw off whatever be tracking us anon. It willnae work more than a few leagues, but the sign this hunter left for his fellows shall be that much harder to track, now.”

Biting upon her lip, the older Breton frowned. “Looks like we be moving again. Mount up, all of you. And don’t fall away from the group. If ye must shit or piss, do it in twos.”
Snygg looked around, seemingly aware of their surroundings for the first time that day. “Oh my. What a high cliff we are under. I jumped from a sea cliff nearly as tall as this a few months after Eduard left me, in hopes that he would show up and save me just like in the novels...but I am better now. Truly. Though I think it is why Da insisted I go to Windhelm.”

The Bat gaped at the young Nord girl, with Solveig and Brenna in rare agreement as they all stared at Snygg Greygull in mixed horror and disgust. “Yer cracked. Absolutely bodging insane...you never, hear me - never kill y’self for some man. Particularly an undead one who’d sooner drain your veins than boff ye. T’was luck that saved your life, not any altruism from such a one. Pray that he stays far away.”

Snygg blinked her big, brown eyes and breathed laxedly through her hanging jaw. “Oh, he’ll come back. We’re meant to be - Eduard and I. We belong together forever.”

Brenna mimed retching behind the slip of a girl as the Bat actually coughed back a laugh. Snygg’s prominent buck teeth minded Solveig of a plump rabbit...and the Bat looked positively foxlike at the moment, so sharp her face was in disapproval - as though she would gobble her up if even one more word was uttered on the matter of Eduard.

Solveig could not resist. “Jealous, mage? Perhaps you cannot remember having had such ardent suitors. You are of well-advanced years, after all.”

Brenna tightened her fists, making the leather of her gloves squeak in warning. “Solveig, we all know you are always prepared for a sudden randomly available cock, but for your own safety shut your mouth.”

Was she implying that she, Solveig Windrime, was a light frigate?! Palming a dagger, she nearly managed to pull it out of her sheath before the mage stepped between the two of them to break up the impending fight.

Brenna backed down, releasing her hold upon her sword in reluctance, even as Solveig wiggled her fingers...the dagger she had secreted up in her sleeve still there. Just in case.

“Y’can think that if it gives ye pleasure, Windrime, though the truth be quite the opposite. Old though I may be, I’ve enough Bosmer blood t’outlive you lot by twice yore lifespan, y’ doxy tart.”

Gracing her with a nasty smile, the Breton stepped into her stirrup and swung her leg over, firmly plopping into the saddle. Solveig’s arse ached in sympathy. “Beauty and youth last but a moment, but the canny and paranoid live long and free. Besides...”

The woman arched her neck back, showing off a rough ring of scar tissue that caused Brenna to utter a soft curse. Her gray eyes were hard as she stared at each of them in turn, stroking her scar pointedly. “I’ve already suffered such foolish notions and acted upon them. And I can tell ye...t’was nae worth the pain. But yore lives be worth far more than a title or toss in the hay. Remember that.”

With that pearl of wisdom, the Bat spurred her horse forward, clicking her tongue as the other girls followed unsuccessfully. Leaving them in the dust as the noon sun bore down upon them, causing a trail of sweat to trickle down the fine hairs of Solveig’s back.

She scratched at it, only succeeding in smearing it even further around her neck, itching furiously. Ugh.

The three young women were silent as their horses trod along in the heat. Brenna cleared her throat. “Think she did that to herself? And survived?”
“I’ll bet her lover saved her, riding up on a white stallion and cutting her noose with his bright blade before she could choke to death,” Snygg murmured with a dreamy smile. “D’you think Eduard-”

“No! No more golden eyes or pale, perfect chests or bronze tousled hair! Truly, I cannot stand it! I’ll carve you like a horker if you say another word, Snygg, so help me Shor!”

Brenna growled in rare agreement. “Shut up, Snygg!”

“But…”

“Shut. Up.”

The Dawnstar maiden pouted. But for a few moments, Brenna and Solveig indulged in blissful, idyllic silence while riding.

A silence that could not last.

“Holy crow, I forgot to tell you two about Jakob. He is truly the best of friends, though Eduard seemed to behave very oddly when I mentioned him in passing, only a couple dozen times…”

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“Someone be following us…and leaving sign fer others to go by. That be the third set of such deer carcasses I’ve seen since Windhelm.”

Ulfric did not look up from folding his map. She had found him riding slightly ahead and apart from the leading Stormcloaks, presumably waiting for the scouts to return and report on what lay ahead. “Wolves, I’d imagine. Our peace delegation numbers nearly a hundred strong, Nemain. It’s not as though we can travel to Whiterun in stealth.”

Nudging her horse until their legs touched, Nemain leaned over and took the map away from Ulfric’s hands. The swirl of lines and carefully lettered place-names seemed to blur even as she looked. Cor, but she was tired. “Do wolves leave the guts intact an’ unruptured of their kills? Or burn runes into the hides to indicate the direction of our passage?”

He hmphed softly in response. “There’s little we can do about that now. Wolves or man, we outnumber them. And I am not worried. Look up, Nemain.”

“…though I hardly know who would be sae interested in our venture. Tis not as though we’ve been particularly discreet. Be the Empire or Markarth more likely to track us in such a way? I’d lay a goodly amount o’ septims on it being Reachfolk, if the deer were not sae plainly in sight. We’d ne’er know it were they to choose tae follow us, they’d sink intae the shadows…”

“Nemain. Look.”
A large calloused hand took her by the chin. Gently but firmly, Ulfric raised her head until she was blinking up with a frown. The map crinkled in her hands. “What…”

Whiterun Hold.

Nemain could see it, for they had exited the canyon and had reached the lookout point at last. Whiterun Hold! A vast tundra scooped out of the glacial valley, ringed by snowcapped mountains and absolutely vibrant with the stalks of thick, golden wheat and fields of lushly green grass. Nemain continued to stare like a yokel as their horses began descending the ridge, the view only more spectacular as the city itself rose in the distance.

She could see a peaked roof stretch high above the walls, a collection of towers that could only be the Hofkahsejun, the palace of Dragonsreach. It dwarfed even the largest manses visible from her perch. And somewhere there lies the upturned hull of Jorrvaskr, Ysgarmor’s ship carried overland and built up to be a warrior’s hall, right beneath the Sky Forge of yore.

Why in Hircine’s name did they do such a daft thing? T’would have been far easier to venture to the nearby mountains for timber than to lug a boat that many leagues.

Smiling despite herself at the mental image of five hundred sweating Atmorans shouldering a warship through the grass, Nemain suddenly coughed. Then rubbed at the sweat upon her forehead. Knuckle-dragging fear thuaidh. Though I suppose my own folk’s traditions might appear just as foolish, at that. Briarhearts and hagravens and bone-strewn brochs.

Gods, I miss my home sae much.

“Quite a sight, isn’t it.”

Nemain hmmed in agreement, for she could not rip her eyes away from trying to estimate just how many farms there were, scattered like embroidery hoops of green and gold. Small figures of farmers toiling over their scythes and rakes moved like ants, industrious. Countless. “How much grain does the Hold produce? Why…”

Sae many starved this last winter! Why had Whiterun not helped…

She realized that Ulfric was looking at her, and not at the fields. His blue eyes were distant, though something lurked behind them that caused her to sit up straight upon her mount.

Anger, perhaps. And something else. “Whiterun grows about three thousand acres of wheat, along with many hundreds more bushels of produce and other animal goods every calendar year. The soil is rich and dark. Lots of rain and sun, and little to fear in the way of incursions or predators aside from occasional spats with the giants, for there are no major rivers that pass directly by Whiterun and no easy way to climb the plateau upon which it sits.”
“It is the trade capital and bread basket of Skyrim.” Ulfric shook his head, a hank of blonde hair falling over his eyes as he scratched his head. Nemain resisted the urge to smooth it back, for he had grown his hair out until it curled at the nape of his neck.

She wondered if he still smelt like snowberry soap on the road, or if he used something more prosaic, like lye. *Was his hair as soft as she remembered?* “...The heart of our motherland, and yet the Hold ships the majority of its crops north to Solitude’s port and south down through the Pale Pass, to Bruma.”

Nemain frowned. Their horses were still clopping along, the calls and cries of the Stormcloaks behind them showing that they, too, were celebrating their arrival into Whiterun Hold. “Why, when so many in Eastmarch and the Rift be starving fer want of sustenance? It’s not as though the mines have dried out, to lack for trade in fine ores or jewels, or even fish and lumber. And though ye be divided politically, Whiterun has been verrah neutral this entire time. How can Balgruuf be sae hard-hearted?”

Cutting his gaze over to her, Nemain swallowed. Ulfric’s eyes had frozen into diamond chips.

“Because of gold. Profits that the Empire tendered through trade and marriage settlements, long before my time or yours. And Jarl Balgruuf has ever benefited from the policy of befriending our neighbors to the south. Much like your Markarth motto: that omage to waterfalls of silver and blood. Indeed, the White-Gold Concordat seems to have done little damage, here. Much good it will do them in the long run.”

“Come. We must make it to our encampment at the base of the Monahven before nightfall.”

Leaning over her mare’s neck to get a better look at the tundra valley, the Reachwitch rested her head for a spare second and closed her eyes. *Och, a sleeproll do be sounding better than even brandy and apple pie at the moment. Wonder if any more dragons have attacked since that news of Falkreath. They have a wall, but dragons have wings...*

A piece of something soft hit her on the cheek. “Oy! Whuzzat?”

Jerking upwards, Nemain dodged another thrown bit of - was that bread? - as Ulfric laughed and tore off yet another piece as ammunition. “Don’t fall asleep just yet.”

“Mmph.” Pinching her nose with thumb and forefinger, Nemain hissed through her teeth. She had a rapidly-increasing headache. “Apologies. Dealing with yer fair maidens ‘as put me in a foul mood. Them and their olagonin’ complaints have been a trial.”

Through the iron-hot waves of the migraine, she saw Ulfric shake his head and look at her in sympathy. “I told you, you need not attend to the matter if it is not to your liking. I could write a missive to Galmar, and he can take over the task once he is done organizing the naval routes up in Dawnstar.”

About to answer, she glared at him as another piece of bread pattered against her chin. “Stop that, fear thuaidh. I said I would and so I shall, though you’d be a right daft knapdarloch for choosing *any* of these lasses tae wed.”

“You haven’t called me fear thuaidh in that tone for weeks.”

Growling, she picked up the larger crust he had tossed at her hair and threw it back. The man dodged it with a smirk, laughing as she began riffling through her own knapsack for something else to throw.
“...and I seem to remember a time when you spared me what you had planned to be a very painful and lingering death because I gave you a moldy old crust. Has that option for negotiation lost its savor?”

Pulling out a full loaf, he waved it enticingly. “Ooh, look. An entire brick of bread! Mmm, scrumptious. What favor would you give me for this, witch? Knowledge of some Shout? The pleasure of your tight little quim? What?”

“How ‘bout a clout t’your rock-thick fucking head, fear thuaidh!?”

Winding up her arm for the pitch, Nemain hurled a stiff rind of horker jerky at the Jarl’s head. Deftly he caught it, stuffing it into his mouth as he laughed, chewed and swallowed in the face of her thunderous glower. “Mmph. My favorite.”

“I hope ye choke on it, cul tona.”

“Perhaps I should marry all three of them,” he suggested as she sputtered angrily, laughing as he directed his horse to trot directly alongside hers. Their legs brushed up against each other once again, a subtle tease. The contact, brief as it was, was enough to wake her up almost entirely; though her head still ached like a hammered anvil. “I hear the Alik’r in the far west do so to keep their women in line...by replacing any troublesome wenches in their harems with more docile, younger women. Perhaps there is something to the traditions of the desert after all... ouch!”

That had been her last oatcake, but damn if it hadn’t been hard as rock - and perfectly suited to its purpose. “I almost wish ye would, Bear, just to see yer look of abject misery once you’ve discovered what ye’d done to y’self. Snygg be a lovelorn nit-piffle of a lass who cannae fight t’save her life, but Brenna could be her bodyguard - if she were not sae damned uncomfortable in her own skin. That big girl needs to be around more of yer woman warriors, I think. Develop some sense of her own strength and pride. A pity ye’ll no wed her, for she has a stout heart and much potential. If only she’d no stammer and hide sae much!”

When he leaned over to offer her some bread, Nemain barely managed to rip a handful away before Ulfric slouched back in the saddle; that same smug grin still plastered upon his face. “Oh, do go on. Tell me all about the fair maidens my thanes have hand-picked for me personally.”

“Ye dinnae have t’act sae happy aboot it.”

“Oh I do, for it seems I’ve been gifted the cream of the crop. List their faults and virtues. You have been riding with them almost exclusively this entire trip, so I am sure you have got the measure of them by now. I noticed you did not mention the pirate’s daughter. What think you of her?”

Licking at her fingers to get every last crumb, Nemain flicked her hands at Ulfric to beckon for more bread. He handed it over with a twinkle in his eye, as his thumb stroked the full length of her hand and wrist before letting go.

She felt an unpleasant flush warm her face, and turned away, bread forgotten. “Solveig be too beautiful an’ clever for her own good. An’ she insists the Windrimes be honest merchants, nae pirates.”

Somewhere high above them, a hawk wheeled and cried. They both looked up, watching as it flew towards the southern mountains.

Ulfric cleared his throat, then unstoppered his waterskin and took a drink. “So the cloudheaded act is
a farce, after all. I suspected so after she asked about the efficacy about traveling via horse instead of by boat. Though she did not seem to know that going by river in Skyrim would be no pleasure; spinning through rapids, whirlpools and eventually crashing in one of the many waterfalls is the inevitable fate of any who insist on doing so.”

“Mmm. She loves sailing, will talk of nothing else should the topic be broached, and she be a fair fighter. Not as good as Brenna - gods, that braw lass was a sight t’behold, swinging that sword and shield, she must have slain twenty on her lonesome while Snygg cowered behind - but I watched Solveig skewer a bandit at twenty paces with a thrown knife, only tae turn and slit a man’s throat who’d been a’creeping up on her. I think she carries a brace o’ throwing dirks on her chest, somewhere hidden below those astonishing bubbies.”

“A woman after yer own heart, what with the way y’clank about like a tinker in assorted pointy bits.” Taking the waterskin from him, she took a pull herself after putting the bread away in her knapsack. Grateful for the reprieve from talking about the girls, as a curl of something envious and dark snaked around her chest.

Little does it matter now. Yer a dead woman walking. Why should you be jealous of what ye can never have? “And she’s by nae means yer only option. Far more elected tae stay in Windhelm than come along, y’ken. Some e’en more accomplished and fierce than these. Dinnae feel constrained by the three what have stayed for the destination. Yer nae Alik’r...you only get the one wife, after all.”

“I won’t choose poorly. And thank you.” Removing the waterskin, the man touched her hand where it lay limply in her lap holding the reins. Hating herself, she grabbed his large paw and held it fast, happy that his fingers tightened around hers in response.

And even though it was incredibly uncomfortable riding in such a way, for he was tilted practically onto her saddle, she did not let go.

His breath was hot on her cheek, and she shivered. Though it was plenty warm. Gods, her head was pounding, that voice insistently whispering in the shadowed recesses of her thoughts. Darkness rises when silence dies.

Struggling to think clearly, she turned her face just enough that his nose brushed her cheek. “You know, Nemain...you must know...that this task does not have to fall upon your shoulders. You. I...”

“My Jarl! Lady Dragonborn! We’ve found something!”

“What?” Turning together to see what was about, Nemain’s breath caught in her throat as two Stormcloaks approached, each bearing one wriggling, protesting child.

Aventus and Sofie!

His hand tightened around hers, then dragged her off her horse as Ulfric dismounted. “What in Talos’ name are you two doing here?” He growled, stalking towards them in clear distemper. “I expressly forbade you to come along.”
“We wanted to see Whiterun!” Sofie chirped, as Aventus frowned belligerently at his boots. The Stormcloak warriors kept an effortless grip on both as they continued to try squirming away. “You left for such a long time before, Ma, that I thought -”

“-ye didnae think, child. Gods damn ye fer wee proud fools!”

Far more scared than furious, Nemain took three great, robe-flapping strides and began shaking the girl by the shoulders. “D’ye not know the dangers you have placed yerself in?! This be a land at war, nae some fantasy playground! You couldae been kilt by bandits! Raped and gutted, left for me t’find when yer bones have been picked clean by scavengers! Where have you been hiding! Who helped you!?"

“We found them stowed away in the supply wagon. Little blighters ate their way through an entire barrel of cheese and bread,” one of the soldiers supplied. “Found ‘em trying to take a shit in the open behind the wagons.”

Leaning down, Ulfric took away the mace Aventus had strapped to his waist with a grim shake of his head.

“Hey! That’s mine!”

“...And I gave it to you to protect yourself and others. A weapon to be used in wisdom and faith. You have shown little of either, in choosing to disobey your mother.”

Hefting the flanged weight of it in his hand, Ulfric inspected it. “I should strip you of this honor, Aventus Aretino.”

Nemain fussled over Sofie’s robes, smoothing away her girls’ tears as Bear flipped the mace around so that the handle was facing her son. “But I will not. We are in the wilds, and a man needs his weapon for defense. I’m counting on you to use it well. Do not disappoint me again.”

“I won’t!” Eagerly accepting it back, Aventus bowed. “I promise.”

“See that you do.”

“And that goes fer you too, m’dear. You end up caught in the fighting, you use what Wuunferth taught ye, and use it well!” Wiping dirt smudges from Sofie’s solemn face with her sleeve, Nemain straightened to see that the three young women were now watching them curiously from the head of the column, still astride their horses.

Brenna’s small eyes had popped wide in astonishment. Snygg seemed vaguely interested, looking back and forth from the children to her and Bear, while Solveig wiped her forehead and sighed.

“Tell me that these aren’t your byblows, Jarl Ulfric. I did not sign on for this.”

Through the bland mask of his court face, Nemain could tell that the question had surprised Bear. It certainly shocked her...though she realized that what with the way they had been jointly scolding the children, such a conclusion was not inconceivable.

“These two imps be my adopted son and daughter. Sofie and Aventus. Seems they have stowed away in search of adventures, against me wishes.”
“And such adventures they will find. In spades.” Vowed Ulfric with a dark look upon his face. “Men, escort these two miscreants to the cook and his staff. I want them peeling vegetables and turning spits until they rue the day that ‘adventure’ caused them to disobey their elders.”

“But Maaa…” Shaking her head in annoyance and relief, Nemain glared at the two as they were led away to labor under Sindaf’s tender mercies. Casting a small spell of protection over them both, she felt her heart give a small flip-flop as the Stormcloak soldiers frog-marched the two sullen children off to the back of the column. “Go! And give not a peep of trouble to the cook, or ye’ll feel me palm tanning yer bony hides!”

Waiting until the children were out of earshot, she bit her lip in worried thought. That could have gone far worse. What if they had been attacked? By wolf or bandit or -Et’Ada have mercy, by some rogue vampire or feral werewolf?! “Thank you Bear. You handled that well. I came fair close tae spanking them in truth.”

“That option is still on the table. It will be all the more difficult keeping them safe now.”

She realized he was now looking at the young women who were still gawping at the scene they had made. “Come along, ladies. Nothing to see here anymore.”

Directing her horse forward, the red-headed lass tilted her head and gave Bear (‘her’ Bear, she thought viciously, though the threat of it was hollow) a dazzling smile. Her sapphire eyes twinkled, that creamy cleavage on display nearly popping from her bodice laces as her horse stamped its foot. “As I see it, there are yet three things seen before you that many would say have quite an appeal, my Jarl.”

“You can count to three,” Ulfric smiled approvingly. “That bodes well for our offspring.”

“And here I thought we weren’t having offspring.” Solveig demurred. Turning that glorious goddess-like stare to Nemain, the chit dared to grin once again.

Though the smile she was given differed greatly from the one she had bestowed upon the Jarl, for it had teeth. “...judging by the rumors of your incapability, you understand. Though it seems your faithful mage has taken it upon herself to remedy the situation. Pray tell, will we share the marriage bed with your docile Forsworn as well? For I find that I do not like to share.”

“I cannot speak as to the rumors, but I assure you that when it comes to the marriage bed I shall steel myself to the task,” Ulfric said, his voice gentle with reprisal.

“You’re revolting, you salty hag. Shame on you for speaking to our Jarl in such a lewd manner!” Brenna railed, her monstrous stallion pawing the earth with dinner-plate hooves. Snygg stared off into the distance, a slight frown wrinkling the faraway look she wore. Belaying how uninvested she seemed to be in the conversation.

“And you’re a cow,” Solveig tossed her fiery hair.

“Slut!”

“Prude!”

“Whore!”

“Man-faced, cock-crushing giantspawn! I'll bet your mother wept at the sight of you when you were
Brenna gritted her teeth and balled her hands into fists. “I’ve had enough of your loose lips. Like countless men, I am sure!”

“I hope the lips you are referring to are the ones resting beneath my nose!”

“Both flap so frequently, it is hard to tell the difference!”

“Oh, stop it you two. It does no good to rail at one another.” Snygg had roused herself, her heavy lidded eyes blinking owlishly as Solveig and Brenna stared each other down. “Come on, we are nearly at our destination! Think of it! Not long, and I shall be able to send my missive to Eduard by courier. He shall find me, and carry me off to his dark palace of pleasures, where he will whisper sweet decla-dations of love and he shall make me his eternal bride! I will never age, or grow old and ugly, and we’ll be beautiful together forever!”

“Declarations, not decla-dations you lackwit,” Solveig stated in annoyance, leaning away as flies buzzed around her horse’s tail. “Ugh, this stink! I hate horses. I hate the south! How long until we reach Whiterun?”

Brenna readjusted her shield upon her back. “If I chop off your head and toss it west you’ll get there even faster, slut. Greygull, if you don’t shut up I will find a beehive, wedge it down your open mouth, and—”

“Our marriage was fated in the stars!” Snygg announced, looking dramatic as any heroine in a mummery as she laid her wrist limply against her forehead.

_Hircine’s horns, what a day._ “I wonder if we’ve neglected the ripe possibility that she injured her head in that fall,” Nemain grumbled. Looking over at Ulfric, the witch nearly snorted to see him gaping in poorly concealed dismay at the three squabbling lasses.

“Time t’be off, girls. You’ve entranced the Jarl long enough with yer charms.”

“Thank you,” He mumbled fervently, as Nemain herded the girls away with shooing motions. Solveig held her horse back, lingering to smolder at Bear from beneath thick gingery lashes...until Nemain snapped the haunches of her horse with a tongue of electricity. Both of them watched the three maids gallop off in relief, with Nemain deriving a certain satisfaction as Solveig grimaced with every bounce up and down on her horse. Swotty bitch.

Ulfric groaned, scratching his beard as a scout approached him from the south. “Upon further reflection, I am not so sure that marriage to any of them is going to work.”

Nemain was thinking precisely along those lines, though she saw no reason to reiterate what had already been stated. “Och, but I think ye be perfectly suited,” she said sweetly, just to needle him. “Solveig be quite the match. That elegant tongue...those quivering bosoms…”

“A rebel Jarl with a price on his head weds a conniving corsair. They sport and argue, fending off countless enemies together, all for a lifetime of happiness and songs? I hardly think so. This Windrime has read one too many novels.”
“An’ who says the bitch can read? She can scarcely count, remember?” Nemain scratched her neck, where the sweat had trailed down from her scalp. “And ‘tis Snygg who be the reader of that bunch. A shame she reads nought but two-septim tripe, else her mind would be much improved.”

“Ah, so all clear then? Thank you.” Ulfric nodded to the scout, who saluted and galloped off upon delivering his news. Turning to her, the Jarl patted his horse’s flanks, then made an absurd grimace that she thought might have been some coarse attempt at a swoon.

He topped it off with a fist to his heart.

“Nemain. Sweet savior of Skyrim. Magick me away from this nightmare and marry me.”

She would have laughed, but she did not want to encourage him in this. “Pffth. It’s no like y’doon have options. Brenna be genuinely interested in you, and Solveig simply be bored.”

She ignored the thrill that went through her at the sound of her name uttered in that deep velvety voice, and squared her shoulders. “And I be far too tired tae be made an’ object of ridicule, Bear. Tis impossible. Go shank y’self.”

“Only if you join me. Later tonight, in my tent. We can shank each other. No - wrong term. Ah! Let’s lock legs and swap gravy.”

“Hah! You wish.”

She wished he wouldn’t bring up that bloody awful list. At least it was hot enough to blame the sun for the burst of color rising in her cheeks. *I wish Borri had ne’er handed me such a horrid compilation. I wish I could kidnap Bear an’ keep him all to meself for a year, one whole year without any bodging war or dark politics, somewhere far from big-titted redheads and dragons. Stupid fucking wishes.*

“Fadoodle. Princum-prancum. You plunge the wicket, and I’ll grease the scuppers.”

She licked her lips (her face must have turned tomato-red by now). “Suck balls, Bear.”

He cocked his head, an impish grin spreading across his face. “Now *that* does sound anatomically impossible.”

She snorted a laugh, choking as she tried desperately not to watch as Ulfric craned his neck down... as if contemplating the attempting of such a thing. “What am I going tae do with ye?”

“Nothing, apparently.” He sighed while vaulting into his saddle with an ease she envied. It took her three tries to snag her boot into the stirrup and haul herself up, so exhausted she was. “I suppose I shall have to examine the three terrors once again. Provided you keep them in line.”

“They be absolutely terrified of me.”

“Really?”

“Cor, I always speak the truth. Ye should be scairt as well.”

He gave her a secret little-boy grin that stopped her flat. “Maybe you should try harder.”
They began trotting faster down the path that led to the Stormcloak camp. Behind them, Nemain heard war horns blow, a mournful sound. Signaling that their forces were again on the move.

Yet Bear was hardly going faster than a slow canter, occupied as he was just looking at her. She recognized that contemplative scrutiny. They would get there by next Fredas at this rate. “Mayhap ye should get on th’ move and stop staring at me so, fear thuaidh.”

“And maybe you should grummet the pully-hawly! Quimstick! Tack på förhand!” Bear shouted out, as he spurred his horse into a pounding gallop.

Nemain laughed aloud at that one. And clicked her tongue, to urge her own mare to catch up to him. She couldn’t let him leave her behind, after all. She was too bodging important. Dragonborn, court mage, matchmaker…

I do it all.

Gods save me from my own fool heart.

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“Let me get this straight. You wish to enter into an alliance with my Hold, in order to cease hostilities and end the war once and for all...by trapping a dragon in my palace.”

Nemain and Ulfric glanced at one another, as Balgruuf waited impatiently for their response. “Yes, that sounds about right.” The Jarl of Eastmarch stated casually. “What say you?”

Sitting as straight as she could manage in the oversized wooden chair they had given her, Nemain looked around the high vaulted ceiling of the war room of Dragonsreach. Someone had moved a massive table front and center to replace the smaller one that had been shoved off to the side, covered in the more typical accoutrements of maps, markers and scrolls.

It was an impressively intimidating space, decorated in the old Nordic style. Every corner and crossbeam bore a horned sconce of flickering light, every goblet filled with mead had been carefully carved with stylized bears, eagles and wolves. Even the yellow rugs underfoot were as ornate as a tapestry, with interlocking woven designs that minded Nemain of the dragon ships rocking slowly in Windhelm’s harbor.

The entire city was a work of art, and yet she could not enjoy it. For the talks were not going well, not at all.

“To that I say no, obviously.” Jarl Balgruuf drummed his hands upon the armrests of his throne. Slumped back like that, he looked deceptively tired...the portrait of a warrior gone to seed, with more grey than gold in the hair trailing limply from beneath the circlet of his office.
Yet despite his thickened gut and deeply carved wrinkles, Nemain sensed a quickness about the man that put her instantly on edge. A sharp awareness in those blue eyes undimmed yet by the ravages of time and long rule. This Jarl had not remained aloof from the civil war for so long without possessing a fair share of guile.

Nemain fidgeted, silently aware that it would take all her powers of persuasion to induce Balgruuf to their way of thinking. A feat that she now feared might never come to pass.

She sat in a place of honor at Ulfric’s right hand, surrounded by rows of seated and armored men of rank and highborn blood. And yet she felt very much alone. She was the only woman; indeed, the only one not of Nordic blood (aside from the Jarl’s Dunmer housecarl, who looked as though she’d like nothing better than to disembowel Nemain without any further prevarication. Her red eyes followed her every twitch and gesture with bloodthirsty greed.)

_Breathe and focus. The wind and the flame._ Next to her, she could feel Ulfric’s thigh nudge against hers in a silent show of support. For Jarl Balgruuf was speaking yet again, and his words were not promising.

“Let me be clear. You may be the Dragonborn, and a celebrated hero in the East, but I have never seen you slay so much as a skeever in my Hold, Nemain of the Reach.” The old Nord fixed his pale blue eyes on her, effectively skewering her in judgement as every face swiveled to turn and look in her direction.

“I’m not a fool, Dragonborn. Where were you, when two terrors of your namesake razed our fields and assaulted my people some months back? Not here, I think...it was the Companions of Jorrvaskr who drove the beasts away, wounding them so badly they fled to the south. A fine victory for the Hall of Ysgramor, of the Five Hundred. Yet you were not there.”

“Where were you when the watchtowers to the north and the east fell to bandits? Where was your much-vaunted assistance when the Empire came and took a quarter measure of the seed we were to use for spring planting? Saying that it was our weregild, our tax that remained unpaid...though assuredly we have paid, in both septims and blood for the knife-edged peace I have brokered at the expense of my health and age. Where were you when I needed you, Dragonborn?”

He ended his list of her faults with a deep, growling sigh. “And why should I give you the wolf’s share from my table, when me and mine have been given only the barest scraps of your own?”

The words she wished to utter stuck like a rock in her craw. Clearing her throat, Nemain stood...aware that all eyes were upon her. That most of the faces were not friendly. That everything Balgruuf had said thus far was certainly quite true.

...and yet what choice did she have, but to press her case? For Alduin hunted the souls of the dead in preparation for the ending of the living.

_No choice and no chance, yet she would endure._ Though her faults were many, no one could say that Nemain was anything but persistent. ‘Stubborn as a rusted trap,’ Bear had despaired of her once, though she thought he might have been giving her a compliment. In his own, particularly backhanded way. For had she not used that perseverance to study and memorize his Dovahzul dictionary? Truly it had its uses.
She drew in a shaking breath. And began.

“Fair friends and new acquaintances, it be true that I have not had the privilege of venturing t’your fine city and lands before now. I am unable tae be in more than one place at any given time, y’ken. And yours be not the only land scoured by dragonfire and death.”

“Alduin the World Eater devours the souls of yer honored dead in Sovngarde. This be fact. With every day that passes, he grows stronger. And every day we delay gives him an’ his hosts the chance to better prepare, to strike doon at us. Ragnarök - the battle between gods and men be upon us now! The signs an’ portents be here, before yer very eyes! Calamities foretold by yer own seers and mine...natural disasters, wars an’ rumors of wars.”

"But there be reason tae hope, still, fer I do believe that we choose our destiny.”

Gripping her dress tightly in both hands, Nemain concentrated on breathing evenly. “A wise man once told me that. Only cowards be unwilling to fight fer what they hold dear. Inaction be the easier path, and though you say your peace has come at a cost I say you dinnae know what the cost truly be, should you continue all on yer own. Nay, Balgruuf, the time has come to choose. Though you buy your choice with a great price, I tell ye- so have we.”

“We must surely stand together, else we will all fall as one. An’ who will care for Skyrim’s folk then, when all the warriors be dead an’ gone, and the dragons soar o’er the burning remains? Will the Thalmor reclaim this land for the elves? Will y’let them tear doon the SkyForge tae build a crystal tower? Where be the brotherhood of mankind when all be said and done?”

“I have nae been here when ye’ve needed me, and fer that I be right sorrowful. But I stand here now. Pleading with ye t’see reason. Join us. Join the Stormcloaks.”

Nemain forced herself to unclench her hands and lift them open palmed. A gesture of supplication, to the men who quietly listened with hard eyes...she hoped their hearts were not half so unyielding. “Call the Moot. Broker peace, for none of us can stomach another winter such as the last one! Help us cut off Solitude from the Empire’s clutches, and draw them intae peace talks, t’unite with us. Help root out the murdering and meddlesome Thalmor once and for all.”

“And please…” Tensing her shoulders, she saw Ulfric lift his head the slightest bit. Thankful for his reminder, she raised her chin and set her mouth in a grave line. Show nae fear.

“At least consider using Olaf’s ancient contraption tae catch a dragon. The Greybeards of High Hrothgar themselves ‘ave blessed this quest, and I ‘ave been given several Word-Names of Alduin’s closest warriors, tae lure and keep secure in the stoneworks of this grand palace, yer Dragonsreach. Think upon it, as all the risk be upon me...but the rewards be laid entirely on yore head! For can ye but think of the fame an’ glory heaped upon the name Whiterun, at the news that ye’ve trapped a dovah and lived? That ye played a grand part in ending the conflict evermore?”

Finishing with a deep exhale, Nemain felt eerily drained. “I thank ye for yer attention and time. I leave this matter t’you and yore council, tae decide at your leisure.”
Sitting woodenly back down in her chair, she felt a tiny flare of pride as Ulfric grasped her hand beneath the table and squeezed, though his face remained impassively pointed towards the Jarl of Whiterun.

Just as Balgruuf opened his mouth to speak, a figure detached himself from the shadows surrounding the war table and stepped forward. “The Dragonborn has given aid to at least one of Whiterun’s citizens in their time of need. I stand witness to the bravery of the soul before us. She is worthy of hearing, and being heard.”

Nemain’s jaw dropped to see none other than Farkas walk into the light, as a low murmur rippled around the table. “Who has she given succor to, Companion?” Balgruuf demanded, sitting up a bit straighter in his throne.

Glancing back at her, the Nord’s grey eyes were warm despite the fearsome paint that framed them. “She saved me, my Jarl. Defended me against those who would have done me in.”

Another man joined Farkas from the shadows, though Nemain was less overjoyed to see the stern visage of the Companion’s twin, Vilkas. “Aye, it’s true. I was there, I saw the Reach witch heal my brother of grave wounds that else would have ended him.”

Farkas bowed. “I owe her my life.”

Balgruuf made a slight motion, and the two twins stepped back...waiting as servants hurriedly pulled up two more chairs for them to sit at table. “Hmm. I suppose the matter bears further thought after all. Thank you, Companions. Jarl Ulfric, Dragonborn. I will give you no answer yet, for the news you have given conflicts me greatly.”

“Yet I have been a poor host. Let us end this discussion for now, and make ready for the celebration I have prepared in your honor! For long has it been since my old comrade Ulfric Stormcloak has visited me in my lands. And he brings none other than the Dragonborn, the Dovahkiin of legend along with him. We will feast you, aye, and drink to your deeds with the finest of mead. Victuals have been provided as well as music and merriment. You shall not leave my Hold with a heavy heart.”

Clapping his hands, everyone arose. Feeling nearly numb from the tension of imparting her speech (and racked with guilt that she perhaps had not done the words justice) Nemain stood Shakily, relinquishing Bear’s hand at the last possible moment. Her palms were sweating, and she wiped them against the back of her dress, biting her inner cheek in dismay at the further wetness she felt from beneath her underarms. And this be my best dress!

Balgruuf waved an airy hand. “You are all dismissed, save my fellow Jarl. For I would have a private conversation. We have not spoken alone since the culling of the Imperial City. To all else who depart from my presence, I bid you ‘skål!’”

“Skål!” The men rumbled around her, draining their cups of mead and leaving in a slow, yet steady trudge towards their various destinations.

It took her two swallows to finish off her mead, leaving her pleasantly tipsy afterward. “I’ll see you later at the feast,” Ulfric whispered, pushing her gently towards the hallway where a maidservant waited.

Nemain looked between him and Balgruuf, who stood arms akimbo. Neither looked thrilled at the
prospect of a private conversation, but she was learning. Slowly understanding that political intrigue was often, but not always, borne out in the open. Beneath smiling lips often lay seething lies, and though her Thu’um often provided discernment between truth and error, it did not tell the Reachwitch the silent thoughts of the man whose opinion she cared more for than she ought.

_The culling? Imperial City? Since when has Bear been friends with Balgruuf? I’ve ne’er heard him mention any such thing._

And yet sometimes the most efficient plots were hatched in the subtext of secrets. She bobbed her head at both Jarls, and took off in an uneven step towards the maid, who curtsied and directed her towards the ladies chambers.

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Both men watched the small woman go, weariness evident in the slump of her shoulders.

“Strange bedfellows you make these days, Ulfric.”

He stiffened, the Thu’um in his chest roaring like a furnace as he struggled as he had never needed to before; to contain the ire within him. Some of that inner battle must have showed upon his face, for Balgruuf gave him a strange glance.

"Don't be alarmed, man. I mean no harm." The older Jarl let out a breath through his nose and looked to his empty goblet, as if he could mentally will the mead to reappear within. "I know that certain alliances are necessary in times of war, no matter how...distasteful one might personally find them."

It was his old reasoning again, Ulfric’s own mind reflected in such words - and yet the idea was as bitter to him as saltwater, unwelcome and unfriendly in the light of what he had come to feel for Nemain. Still, he would do her no favors to speak in her defense. It would have implied a familiarity that, though real, he did not wish to discuss with Balgruuf.

So instead he frowned, and looked away. “The Dragonborn is useful to me.”

“As she is to us all. And yet I wonder if you have thought clearly about your decision to challenge the might of the Empire, and spit in the face of our traditions.” Balgruuf’s face puckered in speculation as he bid them both silently to sit down once again.

Ulfric splayed his hands upon the table and looked at them. Rough and coarse, they were tangible proof of the life he had lived. A life that had been devoted in many ways to the best of Skyrim’s heritage. “It is the Empire that despoils our proud traditions, Balgruuf. We were not always weak, to accept chests of gold in exchange for our gods. Once, we were brave.”

“Damn it! This isn’t about the gold!” Balgruuf smashed his fist upon the table.

“Did I get a chance to object to the terms of the treaty, once the Imperial City fell? Did you? No! We Jarls and nobles were not asked, we were told! And we had to like it!”

“The White-Gold Concordat was the spark that ignited a wildfire. But that flame had been a burning
ember long before you and I went to war in our youth, Balgruuf. How many decades has Cyrodiil annexed Skyrim as a lowly province? We cannot even make our own laws without asking permission from our elven overlords, scraping and bowing like dogs in our own lands! It has to end. I will make an end of it...with or without your help.”

The two men locked eyes one with another. “So it has come to this, at last.”

“It seems so.”

Balgruuf broke away first, his mouth tightening as though he were in pain. “And you are serious in challenging my rule.”

Ulfric shrugged. “You would retain the leadership of your Hold. If I were to ascend to be High King, I would even name another...to rule Windhelm in my stead. Such responsibility deserves the best of attentions, and I do have faith in your skill and judgement, Balgruuf. That much was never in doubt.”

“Deadking Torygg did not expect to be called to task in the Old Way.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“You could have ended it without his death.” Ulfric watched him wordlessly, not finding the statement in need of any response as Balgruuf sighed in defeated vexation. “But you will do what you feel to be right, regardless of what council I - or any other Jarl - would seek to give. Ever you have been the follower of your own mind.”

“I listen to wisdom, if it is wise.”

Balgruuf templed his fingers and looked at him beneath furrowed brows. “Yes. But who decides what wisdom serves the people best? For a mind surrounded only by fawning lackeys will grow stale, and not even pride in the people will save you from the grief of your errors, then.”

“I have come to learn that particular truth of late, Balgruuf.” Slowly, like water draining from a sieve Ulfric’s anger began to seep away. Leaving him cold, and indelibly aware. Had it only been the span of a year since Helgen?

So much had changed. “My new diversity of opinion is owed entirely to my strange bedfellow you made mockery of, earlier.”

Balgruuf’s pale eyebrows shot up. “The Forsworn witch?”

“Her name is Nemain.” Leaning forward, Ulfric rested his chin upon the folded knuckles of his fists. “And it is due to her influence that I come to you, not with an army, but with an offer.”

Flicking his gaze up to the older man, Ulfric gave him a reluctant smile. “Think on it...for old times sake. We helped one another once, in escaping the citadel and making our way up north through the pass. I remember the starving and the songs, huddled together around a fellow soldier's pyre light for whatever warmth we could find. Help me drive out foreign rule and bring back the old unity of the Jarls, led by a High King who suffers no foreigner to manipulate his rule.”

"Help me make Skyrim a country to fight for, once again. The birthplace of man; Ysgramor's seat. Our home, safe with its borders secure and her people well fed and happy in their choice of government.”
Tapping the table, he nodded thoughtfully. “One that will serve all its citizens, while keeping the
unique nationality of our people hale. The discovery that this is possible has also been a recent
acquisition of mine...a mindset that I know you have long owned to be true. Forgive me for past
errors, Balgruuf, but do not make the mistake of thinking I will scrape and bow...for I have had my
fill of such obeisance. And I will bow no more.”

An echo of his previous temper made him curl his lip. “Never. Again.”

The noise welling up from the main hall of Dragonsreach was slowly spilling into their quiet circle,
isistent and inevitable. Balgruuf settled back into his throne, a pensive look upon his wrinkled face.
“Well. You have already proven your personal strength, that is beyond doubt.”

Ulfric waited.

Balgruuf stood, not exactly smiling as Ulfric echoed his movements. Yet the Jarl was not as hostile
as he had felt before, judging by the air currents wafting towards the breath Ulfric tasted upon his
tongue. The Jarl of Whiterun’s breath of Thu’um was complex.

“I stand by what I said earlier. I will give you and the Dragonborn my answer in the morning.”

Extending an arm, Balgruuf clapped him on the shoulder as they both left the war room. To stroll
towards the living area, where servants scurried along with lowered eyes and the sound of female
laughter rang like bells down the opposite hall.

“I believe you. Gods strike me, but I believe your words. A man may talk, and talk, and say that he
has changed. But the proof lies before my eyes, does it not? For the Ulfric Stormcloak I knew ten
years, or even two years before would have given me his axe without so many words.”

Ulfric shrugged. “There are still things I cannot find in me to compromise upon. Yet some methods
that are less than clear cut have proven to be most efficient.”

Balgruuf hmmed in agreement. “A man who sees only in black and white lacks the ability to
recognize differing hues of color. Enjoy the feast, Jarl Ulfric.”

They both tilted their heads in slight, but identical bows. “I shall see you there, Jarl Balgruuf.”

“Of course! I wouldn’t miss a freshly broached barrel of Black Briar mead for the world!”

Ulfric cracked a grin. “That’s the spirit. You should try some of the sujamma I imported recently
from the Retching Netch, in Solstheim.”

Noting Balgruuf’s piqued interest, he waggled his fingers. “I spent an entire hour, simply watching
my hand move in the light of a candle flame after drinking a half bottle of the stuff.”

“Oh mother Kyne. Now I have to try it.” The Jarl wet his lips, looking around briefly until he was
satisfied that none were eavesdropping.

Appearing grieved, Balgruuf opened his mouth, then shut it. He finally whispered. “Talos preserve
you.”

Ulfric sighed, a trace of power vibrating through his chest in anger - righteous anger - at the levels of deceit the Nord people had sunk to, just to honor their gods.

One way or another, he thought, I will bring it all to an end. For without an end, how can a new beginning come into being?

“May Talos guide you, Balgruuf. And keep you whole.”

Watching the Nord depart, Ulfric looked around himself at the signs of wealth that showed the Hold’s prosperity. Carved wood gleamed, freshly oiled from bannisters to furnishings. The candles that had been lit were beeswax and not tallow, for the smoke trailing up from the scent of them was sweet. And the carpets underfoot as well as the tapestries hanging the walls had been dusted and freshly beaten, the colors brightly embroidered. Their profusion in decorating Dragonsreach's walls and stone-flagged floors utterly lavish.

Ulfric thought upon the sun-faded carpets; the threadbare curtains and the reek of the tallow candles decorating his own palace, and sighed. How much wealth from Imperial coffers had been drained to afford the abundance on display tonight, at this celebration? Was it something Balgruuf would be willing to risk, in order to serve a higher calling?

Choose wisely, old friend.

Chapter End Notes

Swedish phrase (My Swedish speaker will please TELL ME if this is totes wrong. IDK. I just googled it.)

Tack på förhand! – Thank you in advance

Yep...you guessed it! Solveig is my OC Dragonborn, created after the Dragonborn expansion that re-introduced us to Solstheim.

I love her. She is my major Thieves Guild go-to girl. Vain, shrewd and in love with nothing save perhaps the freedom money and power can bring, she reminds me of a blend of Regina George from Mean Girls...and maybe Miranda Priestly from Devil Wears Prada. LOL. Yes she's a bitch, but she's 'my' pretty bitch.

And as for the other two:

Brenna of Karth is Brienne of Tarth, from the Game of Thrones franchise. I hate to love her, because she seems sometimes like a bit of a cop out. A bit one-dimensional, the fish-out-of-water who breaks the mold by being exceptionally good at something that is typically a man's purview. Am I right? Don't get me wrong - I love this character. But I hate to love her. I’d like to see some more depth than just ‘I feel ugly, ergo I will go hit things, because badassery.’ Yeah.
Gudrun or Snygg Greygull is Bella Swan from the Twilight series. Get it? Greygull for Swan, and Snygg is Swedish slang for 'good looking,' which hey. It works!

I love to hate her.

Let the flame comments pour in now, because I will admit - I have read the Twilight book and have seen the movies, to foster unity with my sisters and just to see what all the fuss is about. Let me put it this way - I have read fanfic better than Stephanie Meyer's brain farts. And I do not care overmuch for Bella Swan, given that she is such an obvious self-insertion of her author and a horrific Mary Sue.

She is passive. She is completely obsessed with her boys. And she's not even particularly nice to them...leading the (alive, terrifically hot) boy on hopelessly while moping unhealthily over the other, more stalkery bloodsucker.

Really. Comment and we'll discuss the ins and outs of Twilight characters versus Skyrim. Even with Bethesda's one dimensional writing for its NPCs, I dare you to find a character that is not nearly as compelling as the main cast of Twilight's pasty-faced sparkly vegetarians.

BEGIN.
Chapter Notes

Holy snickerdoodles, this is a long chapter Batman. Buckle up, buttercups! It's gonna get wild from here on out.

And oh my glob...I know this is old hat, but I just discovered the Techno Viking. I’m dyiiing… :D I have no idea who this German guy is, but seriously: watching this dude dance makes me happy.

I bet this is exactly what Farkas would do if he were plopped into a modern music festival. I’d throw septims like confetti to see that s--- go down. ;)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0IofkJW9f0

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No bread did they give me
Nor a drink from a horn,
Downwards I peered;
I took up the runes,
Screaming I took them,
Then I fell back from there.
Do you know how to write?
Do you know how to interpret?
Do you know how to color them?
Do you know how to consider?
Do you know how to consult?
Do you know how to sacrifice?
Do you know how to send?
Do you know how to kill?

-Odin, by the group Faun (featuring Einar Selvik from Wardruna) Quoting the Voluspa (again)

The song can be listened to in its live version here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ch-fed2_swY
Night had fallen, but Dragonsreach was awake. Bright with the light of dozens of torches.

Inside the imposing hall, festooned in summer-green garlands and blooms, were tables filled with Nords. Feasting, singing, some still drinking though the night was long in the tooth. Their less inebriated kin whirled about in stamping circles that broke and bled together, thrumming to the beat of drum and lute. Clapping and jumping in freeform gaiety and noise.

Nemain nursed a full bottle of mead, gritting her teeth as her headache continued to pound away. Somewhere in the festive bedlam, Solveig laughed high and clear. She could see Brenna rubbing shoulders with the elderly wives and veteran warriors near the back, and she had already checked upon Snygg (whose head remained buried in her book) and the children, who had found refuge in the larder scoffing meat pies and ale (watered-down ale, she had made sure of it) with Jarl Balgruuf’s bairns.

Nothing left to do but enjoy herself, as much as was possible considering the circumstances. Lifting the damp weight of her hair from her neck, the Breton sighed as the barest trace of a breeze cooled her skin. What bright spark decided that the grandest place for such a shindig in high summer was here, with all th’ body heat enclosed inside and a roarin’ fire? Clarty fanklesome logic.

She had settled herself against one of the carved wooden pillars near the stairs...far out of the way of the revolving ring of dancers, but close enough to keep a weather eye upon her three charges and anything else of note. And if the distance did not discourage the fear thuaidh who separated from the throng and approached Nemain to talk, then her black scowl sent them packing.

*Might as well have painted a sign and hung it round me neck, stating tae BUGGER OFF. Nought to see here. Yet for as many Nords who dared to try engaging her in speech there were thrice as many who stared right past her when she brushed by, or cast her equally dark looks in return. No love lost amongst her and the fine citizens of Whiterun.*

Which was fine. She was not there to make friends. That was Bear’s job.

The peace council, the bride-seeking...this unwanted attention: it bothered her. It bothered her intensely that she could no longer escape to the shadows. To watch and observe, unimportant and unknown.

Being front and center was not among her strengths. *Dancing aboot like a moon-mad cat and gibbering prophecy, och that I can handle, but... surely, she had botched her little speech!* For Balgruuf had not given her more than a cursory nod ever since he had taken up his throne to feast. And of Ulfric, she’d seen neither hide nor hair for an age, after he had danced the obligatory round with Solveig, Brenna and Snygg.

She snorted to herself. Watching Bear goose-step along with a straight face as Snygg trampled on each and every one of his toes had been priceless. Nemain had nearly been forced to stuff her fist
into her mouth, just to prevent any stray guffaw from escaping, as he bowed courteously only to limp away to Dibe knows where.

This whole situation was truly incredible. She wasn’t supposed to be here, in Whiterun, with all these Nords...these rough, joyous fear thuaidh who laughed and sang so open and freely...songs that she hadn’t grown up knowing. Dances that were nothing like the stiff, quick jigs the Forsworn men stamped out in celebration, arms splayed or held tightly to the side. Nor was anything seen here even remotely similar to the fluid cavorting grace of the priestess’ step dance. Movements that praised nature, that glorified the beauties of the body; the form and function thereof.

She took a small sip, looking on with indifference. Nord dancing in comparison seemed more akin to a group of warriors who had made themselves over merry with drink, stumbling arm-in-arm to the nearest privy. She wrinkled her nose at the thought.

As more sweat trickled down her forehead, Nemain found herself longing for waterfalls. Cool and misted and massive, pounding down the rocky crags and into surging streams. She missed the tangy scent of juniper, of holy groves wreathed in mist...the pipewyipew call of the pine thrush. She could barely recall the sound of her own tongue; of accents as familiar as the death dirge and prayers to the Goddess had been - bones rattling upon boldas in the night. Here? In this bastion of wealth fed by wheat, golden within and golden without? It was all wrong.

And she did not belong. Not here. Not anywhere.

Raising her head, she looked around the crowded hall. Where had that man gone off to. Straining on her tip-toes, Nemain desperately struggled to ignore the waves of pain emanating from the base of her skull (really, did the drummers have to play quite so vigorously?) as she looked for a familiar head of red-gold hair. Simultaneously wanting him to appear, and yet dreading it even as she searched...

A solid broadcloth-covered chest blocked her view. “Mead not to your liking?”

Craning her neck to look around the Companion’s bulk, Nemain sloshed half her bottle upon Farkas’ pants and boots. “Shite, sorry aboot that. No...I’m - ugh. Nae feeling too merry at the moment.”

Plucking the bottle (which looked like a thimble in his paw) from her limp hand, Farkas drained the remainder in a single gulp. “There. Out of sight, out of mind. Come on, midget. Smile! Live a little!”

“That’s a shame. Then again, you are Dragonborn...heavy weight for a little woman.” Farkas shifted, and she noticed just now that he had been carrying nearly a full platter of roast goat leg, pies and what appeared to be sliced cheese and fillets of grilled fish. Upon noticing her stare, he offered her the plate with a grunt, but she shook her head.

“Huh. Tiny thing like you...bet you don’t eat much. Can’t hurt to hang around, see what the mage
who is also secretly a dragon does for fun."

_Shiv men in the sockets what pesh her with idjit questions._ Even her eyeballs hurt. “Dragons eat, fight and fuck like anythin’ else, Farkas.”

Farkas made a happy sound, stepping even closer into her personal space. “Good. Gotta wonder how you’d know. They sure weren’t talkative when I was slashing ‘em down with my sword.”

“That _does_ tend tae put a damper on conversation.”

“He, was gonna ask ya...what it feels like. Being a Dragonborn.”

Of all the questions Nemain had expected to fend off this night, that had not been one of them.

“What?”

At her eye level, she could see his chest rise and fall in a heavy breath. “Just wondering - was it different? After finding out? Different than before?”

Nemain considered. “In truth? It feels...hrm. Angry.”

“Mmmhm.” Farkas’ voice rumbled with rich laughter. “I know the feeling.”

“I’ll bet.”

_The beastborn were right plagued with temper._ She could practically taste the old, caustic bite of her words as she spoke them. The epiphany of their acrid truth.

“In a way it was a relief, her fury. She had played nice, played it calm for so very long. It was not that she enjoyed being angry, not exactly – but anger was familiar since her turning into the Dovahkiin.
Anger was comfortable, and in the soft and gilded world Ulfric had brought to Nemain there was little allowance for it. But all that she had swallowed and choked down to present a brave face (to do her duty to her friend, to find him a wife, to deal with the staring and the snubs and the blather) now came back up her gullet like bile; spiking her head with pressure anew as tears pricked and threatened.

And all because of his simple question.

The werewolf was not looming, exactly, but he had drawn near enough to make her push off the wall and straighten up every inch of her diminutive height. Readjusting the sleeve of her (somewhat clean, plain blue) robes, Nemain managed to crank her neck up to look Farkas in the eyes. Earning a crick in the neck for her efforts.

Grey eyes that looked kindly down at her. “Something else the matter, then?”

She sniffed, privately willing her tears to stay right where they were. She had not even thanked him for his pains to stand up for her at council, and here he was inquiring after her welfare. “I missed Beltane, Farkas.”

“And what’s - oh.” Farkas flicked the dark hair that had fallen forward over his cheek away, almost lazily. “I remember. The Midsummer rites, the bonfires, drinking. Comely wenches...”

The Nord exhaled and grinned. “Good times.”

“Glad ye bear such fond recollections. I had planned to attend a coven ritual, to serve the Gods, the Et’Ada...and I’ve just now realized that I’ve missed it. Completely. Without even giving notice that I would not be a’going.”

He shrugged, fobbing off his platter of food to a passing servant who staggered beneath the weight. “So go next year.”

_Corpsenails, I’ll likely no be breathing next year!_ “Tis nae likely.”

“Huh. Then dance with me now.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Celebrate to make up for it - relax. Let your hair down...er, or tie it up. So it doesn’t fall in your face.”

He swept his arm out, as if to imply disbelief that anyone could resist such revelry. “This is a party. People dance at parties. C’mon.”

“I’m nae really in th’mood, Stout.” Hesitating as the warrior extended a hand, the Reachwoman leaned to the side to look again, just one more time.

_There._

Ulfric had finally shown...leading a blonde she-Nord down the stairs upon his arm. She was inexpressibly lovely, garbed in a traditional blue kirtle, and as Nemain watched her lean over to whisper something in his ear (so hard to tell, people kept blocking her view) the Jarl of Eastmarch threw his head back and laughed.

Something crumpled within her at the sight.
“That’s it. Up we go!”

“Oofh!” Cutting off any remaining scruples Nemain might have had, Farkas had pulled her up into his arms and was now twirling her around in crazy circles. Flying right into the thick of the merry fray.

She gasped - for her feet were nowhere close to the ground! - and scrabbled for something to hold onto as the Companion drew them further into the screaming, stamping din of the celebrating crowd. “Gah, don’t pull so hard!”

Lifting her so that Nemain was nearly straddling his waist, Farkas batted away her hands from where they bore a death grip upon his hair. “Leggo, you little louse!”

“...yer spinning too damn fast, Farkas! Slow doon!”

With a speed of movement that made her jaw clench, the man plopped her to the ground. Seizing her hand, he leaned down and bellowed in her ear. “It’s supposed to go fast! Grab hold!”

“-What?!” But it was too late. For she had been caught up on the other side by a yelling Redguard lass, and could not break free...the circle dragged her along whether she would, or no.

Stumbling around and completely lost at sea, Nemain was practically hoisted aloft for the first song while she fought off the last bits of her banging headache and tried to memorize the pattern of the steps. Farkas’ hand was hot and tight around her own, not allowing for any reprieve as they stamped along.

Sod it. Her head was pounding nearly in sync with the drums, now. Completely soaked in sweat and tired of resisting, Nemain gave a ragged laugh and surrendered to the wild, pulsing energy of the dance.

Surely she was making mistakes, for her footwork was not nearly so neat...one of the older gaffers (gods, was that Balgruuf?) had even worked in a little hopskip at the end of his form, but she was no longer falling so much. Nor was Farkas propping her aloft any more...as the dance wended onward, a strange warmth buoyed her up. Making it easier to break the avoidance she had practiced thus far (she had no desire to see Ulfric at his courting) as she looked around herself.

The smoky room highlighted with torches was filled with Nords, yes, but so much more...Nemain realized she could see Redguards, Imperials and even a couple of Bosmer weaving drunkenly in and out of the shuffling circles of dancers. Most bore smiles rather than frowns, and she found her own flushed face splitting with a grin as the dance ended with an uproarious yell- and a vigorous stomp.

She barely avoided a boot the size of a trough as Farkas trod upon the hem of her robe. Nemain groaned upon hearing a tearing, then a loud rip.

“Noooo! Ye shoogly flat-footed galoot!”

“It's not so bad.” Farkas cast a cursory look at the pronounced split in the cloth (nearly up to her knee, she could just spit ) then slowly smiled. “Here. Let me help you out of it.”
“Hah!” Biting her lip, Nemain stretched out her leg to see what damage had been done. 

_Damnation...an’ I have nae more clothes t’wear._ “I think not, pup. Stay where y’are.”

“Just to fix it, woman. Won’t do nothing else...unless you want me to.”

Before she could respond to _that_ proposition someone shoved her roughly, and she stumbled, managing to grasp a hand that was thrust nearly into her face. A hand that nearly pulled her arm out of her socket while heaving her to her feet.

Wiping her hand, Nemain bared her teeth at Vilkas. _And didnae he just have the worst gowk timing ever?_ “Yer too kind, Slim.”

“Don’t mention it. Ever.”

“Brother!” Farkas clapped a heavy hand against his twin’s back, nearly toppling him over. “See, you made it just in time for the best dance! They’re playing Three Giants Tossed A Boulder...your favorite!” Bending nearly in half, Farkas mock-whispered into Nemain’s ear. “It’s his favorite because of the way the girl’s skirts fly high when they spin. Shhh!”

“Your blood runs hot, Farkas...for an ice-brain. Ysgramor himself wouldn’t have the patience to deal with you. Either of you, for that matter.” An auburn haired woman who looked vaguely familiar appeared behind Vilkas’ elbow.

“...You again.”

_The werewolf from the fertility festival. Fancy that._ “Er...Aela. Right?”

Looking her over, the woman appeared unimpressed. “That’s me. Anyone seen Skjor, yet?”

“Probably getting himself plastered enough to stomach dancing with you, Shield-Sister.” Vilkas dodged a careless swat from Aela, who then turned to Nemain and Farkas. “Coming?”

“If the Forsworn can keep up,” Vilkas silkily added, offering that nasty smile when Nemain gave him a dirty look. “Come on...it’s not that hard. Shuffle-step clap, shuffle-step clap. Spin around, change partners. Clap clap clap.”

“Truly, ye Nords have such sophisticated ways,” Nemain responded in kind, jutting out her chin as the Nord armsmaster scoffed, eyes narrowed.

“Better than a bunch of hide-draped savages picking their asses with elk antlers. Hooting and hollering at the moon.”

Nemain pursed her lips. “Only ‘cause the local weres be sae incapable in their duties, Slim. Awooo!”

Farkas shook his head ponderously as Aela chuckled. “Don’t make me separate you two again, Vilkas.”

“Think I’d prefer that, actually.”

Somewhere to the left, two flutes began tootling a quick stepping fife. The drums beat a _rat-atat-tat_,
and Nemain found her hands gripped in those of Farkas’ once again. “Ready?”

As much as Nemain would have loved to keep dancing, she had other duties. “Can ye do me a favor Stout?” She tilted her head to the side of the room, where Brenna stood. Looking dejected and bored. “See that tall lass o’er there? The one in that gods awful pink dress.”

“Hard to miss her.”

Making her eyes as liquidly doleful as possible, Nemain batted her lashes at Farkas. “Would ye be sae kind as t’dance the next round with her? She’s a shy one...willnae put herself out there. And maybe y’could put a bee in her bonnet aboot the Companions, y’ken? She’s a braw bonny fighter.”

Nemain dropped all pretense and slumped her shoulders. “In truth, I dinnae think she’s cut out fer marrying the Jarl as be her wont. And she’s sae eager t’prove herself...will ye do it? Though I know, I’ve nae right tae ask, after all ye’ve done standing up f’me at council. Should be doing ‘you’ a favor, I ken.”

“Hmm.” Farkas released her hands and slapped her twice upon the back...much more gently than he had his brother, though she still was forced to rake her nails into his shirt to remain standing. “Think I can manage that. Always looking for new Shield siblings.”

“But…” he snagged her hand as she made to leave. “You’re still gonna dance. Vilkas will take care of you for me. I’ll find you afterwards.” Squeezing her fingers, the Nord leaned over and placed a light, barely-there kiss upon her wrist.

She swallowed, for his grey eyes were suddenly hot and dark. “Said it yourself. You owe me a favor, Nemain. And I aim to collect. Later then?”

Barely managing to bob her head, Nemain squeaked out a weak little ‘aye’, as the broad bulk of Farkas’ back plowed through the sea of guests.

Dragging her attention back to her unwanted dancing partner, Vilkas looked at her in sour resignation. “You and my brother, eh?”

“Uhh…” Unable to form any sort of reply that wasn’t yea or nay, she jumped a bit as a loud yell erupted from all the Nords around them. The drumming reached a crescendo, and men and women took up their positions up and down the hall as lutes began to pick out the notes to a fast-paced reel.

Rolling his eyes, the Nord took her hands in his and huffed. “Try to remember the steps. Don’t bark my shins or toes.”

“Och, ye of little faith…”

“- Not in you. But for my brother, I’ll dance and make nice. Just the one time, aye?”

And with that, they were off! She wiped her sweaty hands upon her robe, feeling a breeze as the torn ends fluttered as she spun round, then clapped her hands again. Shuffle-step clap, shuffle-step clap...almost missing Vilkas’ hands in the joined hand-claps, Nemain giggled at the long-suffering look the Nord wore as she intentionally clobbered his toes with her boot.

She might have ground into him deeper than was truly necessary, for he hissed between clenched
teeth, “Gods, I’m going to get you for that. Next partner!”

Twirling until her hair nearly smacked her in the face, Nemain came face to face with an older, scowling Nord with a grey ponytail. And again, switching after the shuffle-step clap rhythm, Nemain joined hands with a handsy fear thuaidh who reeked of mead - then Aela, then a Redguard who smiled at her exuberance.

And back to Vilkas again.

Around and up and over, stepping and clapping until her heart was beating like a bird caged in her chest...a genuine grin stretched her skin until she thought her face would break. *I’ll be a jibbenz’d bampot. This be fun!*

Breaking away, laughing defiantly as Vilkas attempted to twist his boot upon her small toe and missed, Nemain came abruptly face to face with Ulfric.

The Bear’s court mask was firmly in place, blank and poised. Her mouth grew dry as her body went through the motions; hop-skipping and clapping at the right times though she realized she needn’t have bothered to display such care. He did not hesitate in the dance, clapping his hands against hers without any trace of recognition as they both turned to greet their next partner.

...which was, to her dismay, the lovely blonde in blue. “Dragonborn...Nemain, I presume?” The woman purred as they moved in time.

Her mind was whirling faster than her feet. “Have we met?”

Red faced as they all were from dancing, the Nord’s face was a delicate flush that looked almost pretty. *Not like yerself...gasping an’ blowing like a beached whale,* Nemain mentally gristled.

*Stupid jealousy, rearin' its glodgin' heid.*

“I am called Astrid. You have met my husband, Arnbjorn.” They skipped a second time, nearing the end of their turn.

As they clapped their hands together, Astrid locked her fingers around Nemain’s own. And leaned in to whisper in her ear...so close that Nemain could smell the musky scent of her perfume, mixed with sweat and something pungent. Something older.

Dried and old, but nothing else had that rusty tang.

*Blood.* “I offer you a place with us. Formally. Babette has told me much about you.”

Nemain was shaking with adrenaline as the lovely woman gave her one last, lingering smile before moving on to her next partner. Matched up with a well-dressed Redguard man who looked as though he’d rather be anywhere else, Nemain allowed her mind the time to digest this new development.

*The Dark Brotherhood. I’ve been meaning tae find ‘em...just -*

And the voice, the motherly voice which had been so insistently threading through her thoughts these past few months suddenly broke upon her inner quiet like a thunderclap.
Standing at the head of the stairs leading to the throne room, Ulfric fixed the tight collar of his quilted doublet and sighed.

The peace summit had gone about as well as could have been expected. The Reachwoman had held her ground tolerably. Had kept her stammering and nervousness to a minimum. It was obvious she was uncomfortable, being thrust into the fore but it could not be helped.

Nor could the judgement exuding from the council be ignored. Nords could be clan-minded at the best of times, Ulfric thought, and veer towards territorial at the worst. It was a survival mentality. Us, not them. Nemain did not belong in their eyes, and frankly he knew of the colossal effort it would be to win over each and every man in Balgruuf’s council. To sway them to his way of thinking, to his logic in keeping Nemain close by his side. For her counsel, her Seer sight, her Thu’um. Her courage and cheer and calm.

Just another obstacle to be overcome. Taking the steps two at a time, he was immediately pressed into dancing...an event he could not refuse without rudely insulting his potential brides.

As he politely led Brenna in a stately round-step, his mind continued picking apart the tasks, ranking them by importance and timeliness.

The most important being Balgruuf’s continued cooperation and union with the Stormcloaks. He pasted on a smile as Solveig flounced forward for her turn, aware that the eyes of the hall were watching. Always watching...tongues always wagging. He had heard and dismissed several rumors already that he was indisposed. That Windhelm was bankrupt, that Galmar had fled to Solstheim and had taken his best generals along. That he meant to take Nemain for his bride.

The transparent outrage from his thanes when they questioned him on the matter had dampened Ulfric’s joy in successfully wrapping up the peace talks. For it seemed that though his folk were only too happy to accept Nemain’s help when it came to healing, practical travel tips or advice on matters of magical warfare...

No. A Forsworn as Lady of Eastmarch would have brought only riots and discontent. She was, he thought with a mental shake of his head, far wiser than he.

Urging his mind back from that darker path, Ulfric contemplated their options...for it would greatly
depend on the outcome of Balgruuf’s decision the coming morn as to which end Ulfric would take.

If the Jarl of Whiterun turned down his suit - for whatever reason - they would need to depart from the Hold in marked haste. For not only would there be tension between his visiting delegation and the host, but there would doubtless be heightened risks. Balgruuf was an honorable man, but his Dunmer housecarl was perhaps less so.

And more single-minded in protecting her Jarl than most. I would not put poison or traps beyond her. Ulfric relinquished Solveig’s hand with a bow, then turned warily towards Snygg Greygull. The vacuous chit hardly seemed aware of his presence. Yet he managed to keep his expression utterly smooth as one by one, the girl trod upon his toes with every step.

Should have been a blacksmith, for her aim in hammering is stellar. Running tallies through his head of how many trebuchets and ladders would be needed to scale Whiterun’s walls, calculating the logistics of approaching the tundra plateau by the northern side or the west; Ulfric almost didn’t notice when the dance ended.

Limping gratefully away, he accepted a mug filled with frothing mead from a server and took a long, slow pull.

“My, my. If it isn’t Ulfric Stormcloak.”

Nearly choking, he wiped his mouth as a shade from his past appeared in the flesh.

A stunning, highly memorable shade. One who smiled in a coy, playful way as he managed to smear foaming mead even further into his beard with an awkward swipe.

Astrid. “You…” He groaned.

“…of course I know who you are. And before you ask, yes. I knew approximately a week after our first, hmm. Meeting,” She practically purred the last word, sidling up to him with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

She was almost unchanged, Ulfric marvelled. Age had strengthened her features from childlike delicacy to a more sculpted elegance. She wore a traditional blue kirtle, with amber and sapphire beads strung along the bodice. A belted knife (daedric, high quality, he noticed in distracted surprise) had been belted over a slashed apron of wine dark red. In all, she was still one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen in his life, and her warm regard made him flush.

Barely remembering his manners, he lifted his arm to escort her down the steps. She accepted with a gracious tilt, her blonde braids sliding over her shoulders as she looked up at him.

Her hands, he noticed, bore far more scars than they had before. One jagged slash - long healed, extending nearly to her elbow - could have been made by nothing else but a mace. Ulfric wondered what exactly had happened, to thrust a Nord farmgirl into a situation in which she had been wounded so deeply.

“Now isn’t this a pretty picture. You have been rather busy these last few years.”
He coughed. That was certainly a succinct way to sum up the events of his recent past. Dragons, famine...rebellion. *Regicide.* “Yes. I have been. And yourself?”

“Happily married. And occupied - I am a business woman with a...rather unique set of skills.”

The implication she alluded to nearly passed him by, until Astrid delicately licked her lower lip and he realized he could not look away. Leaving him to blush even darker as she laughed, softly.

*Talos save me, I am publicly hand in arm with a brothel owner.*

As if she could read his thoughts (and found them amusing) Astrid graced him with an even broader, glittering smile. “I used to service my clients myself, but now with the demands on my time, I subcontract my jobs to coworkers. They’re more like family, really.”

He could detect nothing false in her words. “And what does your husband think of your profession?” *Poor cuckolded bastard.*

“Oh, Arnbjorn is happy that I no longer actively work. At least, not very often. He’s very protective, you see.” Leaning over as they descended the stair, Astrid’s lips delicately touched his ear as she whispered. “Oversharing about work can be rather like, say. Oral sex. One slip of the tongue...”

She licked his ear. Biting the lobe of it, he jerked away with a squelched oath. Calming only when she patted his shoulder in silent apology.

“Mmm, and suddenly - you're in deep shit.”

Ulfric laughed aloud at that. “That’s not a problem I’ve ever encountered before, thankfully.”

“You have practiced since our interludes, then. I have no doubt your skills have improved...you were ever devoted to mastering a task once given.”

He smiled fondly. “I did have an excellent teacher.”

She responded with an elegant bow, and gestured towards the dance floor. “Shall we then?”

Looking around, Ulfric spied Nemain. His breath stuttered to a stop.

There she was, twirling with abandon in some other Nord’s arms, sweating and obviously embarrassed. As he watched, the Companion (for it was the self-same Companion who had stepped forward earlier in the peace summit) set her down and pulled her into the circle of dancers, laughing all the while.

Feeling miserly, he tightened his free hand into a white-knuckled fist. Of course he couldn’t dance with her. He shouldn’t dance with Astrid now...for how the gossips would bleat, to see him chaining fingers with a self-avowed prostitute.

He’d leave the decision to her. For as he reminded himself, a lady’s reputation was paramount, after all. “We could dance. Do you, a married businesswoman, care to be seen with a deeply controversial
rebel Jarl on the floor? For I cannot protect you from the verbal slander that our dancing might give rise to.”

“...And my reputation is far more sullied than your own might be,” he added with a slight twist of his lips, for she appeared nonplussed.

Her pale eyebrows lifted like stones pulled laboriously from wet sand. "I do not know. Faugh, I do not care." Then, before Ulfric could speak, she asked, thoughtfully, "Why does it matter to you?"

*What an odd question. Surely it is obvious.* “I care about the women with whom I share my company.”

“All of them?” Joining hands with him as the dance began with a roil of drums, Astrid followed his every step with nonchalance. They were well matched together.

And as they moved he wished, for the smallest of moments, that she were not married. “Are you always so...particular in your attentions to your female subordinates?” Her voice had a sharp edge to it.

They twisted and turned in the dance. He bumped into another couple, muttering an apology as Astrid continued to speak.

*Rebukingly.* “Even your bucolic court mage, your Reachborn Dovahkiin? Who wears no formal robes, indeed hardly any proper clothing at all, and shows no Hold insignia to protect her? Is this what you consider decent care?”

Ulfric frowned. *Why Nemain had chosen her most frayed and torn robe for the night’s festivities was beyond him. Surely the gown she had worn at the council would have sufficed.*

Spinning around and clapping three times, a rock seemed to drop into the pit of Ulfric’s stomach as he drew nearer and spied Nemain laughing brightly, freely. One of the Companions seemed to be teasing her with his footwork, weaving his leg between hers as a flap of her torn garb rippled up.

Exposing nearly the whole of her pale thigh to the entire multitude.

Against his will, a dark flare of possessiveness rose up from deep inside him at the sight. Gripping Astrid’s hand even tighter, he looked down at his one-time lover who was still evaluating him so shrewdly.

“I do care. Too much...particularly for her.”

Her hand paused, then squeezed him back. “Then perhaps you should introduce us.”
Tell. Her.

Opening her mouth, for the command was excruciating; every moment she did not carry it out agony borne in exacting, sharp, slices...Nemain gratefully stilled as the dance came to a close. More hollers and applause rolled from the guests, as everyone cheered on the music and each other.

Managing a limp wristed clap, the witch ignored the voice in her head as best she could. And watched as Astrid (*Arnbjorn’s mate, that hulking brute of a werewolf, remember - what was she doing here?!*) resumed her place at Ulfric’s side.

She could feel the Companions shuffling around her as the music eased back into a more sedate tempo. She could not break away from staring forlornly at Bear, as again the snap of envy clawed its way into her chest, making it hard to breathe. *He didnae smile sae much at me when we danced.*

“Aiming for the stars, are we?” Vilkas remarked, standing in front of her with his arms akimbo. Blocking her view, as he lifted his chin pointedly in the Jarl of Eastmarch’s direction.


To her right, Farkas was shaking hands with Brenna, whose rosy face was glowing beneath her shock of white tufted hair. Nemain managed to feel a nudge of satisfaction at the sight. She’d have to remember to check up on the lass later on. At least now the shieldmaiden was enjoying herself. *Someone should.* Behind Vilkas, Astrid was speaking quietly in her soft, sombre tones and Ulfric was laughing again.

Nemain felt as though she were about to retch.

“You will never be one of us.” Vilkas stated calmly. At Farkas’ exasperated glare, the shorter man shrugged. “What? Shall I lie and tell her that her Reach magic is not an object of fear and distaste? You are Dragonborn, Nemain, but you are not and never will be a true Nord.”

A stillness settled into her, cold and clear in its truth. “I ken that. I do.”

“So why bother?” Vilkas tapped his nose, still giving her that surly appraisal. “That, there? That shit I smell pouring from you? Yeah. You stink of desperate desire. Surely there is something else you can do after this dragon problem is all sorted out. If just to get you out from under your precious oathbreaker’s thumb.”

Farkas was still eyeing his brother, in equal parts pensiveness and chagrin. “S’pose that couldn’t hurt, giving her another job. A better job. Here in Whiterun, where no one starves if they are willing to work hard.”

She almost lifted her arms, to sniff and see if she truly did reek. *T’would look worse if ye confirmed it. Dinnae give the man an inch t’ hang ye with.* She would ignore all the other implications the twins had made.
“What did you do before being Dragonborn?” Farkas inquired.

Nemain smiled faintly, though the summons from her mental captor were now scratching impatiently against her skull. Fingernails against glass. “I was a courier, Companion. Made m’living dropping off messages, bits and baubles, doing errands…though I was on the brink o’ starving, despite working sae hard I was often asleep before lying fully down tae bed.”

“Huh. Would have pegged you as an herbwoman, or a midwife.”

She rolled her shoulders, wincing as Bear laughed again. Vilkas seared her with a look of disgust as she made to move forward. To pass him where he was blocking her, away from him. What was the question?

“Did that too. But that was before, when...feh. Ne’er ye mind.”

“Not that much be changed, in essence.” She sighed, her mood darkening as she gave up and looked round the milling throng for her charges. There was Brenna, chatting animatedly with Aela. Snygg was still sitting down in the corner with her book. And there was Solveig, flirting outrageously with a painted beast of a Nord Nemain thought ‘might’ have been Jarl Balgruuf’s brother.

_Hufgarth? Hroggar? Twally shite names these Nords have_. “I still be fetching things on a regular basis, Slim. Tis simply that I am set tae fetch by Jarls and generals, now. Arf arf. Throw me a bone, here.”

“Very funny. You _are_ moving up in the world.” Vilkas agreed, standing a bit closer as he too scrutinized Solveig. “Not that such notoriety brings happiness.”

There was a bitter note to Vilkas’ words that had Nemain turning to stare at the more recalcitrant brother in curiosity. “I be surprised that you, a Companion, speak so. For is not fortune an’ fame the be all, end all of yer guild?”

Farkas was quick to cut in. “We bring honor and glory to ourselves and each other. That’s what the Companions do.”

Vilkas shrugged. “I wouldn’t say we’re anything like a guild. But in one respect, you are correct. I fight for gold. I fight beside my Shield brothers and sisters, to guard their backs in battle. I see no point in drawing my blade over who worships what dead god.”

If the armsmaster was not so quick to take offense, Nemain would have made some jest about him pointing like a hound on the scent of prey, the way he was counting Solveig’s every eyelash from this distance. But she wasn’t in the mood, and it would have been ill received. “Fair enough. Though if one doesnae fight fer the gods, what be the bloody point of valor?”

Vilkas was about to release what was sure to be a scathing reply, until Ulfric stepped into their small circle, his cold blue eyes still veiled. “The gods see our deeds in life. The path to Sovngarde is not so hidden that the good-intentioned will pass it by.”

The Jarl nodded at Vilkas, a faint frown twisting at his mouth. “Regardless of a lack of faith.”

“One can only hope.” The two men clasped arms. “Well met, Companion. What are you called?”
“Vilkas, my Lord.”

With that plaguing voice shrieking now in fits and starts, Nemain kept herself still as Astrid sidled forward, smiling in welcome. “Ah, the doughty Companions of Jorrvaskr. I am Astrid Afhrensoditir. Your reputation precedes you, armsmaster.”

“And yet I’ve never heard of you before.” Vilkas scratched his cheek. “Thought I knew every citizen of Whiterun.”

She lowered her eyelashes modestly. “I hail from Falkreath, before...well. I need not go into any details.”

“Aye. For tis a goner. Good job lads in letting those dovah fly loose. Try tae kill ‘em dead next time. Fewer casualties that way.” Nemain’s voice was more waspish than she intended, and now everyone was staring at her. She fidgeted, aware that her ripped robe was gaping in a loose flap around her knee and that she stunk to high heaven of sweat.

It did not help that the Jarl was glowering at her as though she had personally shat all over his table. “Not everyone can face a dragon and walk away unscathed, Dragonborn.”

“I’d like tae see you try, you-”

“How did you two meet? I confess I am dying to hear the tale.” Astrid interrupted, her smile a trifle too practiced.

Ulfric answered before Nemain could formulate a response, far more honestly than she would have liked. “She tried to kill me, and I was about to kill her when a dragon collapsed a tower on top of us.”

“Mmm. I knew there was a reason why I liked you right away,” Astrid cooed.

Oh Et’Ada. Strike me doon now. Now would be good.

“...after which we both agreed to hold off on attempting to kill one another while we starved, nearly froze to death and finally dug ourselves out with the help of a passing Stormcloak.”

Nemain narrowed her eyes at him, ignoring with effort the snorts from behind her. “I seem tae remember it differently. Ye kidnapped me upon some premise that I could be held fer a bodging ransom—”

“-Not true, witch. I had every reason to believe you were going to assassinate me, and Shor’s beard look how accurate that hunch turned out to be...”

Nemain threw up her arms, annoyed at the choked off snickering coming from the direction of the Companion twins. “T’was a mere couple of revenant corpses! A few thralls at most! I was keeping you on yer toes! Identifying leaks in the camp defenses! Really, y’should have thanked me for my presence. How many of yer men did I heal of mortal wounds, aye?”
Ulfric said nothing. He simply stared at her with that eyebrow lifted and that inscrutable look that told her nothing and everything at once, and when Farkas began pressing her for more details Nemain let out an annoyed sigh and crossed her arms. “It doesnae matter now, does it? I be here. We be here, in this muckle together. Dinnae fash yerself, Bear. Tis water under the bridge.”

Ulfric’s lips twisted in a savage smile. “You wouldn't stop trying to run away.”

“Again. Nae true.” I wouldnae mention the jazbay berries if ye favored yer health, milord.

“Even when you didn't have a fucking clue where you were.”

Nemain bit her inner cheek, aware that both Farkas and Vilkas were laughing openly now, and that Astrid was staring at her in bald appreciation.

“Bloodthirsty and enterprising. So often the one trait comes without the other.” Astrid mused aloud, her ivory smooth face staring openly at Nemain.

...who shifted in severe discomfort, the voice yammering at her to speak. To get it over with.

It was actually rather unnerving being around someone as beautiful as Astrid was. Her eyes were wide-set and blue, deeper than Solveig’s. The kind of blue she recalled from watching the Sea of Ghosts from Winterhold’s tower, just before a storm blew in.

“All traits save for wisdom, it seems,” added Vilkas, as she wrenched away from contemplating Astrid’s perfection.

“Och, I’d never claim tae be wise. Else I’d have managed tae make a break fer it, and no be stuck molly coddling this fear thuaidh, affixed tae clean up his messes.”

“One of those messes seems to be in danger of exploding everywhere,” Farkas coughed, gesturing to where Solveig was passionately locked in an embrace with the aforementioned unnameable Nord.

Shit. It did appear as though the man’s tongue was halfway down her throat. Coughing in embarrassment, for Ulfric was still looking at her and she had not a blasted clue of what to do (what be the protocol when one of yer sleekit lassies be snogging an absolute stranger?) Nemain set her jaw and prepared to excuse herself.

Astrid carefully preened a stray blonde hair from her eyes. “And they say romance is dead.”

Nemain rolled her eyes. “I'll go and pry them apart, shall I?”

Ulfric said nothing, merely nodding as Astrid laughed quietly, looping a finger around the amulet of Mara she wore. Fortunately he didn’t seem overly put out...that his most suitable marriage prospect was currently making high, stilted gasps of pleasure in the corner of Dragonsreach’s throne room.

If it had been her in such a position, Nemain reasoned, she would have been furious.
“No. Allow me,” Vilkas stepped forward, raising a hand before she could protest. “Not to worry. I can handle it.”

There was a grim sort of amusement in the way the man was looking at the impassioned couple. Nemain raised her hands in surrender. “Tis yer choice, man. Though I tell ye - she’s a firestarter. A right handful.”

Vilkas’ teeth glistened in a darkly enigmatic smile. “Good.”

Holding her ripped robes closed with one hand, Nemain motioned to Astrid. A bit desperately, for it looked as though both Farkas and Ulfric wanted words with her. *One tae snog, and one tae scold.*

She was no longer sure which was which. “Can ye coom o’er here, sae we may speak in private?”

Astrid nodded, and they left the men to stand in a secluded spot near where the musicians played. Covering her ears, Astrid leaned down to nearly yell in her ear.

“Why here?”

“If y’can barely hear me, then no one else can either!” Nemain replied in a stage whisper. As Astrid continued to look confused, Nemain let out an aggrieved groan and embraced the Nord woman...all the better to be understood. For she did not want to repeat the phrase out loud. Not ever again, she had heard it in her own mind so many times.

“**Darkness rises when silence dies.**”

It was nearly the same sensation as when her ears popped after descending the Monahven. Instant tension; then a release, as something unseen drained out of her and into Astrid.

*Peace. Alone at last...I can hear me own thoughts again! She be gone from me!*

Upon hearing her shallow intake of breath, Nemain loosened her hold to stare quizzically upon the paling face of the assassin. “Right. Did that mean anything tae ye?

“I think you had best come to the sanctuary sooner than later, Nemain. For there is a great work to be done that only you can do, it seems.”

Dropping down, Nemain flung out her arms. “Join me list, fear thuaidh! I’ve got a fucking regular waiting list of people needin’ things, stuff from me.”

Stepping forward, the Dragonborn could easily hear Astrid even though the music was obnoxiously loud. “Put this at the top of your priority list, then.”

“Why? Why should I care aboot your folk more than my own?”

If possible, the woman grew only more white. Her lips were practically bloodless as she bit down upon them, though her fists were similarly white-knuckled. And not only in fear, Nemain noted as she took a deep breath. There was rage there, too.
Good! Rage to twin her own heart-snarl of fury, at the events of such an evening. “You are hunted, Dragonborn. You do not even know it. I have come here merely to gather information, and found along the way that the peace you seek shall be spoiled…”

“Nay! If any seeks tae disturb the pax we wrought, it be you with yer...yer fine clothes and hangdog ways! Draping yerself all over my Jarl, as though he were mere decoration! I ken yer type!”

Shaking her head, Astrid stepped backwards one step. Then another, as shadows seemed to gather around her. A pretty little trick, Nemain thought, for it was no magic. Merely stealth and guile.

“My type seeks after power. Your Jarl is in no danger from me. But you are in danger of him. He belongs to neither of us, Nemain, for you are the hunter and he is no longer prey.”

She blinked. The woman disappeared.

Turning her head from side to side, Nemain could make out nothing of where Astrid had been. A mere ghost of a whisper floated down from the upstairs balustrade, and Nemain made to walk up towards it...stopping only to mull upon what she did hear.

“Seek me out in Falkreath sanctuary. When asked by the door, ‘what is the music of life,’ the answer will be ‘silence, my brother.’ Come quick, and do not delay. For darker shadows have been cast than you are aware. The wind hunts you.”

As cold fear trickled down her spine, Nemain spied something floating down from above. Catching the bit of parchment before some drunkard could jostle it away, Nemain unfolded the miniature scroll and saw a black hand, emblazoned starkly with no other ornament upon the paper.

The wind. Hunted, power. Prey.

... hagravens.

-Mother?

Dear child. You belong with us. Not them.

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He was here. Eduard was here!

Gudrun Greygull (call me Snygg) shuddered at the balcony and kicked away her abandoned book. Barely feeling the wind through her nightdress as she watched him climb; moving deftly up the stone wall. Rolling over the thick lip of Dragonsreach’s sky porch, followed by similar, toothy-smiled
shadows that flowed around and about her.

Snygg gripped the ledge with both hands, as though it would anchor her bodily, for Eduard was here, right now at this very instant before her. He had come! Had responded in the best way to her hastily scrawled note, sent the moment she had arrived here at Whiterun!

Even now Snygg felt faint; lighter than air, like when she had jumped from the sea cliff and had felt nothing but air for a long, long time in the falling.

Yet she was falling again. Power slid into her, emanating from those burning eyes; and she shook her head fiercely, but the memories were already there: a black flood-river of her own mind's creation rising to swallow her whole. Memories of when he had last fed from her, back in Dawnstar. How he had seemed to sparkle, then!

But there was no shining now. Only pale, bloodless skin and a hungry smile filled with teeth.

A cool, imperious voice whispered in her ear, low with laughter as she shied away in unexpected fear. "Have you missed me, my pet?"

His touch calmed. Quieted even as a portion of her mind began screaming, begging for her to run, yet she stood limp as a doll. Watching uninterestedly as scores of black clad vampires skittered into the wide doors of Dragonsreach.

She should yell. Scream. Call out, raise the alarm. But why worry, when all she had ever wanted was here, holding her in his cold, perfect arms?

“Little thing. How I have missed your taste.” His words whispered like feathers along her bare skin.

“Shall we be one?”

Snygg’s own voiced answer was rough, so ragged with desire she could scarcely recognize it "Master, oh yes -"

And the fingers tightening, cutting off her air, twisting her head sharply to the side as the blade-tips of teeth traced over the vein of her throat...

Oh, it was a teasing, tensing torment! Scraping her raw as she strained to breath, to reach that promise of touch – and then, at long last! – the sudden bright glint of pain. There was relief in that pain, in the shiver of agony that ran from head to heel and raised gooseflesh on her skin.

Euphoria, at the heavy pressure crushing her throat. She was needed here, valued here; she belonged here, on his lap, her master's hand digging into her neck and his tongue on her pulse, marking out the beat of the heart and the veins and the life that belonged only to him, only ever, ever to him...
Cold. A prickle of something vaguely like unease caused Snygg to push feebly against Eduard. “E-enough. S-stop!”

He did not listen. Jaws locked tight into her flesh were working, tongue swirling the skin around the bite as Eduard continued to feed...his small sounds of contentment mingling with her own fearful whimpers.

She felt her eyes droop as the night sky began to spin. Surely there was no harm in letting him have this, the most vital gift she could offer her love. He would stop, soon. Would cradle her in his marble arms, and carry her away. To live with him, forever.

Snygg sighed as a cool numbness doused the fire burning at her throat; as a spill of grey crept up from the corners of her sight, and she - closing her eyes - knew no more.

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The amulet resting atop her chest was icy cold.

Nemain awakened with a start, sitting up in bed. A strange bed, with strange blankets and smells unfamiliar to her nose...where was she?

Dragonsreach.

It all came flooding back...dancing and Astrid and the mortification of love exposed and unrequited. Clutching her amulet in sudden, stifling awareness, Nemain forced her loud, raspy breathing to quiet. Forced herself to focus, for she had not taken Farkas up on his offer to spend the night.

He had been all limpid silver eyes and warm hands, yet she had said no. What was wrong with her? Surely Bear, despite Astrid’s comments to the contrary, was not spending his night unaccompanied. Was she doomed to awaken every day for the rest of her short life in a cold bed, paranoid and utterly alone?

What had awakened her? Who had disturbed her amulet?

Looking about wildly, Nemain wet her lips and cast a quick, messy ward. She could see nothing in this darkness, feel nothing but the too-thin cambric of her bunching nightgown. Yet the hairs crinkled upon the back of her neck. She was not alone.

Then, there was a white light. Frost ripped an abrupt streak down her back from shoulder to hip. Nemain cried out and stumbled forward from the bed, barely managing to keep enough of her senses to turn and fling a handful of flames as she did so. Abruptly the bed caught fire.

Damn it...no. There! Something stirred near the door, near the window. A red light streamed towards her, chaining her in an umbilical that she could feel instantly start draining away, siphoning her
strength even as she faltered.

**Vampire!**

Summoning the brightest fire she could manage, the Reachwitch gritted her teeth and *yanked* with her will against the magical tether binding her. It wavered, and nearly dissolved...until Nemain became distracted again. Dodging another magical sheet of ice, she rolled and ran - a blast that had rushed near enough that her injured back began burning with cold anew.

Not one...but two of them had managed to dispel the basic wards...the wards she always cast every night about her before she slept. The one who had cast Frostbite bared its teeth, dripping strings of saliva flowing like ribbons as it snapped and flashed ever closer. Stumbling upon her nightgown, Nemain flung her left hand forward and cast stoneflesh. Praying it would be enough; silently rejoicing as the vampire’s jaws clamped down upon her wrist and skidded off with a screech against her altered skin. *Curse the bluidy parasites...Bear! The children! How many? Where be the others? Safe?*

She kept fire burning like a beacon in her right hand, throwing flickering tongues of flame as the vampires grew even bolder in their efforts to bring her down. One of the creatures flickered sideways out of her fire’s path, laughing, those hands alight in red hazed vapor before he vanished into mist – the other blew towards her on a shadow’s edge with hands reaching forward, a length of enchanted wrapping wire as thin as a scream stretched between them.

*Breathe!* Nemain took two more steps backwards and lifted her hands to ward, preparing to *Shout* the undead arsehole into an even more fulsome afterlife– until an arm wrapped in a thick, musty robe closed around her throat.

She gasped. Choked, reached blindly over her shoulder; her fingers clawing over hair and eyes as the being holding her let out an oath but tightened their grip. The world came in sharp flashes of sound and lightning, for beyond her slowly opening door there *was* light: the vampire with the pale hair reaching for her with her wire – the arm closing off Nemain’s air, sweat beading on the exposed skin under her chin – and the hot salt smell of blood sudden, as the witch reached up with her free hand and dug her long fingernails into the vampire’s throat.

Her captor cursed brokenly, the swears garbled with fluid as blood pumped darkly down, but Nemain was gone. She was a breath on the wind that sighed behind the creature, reaching into his musty robes with fire-laced hands for his heart. For this was a dead thing, and her power that lay dormant knew this; knew the ease of pushing past corpse-soft skin and thicker things, to reach the seat of life itself. To stop it.

A smell of charred cloth. A jagged scream. The organ burst like pulp in her hand, messier and more brutally wrecked with her bare fingers as she kept squeezing, until the body toppled away from Nemain and she was left with nothing but a handful of meat.

The she-vampire with the wire skidded to a stop, her heavy rope of white hair swinging wildly with the motion as Nemain thudded back into awareness again. Seeming to think better of attacking the witch still holding the gristle of her companion’s heart, it slipped past the creaking door of Nemain’s room, where beyond could be heard shouted yells and sounds of fighting. Bursts of light, light that
flared like resin popping in a blaze as Nemain blinked her eyes against the brightness. Some blood had fallen in her mouth, and she swallowed without realizing it - gagging as the foulness slid down.

That had taken more out of her than she'd thought – her back burned with damage from the cold – but there was Bear to think of, and the others... *gods damn them where had they daunered off tae*?! 

Skidding along what she could now see was a blood-stained corridor, Nemain lost her footing on the slick surface and crashed hard against the wide double doors. Managing to wrench one of them open by scrabbling hard with her bare feet, she ran into the upper hall and spotted several bodies lying at odd angles like statuary upon the floor. But there was only one vampire left, only one...

*No*. There must be more.

Nemain spied Balgruuf, his housecarl and several who might have been guards fighting for their lives. With a shock, she realized that Vilkas and Solveig were holding their own against the vampires as well; both practically naked and leaving no illusions as to what they had been doing prior to the attack. Indeed, Solveig wore only a loincloth, and the armsmaster of Jorrvaskr even less.

*Slime, ye dodgy lust-lummocking churl! I'll be havin' words with ye. Later!* 

The old Jarl brandished a mighty double handed greatsword, cleaving through two vampires heads like rotten melons; his eyes widening at the sight of her as his Dunmer companion gutted another, then began sawing off the head as the undead thing shrieked. Then fell silent.

“Dragonborn! Behind you!”

The pale vampire she had been chasing flashed out of nowhere, dealing Nemain a gauntlet-sharp blow she barely dodged. Letting out a piercing whistle, the Dragonborn watched dumbly as from the pillars around them four more shadows detached and slipped to the stairs. Flowing upward like smoke, like mist she could feel, gods her amulet was burning like fire though she was bitterly cold...

Nemain took a step back, her vision blackening at the edges, and realized the vampire had nicked her after all; she pressed a hand to her neck where it was bleeding.

That it did not hurt was a bad sign. Sliding her thumb to her fastening sash of her robe, Nemain thought about wrapping it about her wound, to stave off blood loss while she tried to ward herself and cast a restoration spell, but she knew. She knew...both efforts would be, ultimately, futile.

Her blood was seeping hot and fast and the creatures were closing in, smiling, laughing...some of them with gleaming blades and others with gleaming hands, and even if she did manage to summon some scrap of remaining magicka, she did not think she still had the magical reserves or the skill to end them all.
"Come, little traitor," said one of them as Nemain backed away towards the wall rising behind her, the sibilant voice gentle and chiding in tone. "Your parents bid you to return. We have come to take you home, at last."

"Yer bloodsuckers be dead," Nemain snarled as her hips pressed against a table, raising hands still lit up with spells to the level of her eyes.

Máthair! Something screamed deep within her, a howling betrayal she could not afford to heed. Máthair, how could ye, Máthair... "Yer trap has failed, and ye be far outnumbered. I am nae returning to wherever ye’d have me go, an’ I will nae yield."

The she-vampire - the one who had brandished the wire restraint - shook her head, black eyes glinting in the shadows. "But you are wanted. And what the Ard Ri wants, we will bring. Take her."

But before the last word finished the creature exploded into flame.

There was an instant's brief, startled silence. Then she screamed as she burned and the other four vampires screamed as well, staggering back from the sudden pyre as if they too might be immolated.

Nemain's gaze jerked left, unsteady and disbelieving – but there was Bear...Ulfric. Fresh blood was smeared across his face and chest, highlighting the unearthly blue of his eyes as Brenna at his side raised her smoldering hand.

No, not a hand...Nemain blinked, for black dots were sprinkling her vision. A smoldering torch.

They had thrown torches.

Torches and blades and axes that shone bright in the light of the pitch-fueled fires, for it was not yet morn. They lived, and she could have collapsed at the joy of it; even as her own life pumped thick and sluggish from her neck.

But there was no time to waste, no time to mentally applaud them for their daring inventiveness. For the vampires were surging forward again, and Nemain was busy...suddenly kept very busy on the defense.

A vampire who raised his clawed hands to tear at Ulfric’s back met his end split upon the forked tongue of her lightning. Her magic was nearly gone, the deep well from which she drew bottoming out as she felt strangely light headed and floating.

Yet she had the presence of mind to scream ‘Yol Toor Shul’ at the pale haired vampire who sought to bind her with enchanted wires, for the being had not been fully crisped by the torch that had lodged itself in her gut. Avoiding a swung blow from a vampire thrall, a guard whose eyes had already filmed over in death, Nemain cut the spark of his spell aloft and turned once again to her prey.

Looking around in exhaustion, Nemain watched as Brenna picked up two fire-stunned vampires by
their necks and bashed their heads into the stone wall. Bear had taken a position back-to-back with Balgruuf, wielding twin axes as he assisted the older Nord by hamstringing another undead...the Jarl of Whiterun dealing the death blow that rendered its features unrecognizable.

They were decimating the lot of them. None left who had not been caught and cornered, no matter how they tried apparating into mist. Fires now blazed at every corner of the hall, highlighting the bodies and devastation they had wreaked.

Lurching forward, dragging one foot at a time in slow parody of the dance she had partaken of earlier that night, Nemain rested before the gasping, crackling creature whose beauty had been burnt to obliteration.

Seeing those fading bloodshot eyes fix upon her in hate, Nemain released her hold upon the wound at her neck...and offered a handful of wet dripping red blood to the vampire who lay gasping. Fangs so snowy white amidst all that black char.

“Where are they...th’ ones what sent ye. Tell me now, and I shall give ye this blood in return.”

A brownish stick protruded from the shriveled up lips - her tongue. It stuck out, as if to beg for a droplet, but Nemain lifted her hand in cold fury, and the vampire hissed in beseeching misery.

The dry voice was barely audible. “Please. Mercy! I...serve.”

“Y’serve none but Sithis, now. Tell all.”


“Feed. Me.”

Clenching her bloody fist, Nemain lifted her leg and drove her bare foot into the vampire’s skull. Crushing it in a single blow.

The jellied brains were blackened, and the scent of rot might have caused her to swoon had the blood-scent not been so overpowering. Pressing her hand to her neck with the dregs of a healing spell, Nemain watched dazedly as Bear and Balgruuf let out a piercing cry...a shout that was echoed by all still alive.

Footsteps thudded into the floor, and before Nemain could protest Ulfric had lifted her up and was examining her; his stony gaze softening the slightest bit as he took in her wound.

“Healer!” He barked, gesturing to Brenna to come and prop her up. The shieldmaiden’s help she accepted gratefully, for the woozy feeling had not yet subsided.

“You,” Nemain flapped her hand like a ninny, gesturing towards the blood on Ulfric’s chest and face. “The blood. Yours?”

“Not all of it. I'll be fine - just stay still. Healer, tend to her first. She’s about to pass out.”
Still holding his axes, the Jarl stomped off towards Balgruuf. “The hospitality of your Hold is gravely lacking, old friend. What the fuck just happened here!”

“Keep your distance!” The Dunmer housecarl drew her sword and stayed frozen in a crouched stance, her red eyes wild. “Not another step!”

“-Irileth, it’s alright. Stand down. This is one battle I’d prefer to fight myself.”

The woman did so reluctantly, stalking after him as Balgruuf stepped forward. “I don’t know what you think you’re trying to pull, Ulfric. We haven’t had a vampire problem since Jeek of the River upturned Jorrvaskr’s hull...and now my people are dead!”

“You imply that this fuckup is of my creation?” Standing even closer, Ulfric leaned down until his nose nearly touched Balgruuf’s. “In what world would I ever bring down Molag Bal’s spawn upon the innocent?”

“I don’t know! You killed Torygg! Cut off my trade to the east and strangled my merchant’s passage down south!” Balgruuf yelled back. “For all I know, you let these vampires in to prove your point!”

“And what point is that?!”

“...That my Hold needs your damnable help! Why else would they be here, if not to show off your military’s strength! I did not think you capable of such underhanded schemings, Ulfric, but I am onto you now! You’ll get not so much as a dented septim from me!”

“What? Can you hear yourself? That doesn’t even make any sense...why in Talos’ name would I kill my own Shor-damned warriors!??!”

Nemain lifted her head, ignoring the hushed reprimand from the healer who was currently stitching her throat shut. “They were after me.”

_Damn, that potion they had given her was strong_. She felt nothing but a mild amusement as both Jarls turned as one to gawk broadly at her.

Swallowing against the numbness, Nemain patted Brenna’s hand where it had fallen in shock upon her thigh. Her nightclothes were completely ruined, matted in blood and smoke and gore, but what did it matter? She was dead anyway.

“What do you mean, you?” Balgruuf lowered his greatsword to rest upon his knees, looking troubled and more than a bit peeved. “You’re a fucking Forsworn. A common serf, a hedge witch granted the Thu’um by some godly intervention I can scarcely fathom why. You mean to say that this was all some elaborate trick to entrap you?”

She smiled, tonguing the clotted blood trapped between her teeth as Ulfric looked upset. _And why wouldnae he be_, for what sought to take her away would grant him a solid disadvantage as well. The wind hunted her. Madanach and the hagravens of the Mournful Throne sought her. And the World Eater, Al-Du-In the black winged terror, well. He wanted her dead.
Dead, dead, dead. She smiled at the knowledge of it, her death coming for her. For if Astrid had been truthful in this, then there was some basis in fact for the other details the assassin had imparted in her roundabout way. Which had a sliver of silver lining amidst all these stormclouds, but it was just that. Merely a sliver.

Not long now. “Aye, t’was what the blonde vampire stated, when ye were so gainfully occupied slaying her fellows. That wire,” she lifted a finger and wiggled it where the restraints lay, forgotten. “...will show ye this truth. For it be enchanted tae contain a mage...a hedge witch, if y’will. Had they bound it atwixt my wrists, I wouldae been helpless tae cast any spell, Balgruuf. I’d have been effectively powerless tae resist.”

“Jarl Balgruuf,” The Dunmer housecarl barked.

She nodded laboriously as she corrected herself. “Jarl Balgruuf.”

The healer tied a knot in her stitches, then used a knife to cut the end free. Leaving her side, the Nord immediately slouched down to tend to another wounded.

Testing her neck strength, Nemain lifted a shaking hand and lifted it. In supplication...a gesture she prayed would bear fruit. For she could not withhold her neediness any longer. “Ulfric...Bear. Please.”

Her a rúnsearc, her secret lover made as if to walk towards her: his face a wreck of emotion. Then halting, the Nord seemed to check himself...even as she watched in deepening despair.

Sliding his hand down the haft of one of his axes, Ulfric turned to Balgruuf and presented him with the handle. His face was utterly grim.

Looking at first Ulfric’s expression, then bouncing back to Balgruuf’s, Nemain could make neither head nor tail of it. Both men stood there like statues for what felt like an age; making no sound. Indeed, not a peep was heard from any in the hall save the wounded who were too far gone to care.

Lightly, Balgruuf’s hand descended upon the axe handle.

Touching it briefly, the old Nord’s face crumpled. Then smoothed out in stoic resignation, as he withdrew his hand with a finality that shocked her, for she knew now what it was that Ulfric had meant by extending his axe.

Not for nothing had she pored over the lost annals and traditions of Nordic warfare customs when she had resided in Windhelm. She could even recall what Ulfric had said, upon asking him what was so damned significant about offering a weapon to a shield-brother...without the slightest explanation to define what it was that the bearer was asking for.

He had looked up at her from over the cover of his own book (Antecedents of Dwemer Law, she remembered because it had been so devastatingly dull) and had smiled thinly. With no real amusement whatsoever.

“Men who understand each other often have no need for words.”
In the flesh, Ulfric stood there with the weapon outthrust a mere moment more...his body taut as a bowstring. Then, pulling the axe back to grasp it firmly by the head once again, Ulfric nodded. Just the once.

“So be it.”

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: As a born and bred modern American, I'm not sure I can ever fully understand what it would have been like to live in such a socially stratified society as medieval Europe. Fantasy Europe, I'll give you that...Bethesda wrote in gay marriage for all marriageable followers, and included a nod to Scandinavian laws allowing that women were often warriors and property owners the same as men.

That said, it is entirely reasonable for Nemain to never expect marriage from a Jarl. In writing regarding Ulfric’s feelings I took a page from Nietzsche, who wrote that men are ‘romantic and idealistic’ in pedestalizing the opposite sex, whereas women are more ‘practical, because they must be obtaining resources for their children.”

Not that I completely agree, but such a primal narrative fits rather well here. Don’t you think? (especially the part where men are more romantic. Probably so, else the entire human race would be polygamous and none of us would have parental bonds. Theory, natch.)

To our modern minds, this social class business is terribly sad, but historically marriages of partners who come from unequal backgrounds nearly always ended in contention.

And I quote, “If you knew the sorrow that person must undergo who marries above herself, you would never be ambitious to marry out of your own rank; people call it doing well; they are most egregiously mistaken. Let the husband be ever so kind, it cannot compensate for the numberless mortifications a woman so raised must endure. Those married people have the greatest chance of being happy whose original rank was most nearly equal.” -taken from the journals of Nelly Weeton who lived in Georgian England.

So taking Nemain, who was raised in a quasi-Pictish society and setting her up with a Jarl - the wealthiest, most powerful of men in Viking culture, almost like kings in their own right - and I would bet that neither society, the Vikings or the Picts, would be terribly happy about it.

Fish out of water indeed.
The Stranger

Chapter Notes

Listened to Skyrim's night ambience music while writing this. My favorite is the song known as Secunda - love it. I think someone set lyrics to it somewhere on the 'net. Let me know if you can find that version...you'll get a sweetroll for your pains. (@)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aK4JSwhdcdE

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"You want to know who the Forsworn are? We are the people who must pillage our own land. Burn our own ground. We are the scourge of the Nords. The axe that falls in the dark. The scream before the gods claim your soul. We are the true sons and daughters of the Reach. The spirits and hags have lived here from the beginning, and they are on our side. Go back. Go back and tell your Empire that we will have our own kingdom again. And on that day, we will be the ones burying your dead in a land that is no longer yours."

The "Madmen" of the Reach: A Cultural Treatise on the Forsworn

by Arrianus Arius, Imperial Scholar

“The Dragonborn?! Fuck the Dragonborn! May she drown in the depths of Oblivion for all I care,” spat the one-legged prostitute. “She’s the one what took my leg from me! I just know - I know! - that if one of our own had sewed me shut, I’d not have suffered the fevers and the sepsis. She did something. Cast a curse...you know how her kind deals in the black arts. May the eagles of Sovngarde peck out her eyes for all eternity!”

Shrinking back from the quiet appraisal of the stranger, the Nord licked her lips and gripped her crutches even tighter. “...er. Not that I mean any offense, outlander. It’s obvious you’re not cut from the same cloth.”

“Nay. Though we be patched from similar bolts of the stuff, y’ken.”

She laughed long and loud at the poor jest as he stood there impassively. Scratching one of the visible scabs beneath her rags, the prostitute looked up at him with hope. “Care for a tup? Twenty septims...ten if y’choose a quickie out here in the alley.”

A bag containing twice as much was pressed into her dirty palm, where it promptly disappeared into the threadbare folds of her woolens. The Nord began awkwardly shuffling towards one of the doors she indicated with a hand, nearly falling over upon noticing the stranger’s departure.
Turning his head beneath the hooded cloak he wore, for the summer sun did not bother him as it did others, the stranger looked for the closest exit and walked along the streets of Windhelm...not stopping until he reached the farmer’s market in the Stone Quarter, where several youth scurried about doing their chores.

He rapped upon the wood of a barn stall. “Bjorn. Kald...Bjorn and Kald Whitebranch. Have I reached the right place?”

Two young lads emerged, one still wielding a pitchfork with tufts of hay stuck upon it. “Who calls?”

“I do. I have questions aboot the healer what sewed up a most grievous wound.” Extending his hand, the stranger pointed to Kald’s stomach. “I should like tae see it, if ye dinnae mind.”

The boy smiled brightly. “O’ course. Da says it was a miracle I survived it...the wound and the stitching. My insides had spilled out to become my outsides.” Pulling up his tunic, his brother frowned as the rippled and twisted scar was revealed to their view.

“Hmm.” Laying a single finger upon the wound, the stranger traced the seam of it where the stitches had been placed. “Ye’d say she was skilled?”

“Aye, man...my shield-brothers say she worked long into the night. Did her very best for all of us, though she near fell asleep while pouring a tonic down Ingun’s throat.”

Pinching the lumpy scars together, the stranger noticed no strain upon the boy’s face. Full healed then. And after only a few months. “But she’s an outlander. A Breton, like me. Was she no under arrest...a captive? Why’d she help ye?”

“Not sure, really. Grygg says she was a prisoner, but just as many say that she was an invited guest o’ the Jarl.” Kald beamed up at him. “Whatever she is, she’s ours. I hear she’s taken in orphans to her own breast from the streets, and bosses Galmar Iron-Fist and even the Jarl hisself around like a salty ole marm!”

Bjorn turned to the nearby stall and picked up a brush. Starting to curry one of the horses, he gruffly hrrmphed. “Some might not like the Dragonborn. Say she’s a witch and we shouldn’t trust her further than we can throw her.” He shook his head as Kald lowered his tunic and picked up another brush, attending to the other beast in the stall. “I say anyone who can heal like that is welcome in Windhelm and with the Stormcloaks, for as long as they’d like to stay.”

“Tha’s a generous perspective, lad.”

“She saved my brother’s life. I don’t hold with those rumormongers who say she only got her position by spreading her legs. Why? No need for a powerful mage t’doo so. Some folks got nothing better to do than jaw off.”

Kald huffed as he picked out a clod of mud from his horses’ mane. “I dunno, Bjorn. Folks say the Jarl and the court mage been looking ‘mighty’ friendly. And not just recently.”

“That’s just rumors, Kald. Our Jarl would never lay with a Forsworn.” The older lad snorted. “Not when every other maid with clean hair and a fresh smile has been throwing themselves at him.
Who’d choose a runt over the first pick of the litter?”

A slight twitch moved the stranger’s finger. He willed it to be still, unseen though it was beneath the folds of his cloak. “Indeed.”

“Aye. Bedding outside your sort...it’s not done.” Lifting up his foot, which ended in a wooden stump, Bjorn smiled grimly. “Still. All the same...wish she’d been there when an Imperial stallion crushed my foot in that skirmish, back when they raided Fort Dunstad. Maybe I’d have kept it.”

“Perhaps.” He gave them each fifty septims, a sum that though small made the boys gape widely as the bags clinked in their loose fingers. “For the time I took ye away from work. And yer answers.”

“Th-thank you! Who - who shall I say was asking after her?” Bjorn called out, handing his bag to Kald who began counting the septims eagerly. “Look, look brother! We can finally afford that filly you’ve had your eyes on!”

But the stranger had already left.

He reappeared, later, in Candlehearth Hall.

Dipping his spoon into the overly salted stew, the stranger pressed the edge of the metal to his lips. Allowing the thin broth to drain back into the bowl as he listened to snatches of talk. Gossip that grew more flagrant as the light of the inn’s namesake burned steady, while its fellows became mere puddles of wax.

“-killed Callixto, and murdered Susanna the Wicked too, I’ll wager. She’s brought nought but trouble.”

“I say, let the Dragonborn stay! Wuunferth has already gone daft in his age - did ya see him doting on that little maid, buttering her up with sweets and spells? Not right, those two being so close…we need a woman to take care of a girl. It’s only good sense.”

“Pah. ‘Good sense’ would be booting that baggage back west where all the corpse-eaters be. Let her kill the dragons there...far away from us. Didn’tcha hear that all the Nords in Markarth were put to the sword, you softskull?”

"They say Helgen got hit by a dragon. One of those horrors comes here, we'll be ready."  
“-heard they were burnt alive, some sort of sacrifice to their pagan gods...and then they were eaten.”

“Talos, no !”

“-Jarl needs a woman. Palace needs a woman’s touch.”

“More like a woman’s womb. No bairns for the succession, Jarl better watch himself lest some young upstart gets a bright idea to take over, an’ fill the Palace with his own seed…”
“Talos has got nothing to do with it.”

“- mind the history. Remember the year 174, man. Talos has got everything to do with it. Never trust a Forsworn.”

“-in the city, in the palace!”

“-oh gods, the dishonor; my ancestors would cry out from their graves to see our dark times, the shame…”

“Skyrim is for the Nords, and the Nords alone. Everyone else can turn tail...or bloody taste my axe!”

The stranger had heard enough. Paying for his uneaten meal, he left the inn and walked thoughtfully past the wide double gates, ignoring the hails of the guards.

A week later in the Bee and Barb of Riften, the stranger approached the White Were known publicly as Arnbjorn.

“Fuck off,” the Nord grunted, barely sparing him a glance. The young girl sitting next to him on her stool, legs swinging, merely looked intrigued.

The stranger held up his hands in a gesture of peace. “I mean no disrespect. I have questions concernin’ one Breton by name of Nemain...also known as Dragonborn. I hear she had made her way here, and that she spoke with ye.”

“And who’s asking?” The girl piped up, her high youthful voice a poor shield for the unnatural hunger the stranger recognized in her eyes.

A *vampire unchild and a berserker were. Unusual combination.* But they were not his quarry; not tonight. Their secrets were safe - as long as they did not impact his hunt. “I be an old friend. I’ve traveled far tae find news. Can ye help me?”

The little girl smiled, allowing him a peek of her sharp incisors. “Always a pleasure to meet folks of my ilk, handsome. And you’re right - Nemain was here.”

“...with an elf.” The werewolf grumbled. “Made me sneeze. Shoulda eaten him when I had the chance. Haven’t had a proper High Elf in ages.”

The girl slapped the man on his shoulder. “Don’t interrupt! And it wasn’t the Mer making you sneeze...it was the herbs Talen-Jei puts in his drinks. You broke out in a rash after chugging that Velvet LeChance!”

“I’m allergic to elves, not fine wines.”

“Like you’d know a fine wine from gutrot hooch. You’d drink anything.” Turning back to him, the girl rolled her eyes. “Sorry. She ‘was’ here, with an Altmer mage. Anyone...well, anyone sober could have told you so. They left this morning and split ways...not sure where to.”
“I see.”

The stranger felt a mild tickle of curiosity. It was such a novel sensation...he decided it could not hurt to ask. “The guards said an old woman o’er at Honorhall was murdered. Seems right unusual. You wouldnae happen tae know anything aboot that, would ye?”

He already knew the answer...the scent of fresh-spilt blood and underlying fear was not easy to wash away. But it would be enlightening to see which lies the unchild and the were would choose, to deflect his questions with.

The girl clapped hands to her cheeks, her lips forming a perfect ‘o’ even as her eyes stayed callous. “Oh no! And I heard she was so nice!”

Arnbjorn huffed in disdain, shifting his bulk upon the stool. “You’re not fooling anyone. And it’s my turn next time.”

Behind her hands, the child tittered as the stranger watched, curiosity dying away as the familiar blankness of ennui took hold once more. “You have to admit, Arnbjorn, that there was a sort of poetic justice about it. She beat her children, a child beat her...”

The werewolf lifted up his spoon and licked it. “With a dolly.”

“-a dolly filled with dwarven ingots! What do you take me for, an amateur?” Primly dusting off her dress, the wee vampire fixed the stranger with a leery glare. “You won’t spoil my fun, will you? Because I don’t think you’d taste all that good. You smell like tree-sap and something this side of piquant. Rot, perhaps.”

The stranger privately agreed that eating him would be no treat, though he nodded to be polite. “Unlikely indeed. Nought tae fear...I’m nae interested in yer pastimes. Just need tae find Nemain.”

There were, he thought, only so many places to the west that the woman could have scampered off to. Ivarstead. Whiterun. Rorikstead. Dawnstar? “Here. For yer time.” He threw a bag of septims upon the counter.

“Oooh. Getting paid to talk shop - you’re a dear! Well. For being...what you are.” The vampire squealed as she hefted the bag in her palm. “Keerava! Over here...bring an Argonian blood ale, with a nirnroot twist and a dash of jazbay juice!”

The Argonian moved away from wiping cups and platters, hissing. “You’re jussst a hatchling. No drinkssss for you.”

“It’s for my Da. Obviously ‘I’ will be having an apple ale.”

As the stranger turned to leave, a heavy hand descended upon his shoulder.

Removing Arnbjorn’s hand, he looked up at the giant Nord...a rare frown pulling at his lips. “What now? I told ye, I’ve nae interest in yer affairs.”
“Yet I’ve an interest in yours.” The werewolf’s face looked troubled. “Tell me. What news of Markarth?”

The stranger shrugged. “Only what you’ve heard. Tis gone dark. Nae word gets in...and nae word gets out.”

The werewolf planted himself in front of the door as he attempted to leave once more. “Not good enough. Everyone knows that the Forsworn have retaken the Reach. I need better answers. Solid and useful news, and guess what? You’re gonna give it to me.”

Another sensation - two feelings in one day, it was a mild shock - filled him with disgust, as Ambjorn gripped his upper arm to hold him in place. “Like Babette says, there’s no denying what you are. Talk.”

“...Or I find out just how rubbery your cold flesh is, all up close and personal, niblet.”

It would not be borne, for beyond all other such sensations the stranger disliked being touched.

Disliked being touched. Intensely.

Batting away the werewolf’s paws, he grabbed him by the throat and lifted him with ease. Their difference in heights meant that his stance was skewed by a bit, but it made no difference - his arms obeyed his will. The were’s feet kicked reflexively, surprise coloring the Nord wolf’s features as the stranger thrust his face close. Close enough that the words he uttered, sharp and cold, could not be mistaken for anything but blatant threat.

"You want tae know, fear thuaidh? Know of the Red Eagle an’ the Ragged King o’ the Mournful Throne? The lost ones and the wild what have reclaimed their own lands, at long last?"

He continued to apply more pressure as the Nord’s face began to turn blue. Ham-like hands pummeled his head and his shoulders as booted feet kicked his shins, but the stranger withstood it all in placid calm. He felt nothing but blank satisfaction, putting this Northman in his place.

“All ye need tae know is this: kill one of us, and three more will take their place. The Forsworn be unstoppable. And my betters have given me orders, orders that I fain will obey.”

Choosing to take a deep breath, though he didn’t really need it, he eased the werewolf down to the floor. Who then staggered back, moving away from the stranger as a noticeable quiet came over the Bee and Barb. That little stunt had drawn the attention of the other tavern patrons, and it was time to go.

“Tell Nemain…” the stranger considered his words, as the unchild hopped off the stool to bear up the werewolf’s weight, drink forgotten. Her face pinched with displeasure, as everyone else seemed to lean a bit closer. The better to hear.

“Tell the Dragonborn, if you see her, that the wind hunts her. That the People seek her, and may the Et’Ada hex her, that she may thirst an’ hunger, but ne’er be sated. For her traitorous ways must be
repented of, else I welcome her with a death shroud in lieu of a warming shawl. Féadfaidh sí teacht ar ais chugainn, nó eile.”

The vampire child scoffed. “And are we meant to understand any of that?”

He shook his head, decisively. “Tis not meant for one such as ye tae know. Only her.”

As his feet carried him out and through the door, an old Nord man cried out. “Shor take you, Reachman! Your kind truly are savages, to threaten an innocent family at their sup!”

The stranger spun, holding the door open a moment longer. “There be nae innocent onlookers in this struggle, fear thuaidh. Just the guilty.”

He let the doors slam shut. “And the dead.”

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Passing through the streets, weaving through the pickpockets and merchants, crossing the bridge and bypassing the stables, the stranger walked along. Until the path he walked was shadowed by night, stars twinkling beneath their gauzy veil of shifting ghost lights.

He walked until he reached a cave, where a cowled figure stood up at his approach.

Lifting up an elongated, stained claw, the individual scratched a bony shoulder. The voice that came out of the darkness was a rasping caw. “Old Gods keep ye, for ye took long enough. Ah reckon ye’ve discovered proof ’ve the claim?”

Sitting at the creature’s behest, the stranger nodded. “Aye. Tis all true. Though there may yet be some hope, for an elf travels with her.”

“We’re out of the darkness was a rasping caw. “Old Gods keep ye, for ye took long enough. Ah reckon ye’ve discovered proof ’ve the claim?”

“I understand, Elder One.” A drop of resentment, brought up from the dregs of something buried deep inside, prompted another monotone statement. “Though t’would have been easier had she never left. Unnecessary, it was, tae pass such harsh sentence.”

“We’ve been o’er this a thousand times, you an’ I. Our laws be our ways...and none can be permitted tae foil ‘em. Ye’ve had your orders, an’ I have mine. Tis high time we make fer the Druadach...my bones ache in all this heat an’ scunnering sunlight! Kreeeh, mah flesh! It burns!”

“Nae yet.” He would have to hunt soon...his companion could not fend so well for herself as he did, in her retinue. “We doon have her, and be unlikely tae have her unless we keep tight to her trail. She’s on the move mair often than naught, Blessed Mother.”

The creature issued a soft croak of discontent. Relinquishing his cloak, the stranger laid it gently
upon the thing. It wasn’t as though he needed it anyhow...heat and cold were all one to him. “What news of the west wold? What does the wind say?"

Nails clicked against stone. “Much activity, much gathering, hmm.”

He nodded, though it all seemed more of the same. Nothing new, not yet. “...giants an’ weres be in agreement at the hooley. The orcs be with us, o’ course. Though th’ vampires be more cautious. That Volkihar sort yens tae lord it o’er us all, still.”

“Reckon the Ard Ri had something tae say aboot that.”

In the murk, it was hard to tell. But he thought the creature grinned, for a flash of something that glistened shone through the blackness of the cave. “Och, Madanach had spades t’say, o’ course. Water scrying be a right bitch tae do, but I thought I cuid see ‘im near lose his composure when one o’ the vamps told him tae pay living tribute fer e’en considering a treaty! Hah!”

The stranger rolled his shoulder, for it seemed he had dislocated it, lifting the were. Popping it back into place, he made a dismissive noise. “Few enough of th’ People t’spare fer such things. We need tae be breeding, Wise One. Beltane has come an’ gone, and half as many showed up as last year. Warriors dinnae grow from trees.”

“Hah! Most warriors, aye. You bein' the rare exception. I ken, m’wee Stoutheart, ah hear yer words. Dinnae fash y’self. Ye’ll have yer chance t’see the Reach reborn soon enough.” Claws tapped him fondly on the forehead.

He allowed it, for the creature shrank back after that small gesture. Long years of companionship had taught each the other’s ways, and he did not mind the liberties taken; as long as certain lines were kept well established. For he’d given enough to the People, given enough of his time and talents and self that retaining some semblance of autonomy remained important to him.

Though he scarce recalled why he kept such an opinion. So many other things had been depleted in his Making...but he knew. Knew Nemain could tell him, if the Wise Elder before him would not.

The creature’s hood billowed as it yawned, shivering pinions within the hood stretching the cloak to expand like a blot against the stone walls. “Pah. It be near dawn; ah can feel it. Keep watch, will ye? Doon want another dragon tae surprise us, as we were sae rudely skelped in Darklight Tower.”

Sniffing the warm air, the stranger cast basic wards outside the cave as the creature shifted into a more comfortable position for sleep, trampling and making a nest of its cloak. Nothing unusual to smell out here. There was none of the ash-snake char that accompanied dragons, or the meaty effluvia of the spoor that larger carnivores made, what sometimes frequented the area.

Only the nutty smell of small prey; rodents and creeping things and birds. Far off to the east, a small stream spawned some smaller, sour-bitter mudcrabs, but he was not worried unduly by them.

As he settled himself against the trunk of an aspen to take his watch, the stranger thought back to another such night spent under the stars. When times had been simpler, and danger an adventure to overcome, rather than a dreich chore.
“Nae, tis yer turn tae tell a truth! Fer as I’ve stolen the poitin, you get tae talk first!” Nemain giggled as they snuggled together beneath the Auld Man; the wide-branching juniper tree whose roots did provide such a good place to rest and hide.

Scooting her head down to fit between his shoulder and arm, he took a long pull of the potato alcohol, the poitin, and made a rankled face. “Bleugh, cor that be strong! Fine. Y’want some truth, aye? I think Mairead be the comeliest lass in Deepwood Redoubt. Sooth, those diddies o’ hers...like ripe, sweet melons. What red-blood male could resist?”

As her little hands began tickling him in retaliation, he barely managed to push the poitin away before his back hit the tree root and he began struggling in earnest. Touching in turn what he could reach he grinned victoriously; for the hide dress she had taken to wearing with the other priestesses covered only the best bits.

...And the backs of her thighs were particularly sensitive, as he’d found out during their numerous snogging sessions. Grasping them now, he raked his fingers up until he reached his favorite part of her: the pert round apples of her arse. “Hahah hah, geroff, y’sore loser! Doon worry, I’ll still marry ye...e’en if yer the ugliest wretch born of a besom this side of Redclaw Creek!”

“Ye trolloping cockheid! I’ll cut off her tits and cook ‘em for yer nooning if ye wax on aboot them any more!” She grabbed fistfuls of his hair and began bashing his head against the dirt as his hands squeezed, laughing even as Nemain continued cursing him for a poxy oaf.

It pleased him that she cared so much, even after all this time. Not all bairns promised to one another in their cradles remained so attached, but attached they had been even toddling about in breechclouts, through the horrors of Markarth and now matured into near adulthood: Galan and Nemain.

His taisce. His treasure...snub nose, dirty knees and a bright, crooked smile.

His own.

No, she’d not hurt him. Unless, of course, he deserved it. Then the punishment was usually more malodorous than mortifying - like that time she had stolen his sword and wrapped it in festering maggotty goat-guts, forcing him to spend a good afternoon unwinding intestines...washing his hands repeatedly in the river before he could attend weapon practice.

He hadn’t forgotten. He owed her something equally devastating. Perhaps he’d steal away her books and hide them in Máthair Melka’s broch? The auld woman would flay her alive if she dared set a toe inside her hallowed ground...

Smiling at a particularly creative oath, Galan folded his arms behind his head as she began gesticulating wildly. Listening with half an ear, he bit his lip as her weight ground sensually down against his hips.

Aye. He’d do it...first chance he got while she was away at lessons. But first, he’d enjoy this snatch of time spent alone with her. “Och, doon do that. Ye’d deprive all the other lads of Mairead’s
charms.”

“Fecking Mairead…”

Nemain muttered, turning until she was sitting upon the flat of his stomach. He was painfully aware of how close she was to where he truly wanted her to be, and to take the sting away from his (truthful, Nemain’s tits were mere river rocks) words, he drew her down and took her mouth for his own.

She tasted like poitín and moss and lust, and he drank her in like water; holding her more tightly to him as she gave up struggling and angled her lips…all the better to kiss him, deep in the dark of the Auld Man’s shadow.

When the moons had reached the apex of their slow crawl across the sky, Masser and Secunda found them twined together, half buried in needle loam and sticky, spilled poitín.

Her fingers crawled like spiders along the hills and valleys of his abdomen. “Will ye no stay? Surely they doon need ye for the coming raid? We can go swimming.”

He stilled her hands with his own, linking their fingers together as her breath sighed against his neck. “I must. All the young men who are close t’ the trials be asked to come along. The goats and elks havenae birthed well, this past spring. And y’know better than I just how poor the gathering has gone, and how our gardens and groves ’ave struggled. We need more food.”

She said nothing, for he was right. He had caught her giving away portions of her own meals to the younglings, who often wailed piteously when there was no more food to be had. He could hear their stomachs gurgling, echoes of his own some nights when they all lay together in the fields of the Redoubt.

Galan had scolded her time and time again for being so weak - if he could suck on pebbles to distract himself from hankering after food, well, so could they - but she always waved off his concerns.

“I dinnae like t’hear them cry so. It hurts to chew and swallow; watching them stare at every bite goin’ doon with want. I’d rather silence ’em with victuals than suffer their tears.”

“…Nemain. You make y’self sick and they’ll be giving you their rations, love.”

“Hmph. I’ll just dig more roots than usual…tae make up fer it. And we can climb an’ look for birds nests. Tis always fun!…and I know how much ye enjoy eggs.”

“I adore eggs. I love eggs. I’d eat ’em every damn day and never tire of them. Let's go right now.”

Lying there beneath the juniper tree, Galan’s fingers trailed along her back. And he sighed to feel every bumpy knob of her spine, flattening out to twig-like legs that he knew (from running in their pitched footraces) to be pure stringy muscle. Hardly any fat to pinch…he’d heard some Nord lasses were so plump that they actually missed meals apurpose, to slim themselves, but such an idea seemed an incredible unlikelihood to the young Forsworn.
Who in their right bodgin’ minds would ever turn down food?!

It worried him. She was so slight; she could not afford to miss any more meals. He said aloud, “The fear thuaidh be so monstrous tall, well. Surely they’ll no mind a few cows or chickens missing t’feed us. It would spread farther with our folk than theirs, anyhow. We’ll raid them in the dead o’ night and return before any of them e’en notice.”

“Sae much fer glorious, bloody war like the elders always jaw off aboot.”

He chuckled at that, winding a long strand of her hair around his finger. In the starlight, it looked nearly as black as his...not the dullish brown her Mathair often despaired over so.

Not that he saw the point. Hair was hair...and Mother Melka had always been unusually harsh towards her only daughter. “War be all about fighting o’er resources. Nought more to it. Like the silver mined of the crags, what matches yer bonny eyes…”

“Stop that,” Nemain laughed as Galan began making kissy noises against her hair. Rooting about, he writhed until he had her splayed underneath him.

Propping himself up on his arms, he watched with bated breath as Nemain continued gasping. Grinding down in the right place that brought pleasure to her, Galan’s eyes nearly closed as she whimpered and wound her arms about him. Gods, that felt good.

And though he had been teasing, her eyes were indeed silver...holding all the glow of the moons in their radiance as her lips parted, to speak.

“Galan. Here be my truth: I be yours, mo chroi. I love you, and I'll never leave ye alone. Ever.”

He kissed her, for what else could one say to that? Words were trite and meaningless. Wholly forgettable. But the feeling of knowing she trusted him so, had avowed herself to him and only him...

Taking each of her fingers, callused and rough, he kissed them tenderly. One by one. “I love you too, Nemain. And as Hircine be my witness...I shall never let you starve.”

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

He felt nothing.

Since his heart had been replaced, all that tenderness was a distant echo...like looking at a rock thrown deep down a murky well. The more years that passed by, the more the water seemed to fill it ever higher; concealing the things he used to feel so keenly. His purpose...
An owl hooted. Turning his head slightly, he tracked the magic-made aura of its life winging through the quaking trees. Losing interest as it disappeared, he returned his head to its previous position...staring at nothing as he waited. Waited for dawn.

He no longer needed to sleep. Eating, drinking, breathing...such things were faintly interesting, but unnecessary. For since Galan had become the Briarheart, there was but one single thing that moved him. To spark embers of those long forgotten memories, those feelings that so eluded him now during the endless days of his existence.

Pulling away his cloak and opening his shirt, Galan touched the glowing golden briarheart that pulsed dully inside his chest. The rawhide strips had not aged a day since Nemain had placed them at his Becoming; for her magic had been sound. He had been so proud of her - the knife had hurt like a son of a bitch, but he’d kept quiet through it all. Melka had told him later...none other had had such a Becoming as holy, as silent as his had been, until his handfasted priestess had mucked it up.

Why had she cried? She knew the rules, same as he had. Balefully he managed to remember a shred of the all-consuming fear and love that had roused him to ask her, to make him Briarheart. He had understood it all, all of the reasons and intentions so much more clearly right after his creation than he did now.

But the hagraven who slumbered fitfully behind him in the cave had eased the pricking of his random, perturbing thoughts. Had reassured him that with time, all feeling would soon pass. He knew the Wise One had serious doubts about his quest, and misgivings concerning her own. But the resentment that lived in her heart was old and brown with age, bruised deep and hidden under many scars; what drove him felt bright and sharp and hot in comparison; as vivid as the sun and just as scalding.

It was the only thing he really felt, this desire...the need to find her. To find her, and make things right.

Galan had faith. The Old Gods, the Et’Ada, had seen him and judged him worthy of such strength. He would serve his betters...Máthair Melka his guide and seer. He would continue to be devout, for what else was left for him now?

Nothing but to be Briarheart - thorn made and bathed in blood. The skulls of his enemies decorated his belts, and upon his hands were the deaths of hundreds of Nords, Redguards and Imperials...any and every one who dared trespass the sanctity of the holy land, the Reach.

She would - he swore it to be so - return, with all her Dragon-gifted powers. He’d save her from the cusp of her own willful ruination, stubborn little thing. For he had known always that she was special, no matter what her Máthair might say, and he would see her take her rightful place at last. He’d watch her be given the Mark of High Priestess, ascending even to be Hagraven should the opportunity come. It was just. It was fair.

And of course she would want to return. Why else had she stayed in Markarth, where so many of
their lost kin were kept? She could have moved anywhere, and he remembered the effort it had taken to remain sedate and inexpressive when the news had reached Deepwood of her unlikely survival. Guiding Nepos to offer her a boon had been the simplest of tasks, and it should have made her path clear, but now…

The Briarheart would hunt her.
Galan would find her.

And as he idly massaged the sacred tree keeping his life force intact, Galan knew he would allow her the grace to tell him herself...in her own words...that she was not involved with the Bear of Markarth. The Butcher, who had been responsible of the deaths of so many friends and beloved ones. It stirred the most cached, tremulous nudgings of his stitched spirit to even think her capable of feeling for that...that fear thuaidh monster.

She would tell him. It would be proved a falsehood.

And, he smiled as his false heart grew brighter with the light of the rising sun, she would return to him. Never to depart ere more. They’d break the Nords with a mighty breaking, and rule the west wolds together; just as they had imagined as mere bairns. With the power of the Thu’um, and Madanach’s blessing, anything was possible.

Even the cessation of these damnable feelings that he loathed, as much as a thing like him could loathe. That hurt him, insofar as a heart that had been ripped and replaced could be pained. And he knew...there was only one who could make the feelings cease.

Dearest, beloved taisce...the bane and the bearer of his heart.

I am coming for you.

Chapter End Notes

Gaelic translation:

Féadfaidh sí teacht ar ais chugainn - May she come back to me.
Nó eile - or else
Fear thuaidh - northmen, people of the north
taisce - treasure
In Markarth there was a Forsworn Briarheart
Who fell in love with the Dovahkiin (a tart)
For a Nord she did diddle
With Ancano as second fiddle
M'aiq was right...Briarhearts are not very smart
The Challenge

Chapter Notes

Gosh I do adore Vilkas. My Dragonborn has married him three times. THREE. TIMES. So as you can tell, I lavished a P.O.V. sequence in this chapter.

Yeah, yeah...I know my other fic is all about him. I DON'T CARE. *waves an 'I Heart Companions' sign wildly.

Soundtrack is the song Ramunder, by the band Gjallarhorn.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXsO6SeKWww&list=RDMPR56PXiLqY&index=9

The chairs and cupboards rattled and quaked, as the reverberation of Thu’um filled voices rising and falling in argument rumbled the foundations of Jorrvaskr.

“If they get too loud I’ll just kick them out,” Vilkas said casually, his fingers tracing the curve of Solveig’s waist as they sat at table breaking their fast with boiled eggs and bread.

“You run a tight ship,” Solveig told him. She was rewarded with a sharp, white grin. “Though I don’t know how well that will be received, tossing a Jarl and the Dragonborn out without so much as a by-your-leave.”

“This is my home. My territory - not theirs. They are here under Kodlak’s sufferance - I don’t have to do shit but listen and wait.”

The fresh red weal marring her cheek bunched as she grinned once again, then turned to the table to do their meal full justice. Briefly Vilkas admired his latest conquest; her youthful beauty and shrewd mind. Almost as appealing as the incredible aim she could boast of, with that brace of daggers she carried.

Plump. His inner wolf growled. Tender, her flesh. To rip, tear…

- No. Ejecting the bloodlust of the beast from the forefront of his thoughts, Vilkas distracted himself by resting his hand upon her thigh. Feeling the muscle lift as she tensed, squeezing his hand in response.

It had been the mere work of a moment to detach her from Hrongar. Weapon in human form. Right, his beast snorted in satisfaction. One punch, and the Nord had crumpled...leaving the attentions of this one entirely upon him.
“Who the blazes do you think you are?” She snarled as Hrongar made his escape. Vilkas wondered if she even realized that he was backing her into a corner. Solveig’s scent was salt-wild and strong: utterly honest in its disdain for the one who had summarily ripped away her sole source of entertainment. Her reprieve from the boredom he could still practically taste floating away from her pores. Not even the sweet stink of mead could cover it.

A shame, that. He’d have to find some other means of pleasing this erstwhile guest. He smiled darkly, for he had several ideas. “Who, me? Just the first bastard to take away what you want. I’ll bet you’ve never had anyone say no to you in your entire goddamn life.”

Her scent changed; rage and annoyance morphing into intrigue...and the subtle scent of arousal. Not that she was going to make it easy for him.

Sniffing, Solveig crossed her arms. Plumping up her breasts until he wanted to tear off that stupid scrap of a dress, the better to view them properly. “What makes you say that?”

"Your beauty." Effectively trapping her in the corner, Vilkas brought up his hand and let his fingers trail down the side of her cheek, feeling her shiver. And liking it. “Your spirit. I’ll wager every single one of the men in your life follows the barest crook of your finger, lass.”

He wasn’t wrong. Her blue eyes were nearly black with pupils blown wide, the scent of her wanting pressing against his brain like a red-tinged caul. “I don’t get everything I want. If I did, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Poor little rich girl. Everything a woman could want, and yet she still isn’t happy. You know, I have a remedy for that.”

He ate up her screech of denial with pleasure, feasting at her mouth until she responded in kind. Feeling her arms cling tightly to him as he lifted her and carried her, unchallenged, away from the hall and into the guesting rooms.

He had not regretted it - and had ensured she enjoyed the interlude as well, though the young woman was not nearly so experienced as she pretended to be. His greatest shock had not come from the strike of the vampires; his wolf had dragged him awake from deep sleep in time to combat that. Had brought on the Change in record time...

The surprise had been in how well Solveig had handled the situation. She had watched him tear into the vampires invading their room with remarkable aplomb...only the whites of her eyes revealing the terror she kept tamped down. He liked that she had not screamed: that she had immediately attended to the remaining undead with blades she kept close at hand, holding back from an understandable urge to attack him on sight after the last vampire lay disintegrating into ash at the ends of his claws.

A worthy challenge...and a pleasure to hunt with. This one would be wasted as a Jarl’s wife. She caught his hand before it could delve between her thighs and rubbed his finger, giving him a saucy look.

Turning his attentions away from his memories - and the furor arising from downstairs - with effort, Vilkas cleared his throat. “So Brenna seems content to stay here. She’ll be an asset once properly trained up. But you, I think, would not enjoy being under me.”
His eyebrow arched as she chuckled quietly at his slip of tongue. “...well. In an employment aspect, at least. Where will you go?”

Solveig appeared to contemplate his question. “Riften, I think. My Pa has contacts there...and I’m sure I shall find some means of occupying myself. Plenty to do for one who favors unconventional means of earning a living.”

*That was one way of describing the Thieves Guild.* Not his favorite city, Riften, for the stench of the malodorous waterways was only slightly more tolerable than the skewed morality of the folk who lived there.

But her mind seemed made up, and he was not one to demand more than his due from the occasional women who shared his bed. He was suddenly more interested in watching Farkas, who had just finished speaking with Brenna. Brenna, giant soft spoken Brenna...who suddenly was walking with more confidence than he’d seen in any of the whelps they’d taken in this last month. *He must have given her his review of her skills...and found her worthy of commendation. Good.* She ignored them all, pushing open the double doors to the training yard with not a small amount of pride.

An emotion he would rather have caught from her newest instructor instead of the current soup of anxiety Farkas exuded. *Jealousy. Eagerness. Pain/worry/want.*

Vilkas frowned to see his twin’s face awash in such a rictus of constrained tension, as his nose picked out each individual scent in the haze of smells that clogged the hall.

“Hey.” Farkas clapped a hand upon Solveig’s shoulder, which made the wolf in him tense. Tightening in preparation to fight for what he had claimed. But the open and honest way his brother kept his eyes firmly upon the woman’s eyes - and not her more bounteous assets - allowed him to relax. If only a little.

“You alright? Got everything you need for the wagon heading east?” Farkas raised his head and sniffed the air, as the woman blinked up at him in sudden realization...looking back at Vilkas as he graced her with another meaningful grin. *Surprise!...there’s more than one Moon Called around here. Sharp girl.*


“Yes, thank you.” Solveig thanked him. “Tilma has sent me off with a huge hamper of food - more than I could eat, really. And Brenna and I have paid our respects to Snygg and the...the others that were taken.”

Focusing upon cleaning his plate, Vilkas traced tiny circles upon the woman’s leg as she continued speaking; the rigidity of her posture the only clue that she was affected by their conversation. “It seems I’ve learned all sorts of things on this trip to the south. At sea, our injured either heal fast or die even faster...and the dead are quickly disposed of. Out of sight, out of mind.” She sighed. “None of this lingering attendance to the bodies of the dead.”

He didn’t blame her for feeling squeamish. He’d seen what was left of Snygg and the others...the dessicated husks hardly looked as though they had once been human. *Meat sucked dry and left to dust.*

_Hush,* he mentally grumbled as the beast inside tried to bestir him, to hunt. _Not yet._
Farkas was still speaking, in his kindly way. “-important, for the dead to have their proper rites and burials. The body is the host of the spirit, and in honoring the dead we keep their memory alive. We will send Gudrun Greygull home to her family in Dawnstar in all due haste and ceremony.”

The armsmaster reined in a frown. In times of battle, the care of the dead was outweighed by the need for survival...and Whiterun was, whether it realized it or not, now at war. But Solveig did not seem to notice, for she nodded. “She’d like that. Maybe then her spirit will rest...for she got what she truly wanted, in the end.”

Something flashed in Farkas’ eyes. “Nobody would want to die like that.” He walked off as abruptly as he appeared, his wide shoulders tightening as something crashed and broke downstairs in the basement.

The red-haired woman watched him go, then turned back to Vilkas. “He’s not dumb, like everyone says...not about people, at any rate.”

He tightened his grasp upon her knee, moving to link his hand in hers. Savoring the echo of rare intimacy that sometimes lingered after sex.

Perceptive. In the strange balance of things, there were several ways in which Vilkas despaired of his twin. But, he thought, there were times when he wished he had Farkas’ easy temper, his open affability. The bigger man had spent a long time trying to look less...lethal than someone who moved like a fighter and stood eight inches taller than most Nords were.

Vilkas sympathized - though he had learned to take advantage of the effect he had on people rather than disguise it. “My brother,” he said quietly, “has a soft heart.”

“I know. He asked me four times today if I had eaten, and would I prefer eggs or roast for the noon meal. And would I like ale or mead to drink, and was it enough, or should he send Tilma for more.” She laughed. “I think Brenna might explode - she couldn’t bring herself to decline, and her place setting had enough for three warrior’s noonings!”

“Good to know. I’ll try not to make her vomit while putting her through her paces in the yard.”

She looked down at their hands, still joined beneath the table, then looked up at him. Her expression was surprisingly vulnerable. “You’ll tell me, if a contract takes you east to the Rift? So I can see you again?”

“Hmm.” Leaning over, Vilkas breathed in the sweet scent of her, where her neck met shoulder. Fixing the unique print of what was Solveig firmly in his mind, he allowed his nose to rub the softness of her neck, then stood up from the table. “Aye. But don’t bother to send a courier...I’ll find you.”

Somewhere downstairs, a muffled curse echoed as a door slammed shut. Stomping up the stairs two at a time, Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak of Eastmarch stalked towards their table with a wild look.

“Give me something to do, before I start tearing things apart,” he hissed.
“Wood pile. Outside.” Vilkas jerked his head towards the lee side of Jorrvaskr, where the chopping block and the axe lay unused near the outer wall. He recognized the signs of a man about to snap, and his estimation of him rose a few notches higher in choosing to take out his frustrations upon a log, instead of the woman in the basement. The one currently snarling to herself in that fluid, Forsworn tongue.

His brother moved as if to head downstairs and was stopped by a curt hand gesture from Vilkas. **Not yet.**

Farkas growled, the sound low enough that he didn't think any of the humans heard it.

The Jarl did not deign to answer, carrying his anger like a thundercloud as once again the doors to Jorrvaskr slammed behind him.

“She’s not yours to protect, Farkas.” He said in a chiding tone, once he was sure that the Jarl was out of earshot. “Let the witch care for herself. She is fully capable of doing so.”

Solveig had quietly slipped to the corner of the room, to conceal herself before the Jarl could notice her presence. Not that he could fault her; the man looked angry enough to spit steel. And her actions - their actions, he remanded himself, had not been beyond reproach.

Vilkas strongly hoped that he would not be called upon to fight the Stormcloaks or their leader in the encroaching conflict. The warriors that the Bear of Eastmarch had brought for the proposed peace summit were battle hardened and grim...hailing from a land far more inured to war than his territory. The pleasant climes of Whiterun excelled at churning out farmers and merchants; not killers.

His wolf, however, considered the upcoming battle with some relish...even as Vilkas fought for dominance over his own damn body. He ignored Farkas, who continued to glare at him. The Companions were neutral. Politically non-partisan. Yet, if the fight spilled into civilian homes or Jorrvaskr, he would be forced to raise his sword against these - his newest acquaintances.

Thinking upon Nemain's happy face as she had gleefully tried to stomp his boots during the circle dance, Vilkas sighed. **Friends. Friends is the word you are actively avoiding.**

Thinking of the pulped and slowly dissolving remains he had found in the Dragonborn’s quarters, Vilkas hoped it would never come to that. He barely had time to acknowledge the presence of Ria entering through the front doors before the witch in question ascended the stairs, limping to join them as the pleasantry between Ria and Solveig were exchanging faded into silence.

The Breton wore little besides a breastband beneath the wound dressings wrapped around her neck and back, with an oversized pair of pants - heavily belted around her thin waist to hold them up. He’d seen bandit corpses with more cheery dispositions. The woman was pale as wax, and the astringent stink of healing salve and potions nearly made him sneeze.

Watching carefully as Farkas’ face thawed from ire into concern, the armsmaster mentally shook his head. **Not a fool, but foolish in this, at least.**

Vilkas didn't like witches. They smelled of other people's pain, and they liked causing problems. It was one thing to attend fertility festivals that celebrated Dibella, he told himself, or to hunt in
Hircine’s name. Quite another to live the lifestyle of the bloodthirsty natives day in and day out. He, unlike Farkas, had been to enough Forsworn camps to have seen what the Reachpeople did to their victims in the name of their religion. They harvested the pain, and the carcasses left afterwards were displayed. Then eaten.

Not that he had any room to talk. His wolf had eaten his fair share of two-legged flesh. But wolves did not toy with their prey - they killed quickly. The Forsworn - the witches, and more seldom the very few hagravens and even rarer Briarhearts he had seen, did not kill with mercy. The miasma of pain from their offerings lingered long after bones had decayed to nothing. He remembered...some nights Vilkas thought he would never forget, even after drowning the memories in very strong mead - some of the victims he had not been swift enough to rescue had taken a very, very long time to die.

This particular Forsworn witch seemed more tired than troublesome. His twin’s worry made more sense now, though he’d find fault with it if he could. A darkness seemed to cling to her, injured and frail as she was. A familiar scent that hit the back of his throat; ash and flame. Dragonborn.

Vilkas narrowed his eyes. She was as much a predator as he, if not more. “Jarl is out back, chopping wood. If you’re of a mind to find him.”

“Where is - ah, thank ye.” Bundling up her hair into a snarled nest, Nemain stuck a wooden fork in that Farkas proffered to hold the mass of it up. Then she stood, frowning at him and the others still in the room as though they all had personally offended her.

“I thank ye, Companions, fer letting us bandage up here in an uncommitted space. Yet I fear vampires be the least o’ your worries now...for something more dangerous be on its way. I’ve had a warning of it - from the Jarl’s unusual friend.” Farkas seemed taken aback at the sheer level of rancor in the woman’s voice.

The unusual friend being the blonde. Vilkas cocked his head. Her scent was bitter-sour with jealousy, despair...and something more akin to resignation than he would have guessed, seeing the way she carried herself. Despite the limp, she walked towards them like she was ten feet tall.

Noticing as a trail of blood trickled down from one of her bandages, Nemain lifted a hand wreathed in golden light to staunch the flow. “…Fair warning, I think it only right tae tell ye that my kinsmen be of a mind t’move intae the tundra lands. You lot be the breadbasket of Skyrim, after all. They willnae stop at expanding through merely the Reach.”

She gestured with a flick of her fingers. “Some advice fer dealing with my kind. Dinnae enter any cleared circles in th’ trees where no birds sing; eat nothing offered - especially at any stone table where displayed bones lay. Keep hold o’ your hair and nail clippings, for a witch could take them and bespell ye quite easily.”

Farkas crossed his arms. “Hmph. Sounds like you were more concerned with Stormcloak politics than witchcraft downstairs.”

“Were ye listening, Farkas? Ye know what they say aboot eavesdroppers.” Nemain did not look pleased...and Ria perked up in curiosity, even as Solveig sidled even further into a shadowy corner, eyes wide.

“Kinda hard to miss it. You were both yelling fit to wake the dead.”
“Listeners ne’er hear ought that be good, Stout.”

But at least one of their openly eavesdropping company had no qualms in making her opinions known, Vilkas thought with some humor, as the Imperial newblood visibly ruffled in annoyance.

“Really?” Ria scoffed. “Witchcraft, Dragonborn? This is the Fourth Era! Witches that...that eat babies and feed off of pain are night tales - stories meant to scare children into behaving. The only ‘witches’ I know of are harmless old biddies like Olava the Feeble. And she only tells fortunes. Palm reading...harmless festival fare.”

Nemain gave her a look that could curdle milk. “You may think so if it pleases ye. Though yer life will be shortened by a long stride if ye doon take precautions...Companion.”

Vilkas had not missed the silent question mark at the end of that sentence, and he coughed...holding back a laugh as Ria blushed a dark red beneath her olive skin. The Imperial’s voice in answer was somewhat higher and tighter than it had been. “Huh. Are you a good witch or a bad witch then?”

“You think I kill skeevers an’ wee beasties tae power my spells?” Her tone was furious, and despite the nagging suspicion that all wasn’t as it should be, Vilkas’ wolf approved of her.

“Magic doesn’t work that way from what I hear, but sure. What are you?”

“I prefer tae think of meself as ‘grey’, impertinent one. A bit o’ both, if y’ken my meaning.”

"Sacrifice," said Farkas slowly, for he was ever the instructor, "...is the power that Reach magic pulls from. Mostly the loss of other people's blood and flesh- but I’ve heard rumors that one of the reasons witches have familiars is that they can use them as a higher sacrifice. Not just the animal's death, but the death of something the witch holds dear."

“...which be also why precious few children reach their coming of age in the clans what practice the dark arts.” Nemain responded, neither agreeing nor disagreeing by her tone. “The People use sacrifice tae reap the power of th’ living and dead; for ceremony or for the gathering of power. Spriggans, goats...and aye, sometimes people.

Solveig shuddered from her vantage point in the corner. “That is...disgusting.”

Nemain nodded, her expression grave. “There be some very good reasons why I be studying illusion and conjuration, y’ken. Children with the power o’ magic who dinnae learn fast while young often doon survive tae adulthood for such reasons...they become prey.”

The umbra that cloaked Nemain seemed to swell a bit larger. “And I be a survivor. Not prey...ne'er again.”

A quiet fell upon them all, as they all contemplated another night like last night. But with flesh-eaters and death mages, Vilkas thought angrily. The vampires were bad enough.

The Dragonborn bit her lip, staring at each of them in turn for a moment longer, then dismissed them summarily. Briskly stepping upon a nearby bench made her nearly level with Farkas at head height, and the large man stiffened as she leaned back; baring her neck to him. Revealing everything...noose
scar, vampire wound and all to everyone watching.

“I willnae drag ye down with me, Stout,” she answered the unspoken question that hung like smoke in the room. Baring the throat was a submissive gesture, a *wolf* gesture, Vilkas realized.

Just where had the Reach witch learned such things?

…”and you be far too good -yes, good, dinnae look at me that way - tae earn anything but kindness in return for yer good deeds.”

Lifting herself up on her tiptoes, the woman gave Farkas all the time in the world to pull back before she placed the smallest of kisses on his lips.

“What was that for?” His brother’s voice was suspiciously rough.

“Courage...fer what be tae come.” Farkas tightly closed his eyes as Nemain patted his cheek and stepped down from the bench. “Remember my warnings. Blessings be upon ye all...for Nords, you’re nae so bad. *Saol fada agus breac-shláinte chugat.*”

Stepping forward, Solveig gave Nemain a quick hug. Which seemed to surprise the woman, even as she awkwardly patted her back in return.

“Farewell Ba- I mean Nemain. Thanks. For everything.”

The Forsworn laughed. “Now you be thanking me. Where was this gratitude when I broke up yore wee keg party with the guards? The Beauty has gained some responsibility, it seems.”

“Hardly a beauty anymore.” Solveig massaged the slash upon her cheek. “Those vampires were Shor-damned fast.”

“Huh. My scar be better.” Nemain rolled her head to show off her neck bandages and winked. “Think of it as a beauty mark.”

“Scars are tattoos with better stories,” supplied Farkas.

“I agree...I like it. Makes you look properly dangerous.” Passing Solveig by with a teasing brush of touch, Vilkas rolled his shoulders. “C’mon Farkas. Time is wasting, and I tire of sitting around.”

With that, the tension evaporated and everyone - even Ria - began moving with more loose-limbed ease. Out of the corner of his eye, Vilkas watched Farkas - as his brother watched the witch grab hold of an empty bucket and head with determinedly limping strides towards the stream in front of Jorrvaskr.

“Come on.” Noting his bleak expression, Vilkas smacked Farkas on the back of the head. “Stop moping, it’s unbecoming of a man your age. At least you got a kiss out of it. Let’s go...high time we put the fear of us into the whelps again. It’s shield wall day.”

“Hmm...block training *and* Njada’s loving care...I think I’d prefer ‘leg day’, or ‘run until we all heave’ day.” He rumbled a low laugh. “You’re a cruel man, brother.”
Vilkas counted it a victory, for Farkas was still chuckling as the opening warm-ups began and newblood and Circle-honored alike began stretching to Njada Stonearm’s shouted directives.

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

Beneath the hot sun of Jorrvaskr’s yard, away from the sparring warriors and their training dummies…Ulfric chopped wood.

\textit{Whrrrr-tchunk.}

The rough handle of the axe had already wrung blisters from his hands with the repetitive motion of swinging up and bringing the axe down, but he did not stop. For to stop meant he would be forced to think, and he was too enraged to properly think. For if he ceased chopping, if he began contemplating what exactly he was now forced to do…

\textit{Kill him.} Nemain had said matter of factly. \textit{Kill Balgruuf. Doon muck about with a full scale assault on some pretense o’ honor…walk right up tae Dragonsreach and stove his head in a with a Shout.}

\textit{Whrrrr-tchunk.}

Kicking the newly split wood out of his way, Ulfric replaced it with the most knotted log on the woodpile and began hacking away at it. Almost, he wished it were a head that he was splitting down the middle.

\textit{Whrrrr-tchunk.}

One of the vampires, perhaps. He had lost seventeen worthy warriors to their underhanded sting on Dragonsreach. In his less charitable moments (and when the wood was being particularly difficult) he imagined it was Farkas’ cow-eyed head on the cutting stump.

\textit{Whrrrr-tchunk. Whrrrr-tchunk.} Swing, hit, split. Over and over again, until the sweat ran like rain down his back and he was blowing out great gusts of breath. Despite all his efforts, the cold clear light of reason was returning to his mind, and he began to feel ashamed at his fit of temper.

Not for the first time, he wished for a more facile tongue.

He had been occupied, earlier...helping Nemain wrap the slow-healing frostbite scars upon her back as they both finished cleaning up, exhausted from the hasty morning move of all their personnel out of Dragonsreach. The last minute mop-up of what smacked of a retreat amidst the carnage of the throne room, where before had been such gaiety and life.

And, as was her wont, she had spoken her thoughts out loud. “No school of magic has answers for everything, Ulfric. It be a tool. A hammer be a good tool, but nae so useful fer removing screws. Y’ken?”

He ignored her hint and plowed ahead with his case for appeasement. A tactic he usually despised, but of course ‘his’ version was more akin to a ruthless showdown than any pilfering, dragging death
by treaty.

“Balgruuf’s a reasonable man. Doubtless when presented with a string of trebuchets loaded with burning rock and line upon line of Stormcloaks bearing steel, he will capitulate. He will surrender, rather than see the fall harvests burn. I am sure of it.”

Nemain had taken the bandage from him and finished wrapping herself up. “Mmph. Perhaps. Or...we could kill him, and use that massive nutcracker of a trap tae snag a dragon and find Alduin. Easy...two birds with one stone. A win-win.”

Ulfric turned around and began pacing back towards the stairs. “No. No...I am certain my way will work. Whiterun’s great power lies in its defense, its high ground atop the plateau. Galmar has already blockaded the port of Solitude by now, and doubtless they are feeling the pinch. If Whiterun's outer walls are in danger of being breached, and the Companions are as neutral as they say…”

“... Or we could just fetching kill the fetcher, y’grand malkied optimist.”

“Gods damn it, Nemain!” He yelled, finally losing all control as she continued eyeing him beadily. “Why did you say it!? Why did you wrest away the attention from me and place the blame of the attack squarely upon your shoulders!?"

“Was I supposed tae lie? Are we no goin’ tae be honest with our allies, then?”

“Yes! Under our terms! Balgruuf might have taken my axe, had he not reached the foregone conclusion that siding with the Stormcloaks would mean allying with the Reach! For fuck’s sake, Nemain, he lost relatives in the uprising at Markarth! Beloved kin! We are fucking related by blood! Do you want me to kill my mother’s cousin?!"

“For the last bodging time, I’m nae a Forsworn anymore! If’n I were, doon ya think my Máthair would have responded tae my letters months ago, instead o’ trying tae fucking kidnap me?? And how was I s’posed tae know, Bear?!"

“You aren’t! I don’t expect you to know shit! You’re a Talos-fucking damned advisor, and I need you to stay that way...not leaping to conclusions in front of allies...‘my’ allies, Nemain, not yours!”

At that point he was gripping a chair arm so tightly the wood was splintering, and Nemain had angry wisps of smoke trailing from her mouth and nostrils. Her strangled voice came tight and fast, through gritted teeth as his stomach dropped horribly at her speech. “Then perhaps I ought to leave, Milord, since ye’ve got such a grand fucking handle on all this shite! Let you roll about in your own failings as yer sae keen tae remind me o’ mine and lay blame where there be naught! Let Astrid and her wee helpers lift yer spirits! I be done. I be through!!"

“What?! What are you even saying?” At that point all the pictures and tapestries were rattling upon the walls, but he hadn’t cared. The nails themselves were vibrating: shaking out of the table that Nemain had wrapped her white-knuckled hands around, and all he could think about was that she was leaving him. And what did fucking Astrid have to do with any of this? Did she not know that he had seen her making eyes at that Shor-cursed Companion all the damn night long?! How could a brothel mistress help him dig his way out of the shitstorm Balgruuf’s rejection had thrown him into? He needed the Dragonborn! Fucking Talos and his mercy, he needed her!

“I’m saying I wash my hands o’ ye, fear thuaidh! Do what y’want! Tis never stopped ya before!”
At that point Ulfric had been so beyond words... he had picked up the chair by the leg and had
thrown it, again and again. Seeing nothing but flashes of red-hot rage and the chair he was wholly
bent upon destroying. Bashing it against the stone-flagged floor until it was nothing more than a few
scraps of timber and shreds of metal.

Nemain had watched him act out, completely mute. Then she had turned her back to him, stiffly, and
had spoken a single cold, clipped sentence. “I’ll no bandy another syllable with you in this state. Get
out o’ my sight.”

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

Beneath the sun, one of his blisters popped; the tender fluid-coated skin immediately chafing as he
continued to chop haggardly at the stump before him.

        Whrrr-tchunk.

This has all gone utterly to shit.

        Whrrr-tchunk.

My god. She really is going to leave. Leave me alone. Shit shit shit.

        Whrrr-tchunk.

Balgruuf said no. Nemain is leaving. I am completely alone.

“Bear.”

Her rasping voice was an abrupt trauma. Whrrr-tchunk! He nearly missed his swing; in fact he did
miss, for the axe bit deeply into the wood of the cutting block instead of the log he had been aiming
for.

And it showed no signs of coming out anytime soon. Damn.

“I could cast a calming spell, if ye like.” Her voice was carefully neutral. “A wee bit of Illusion.
T’would take the edge off of that fearful temper I can still taste, bubbling up inside ye.”

“No.” He didn’t look at her, grunting as he worked the axe handle back and forth. Struggling to pull
the Shor-damned axe out from where it had gotten stuck in the fucking damned stump. He didn't look because if he looked, he would probably yell, and she did not deserve his rancor. Not after how shamefully he had behaved, earlier.

Straightening, he gasped as a deluge of cold water drenched him from head to foot.

Turning in shock to Nemain, he watched in a rising disbelief as she set down the bucket she had just thrown at him. “Oh, dearie me. Looks as though ye needed the dunking...your shirt be completely stained through with sweat. But now, the firewood be all wet.”

She arched an eyebrow imperiously as he swore a particularly foul oath, for she was right: all the wood he had just split was now utterly soaked.

Clicking her tongue, she grinned. “Tch - useless. Guess ye’ll just have tae chop up some more, fear thuaidh.” She greeted his outraged squawk with a smug expression...ogling him with a false leer as he stared stupidly back in complete bewilderment.

“Doon worry...I'll sit 'ere and watch, real close like. Tae make sure such a dread mistake doesnae happen again.”

She was trying to make him laugh, and yet...he was still angry with her.

He had hoped to be in better control of himself before he faced the Dragonborn again. He needed control...real control and not just the cocked-up semblance of it; that would allow him to lay out his argument logically, and explain why Nemain was so goddamned wrongheaded. Instead of simply throwing verbal barbs as they had already done before.

“Nemain. You’re still here, I see.”

“Aye. Fer now.” She picked at her linen wrappings around her neck, and with a rude jolt of unwanted lust Ulfric realized she was wearing his pants. And very little else.

You idiot. He could have slapped himself for the almost tangible sense of ownership seeing her in his clothing offered him. He had handed them over earlier with hardly a second thought, for all her other robes and dresses were either torn beyond repair or caked in blood and gore.

Ulfric took a deep breath….held it. Then released it in a slow exhale, as Nemain cautiously shifted from foot to foot a good five paces away. He could almost sense the cloak of civilization that he pulled upon himself; a thin veneer for his inner fighting spirit that wanted to kill something, anything.

But there was no release for such feelings here, in the tense and unhappy situation his people had been placed in. She'd had a rough time, and she needed everything he could give her. Particularly since he had been a complete ass to such a valuable companion. To my friend.
So he used the words that he didn't entirely trust himself with, to tell her what he could. Sitting down next to the (stupid, axe was still stuck in it) stump, he sighed. He hated apologizing. “About earlier. Nemain…”

She moved, faster than any woman with a limp had any right to move. Until her breath touched the back of his sweaty neck. Very quietly she said, "Do you e’er wish it hadnae happened? That we’d not been trapped together beneath Helgen?"

At that he straightened and turned to her, examining her face for hints of just how she’d meant the question. His sudden move made her flinch, and if he hadn’t checked himself the witch would have fallen over in her scramble to get away from him.

He closed his eyes and controlled himself. There were no enemies here to slay. *Just my own goddamned pride.* "Never," he told her with utter sincerity he hoped she could hear.

"I will never regret it. If you could have seen my life before you came into it, you would not ask that question."

He felt her warmth, smelled her closeness (bitter herbs and the salt of sweat and tears) before she leaned over. To touch him.

"I cause ye a fair load o’ trouble. I'll probably cause ye more before we be done."

Ulfric opened his eyes and let himself soak in the knowledge of her presence - *she has not left yet* - and allowed himself to kiss the dimple that graced Nemain’s cheek. Then, unwilling to back away, despite what was surely a curious audience, he kissed the tip of her nose and moved to trace the line of her jaw, feeling her mouth tremble as he exhaled.

He mulled over what exactly to say, next. Enjoying the way she seemed reluctant to step away. “Astrid shamed me when she implied that I have not cared for you as I should. New clothes, jewelry, symbols of your status in my court…you should not have to wear second-hand torn robes.”

Nemain laughed, a clean sound that had a crack of raw emotion streaked through it. “And Farkas said he’d help me out o’ them.”

“I confess I am glad you did not take him up on his offer.” Ulfric peered through his eyelashes at the woman. “Though I am curious as to why you thought Astrid, of all people, would be in any way qualified to replace you. Care to explain?”

Nemain seemed lost for words as his hand pulled slowly at the drawstring holding her (his! The thought was fiercely mutinous) pants aloft. “Why not? She be eminently qualified, Bear.”

“I hardly think a brothel owner would be a good fit as an advisor to a Jarl in a time of war. Unless I was desperate to boost morale.”

“You…” He watched in perplexed confusion as Nemain staggered away, choking and coughing. At least, he thought she was choking, at first. Then after it became clear that she was completely red-faced from an attempt to stave off laughter, his good mood soured into a trace of his previous angst.

“I don’t see how this is in any way funny, Nemain.”
“You wouldn’t!” She sputtered, leaning upon the carved timbers of Jorrvaskr for support as her thin shoulders shook with bridled laughter. “Hah hah hoo, oh gods, Ulfric, if only ye knew! I s’pose what Astrid does could possibly be looked upon as...hrmm...contracts for services rendered. Woo hah hah hoo!”

Waiting for her to regain control of herself, Ulfric glanced over to see the Companions talking and pointing directly towards them. *Time to be getting on.* If he strained his eyesight, Ulfric could almost see the bobbing heads of the children Aventus and Sofie being led by one of his Thanes. Raking his fingers through his hair, Ulfric bit back a yawn and thought longingly of the beds he had reserved for them at the Bannered Mare.

“As hilarious as the explanation is sure to be, let’s get moving. Your enthusiasm is attracting attention, and I haven’t had a good night’s sleep since Windhelm.”

She wiped away a tear as he took her arm in his, leading her in a fast-paced step towards the Wind District’s streets. “Hahah hah. Whatever you say, Bear. Och, wait ‘til Astrid hears this particular drap of blether. Oh gods. I cannae breathe. Woo!”

Bleakly, he watched as the citizens of Whiterun visibly pulled away from them and the tired-faced Stormcloaks marching towards the gates. There hadn’t been enough rooms at the two inns to service all of his retinue...only the top ranking thanes, generals and advisors would be getting any bed-rest this day.

Ulfric planned to make the most of it, despite the knowledge that he’d be sharing the smallest attic room with Nemain and her two orphaned charges. But like a career soldier, he knew he could probably sleep anywhere.

*So long as those two children don’t wet the bed, or kick in their sleep,* he thought maliciously. “Save your breath and stop laughing. What do you need, to bolster your magical reserves back to optimum efficiency? Is there any tonic I can get you?”

She waved the hand not currently trapped inside his elbow airily about. “Sleep be the most important thing. I just need rest, Bear, and lots of it. Vittles, too.”

“Where we are going has both in quantity if not quality. At the very least, we will be afforded some rest before returning back home.”

"Och, aye." There was a lilt of humor that nearly smacked of depression in the way Nemain spoke. As though she didn't really believe it. "Home again, tae Windhelm." She shrugged at the curious look he gave her. "Perhaps 'tis just as well this has all come up for discussion, Bear. But not now...we must be getting t'he inn and the children. Gods, I hope they are not too scairt."

They both walked quick and quietly, but he could feel the attention they were drawing. In the city, folks paid attention to those that went running. It marked them as either predator or prey, where he’d prefer to be neither.

“About Balgruuf.” He cleared his throat, for they were nearing the Plains District. The market
activity was currently at its peak, and it was unlikely either of them would be able to talk once they
descended into the thick noisome din below. “I was wrong, to imply that you were in any way at
fault for the events of last night. I do not care overmuch, regarding what Balgruuf thinks of me.
You...I do care. It's...difficult.”

She nodded, chewing at her inner lip. “Perhaps t’would be easier for ye if I did leave, Bear.”

No! Seizing his immediate reaction, Ulfric suppressed the truth of what he wanted to say with some
effort. “You...have been very helpful thus far. Of course you can leave the Stormcloaks whenever
you wish - though I’d prefer it if you would send me missives of your struggle against Alduin. I
would be honored to help in any way that I can.”

He tried again, though the words stuck like poison in his craw. “Do you have a place in mind to go?”

The Dragonborn was no longer paying any attention to him. Her focus seemed entirely targeted upon
a particular market stall, her face pinched and pale.

“-Nemain?”

Almost before he could process it - it happened so fast - the assassin struck.

He felt a pinprick; really more of a tingle as something stung his neck.

“ Wuld Na Kest! ” Nemain Shouted, her booming Thu’um propelling them both towards a cleared
edge of the marketplace. They mowed over several bystanders with their sudden blur of motion, who
screamed and cried out in exclamations of shock as Nemain’s tight grip loosened only the slightest
bit.

Doubling over, for the combination of the Shout and his exertions had addled his awareness of their
surroundings, Ulfric panted shallowly as Nemain squeezed his elbow. To reassure him, he thought
wildly. There were no beehives kept in Whiterun. In Riften perhaps, he reasoned, but not here. Not
now.

As a groggy dullness began to soften his stance, Ulfric hardly felt Nemain's small hands as they
clasped his face tightly. Forcing him to look up; to look at the Dragonborn straight in her worried
face.

“Stay here! I mean it...stay put, Bear. And doon do anything foolish!”

Foolish indeed, he thought; for as he looked up to see where Nemain had ran off to he watched in
stunned silence as a Khajiit unsheathed an arm’s length of steel and buried it deep in Nemain’s gut as
she ran by.

Sharp. Sharp steel cut swiftly. Hurt least and healed quickly, Ulfric thought in frantic fear as several
Stormcloaks apparated out of nowhere. He crumpled to his knees, still watching blankly as Nemain
jerked; as the sword bearing cat pulled the blade out and in one continuous motion began running
pell-mell for cover.

“My Jarl! What is wrong? Who attacked you!? Who!”
He could not answer, merely gesturing over to where Nemain stood: hands clutching her belly to staunch the bleeding...her hands alight in the glowing gold of a restoration spell.

There were spotted cobwebs staining the edge of his vision, now. He felt his lips going numb, and as he continued watching for as long as he could while his men sat him down upon the earth, he knew. He saw when Nemain looked up; a predatory gleam in her eye.

Creating an icicle that was as long as her leg, the Dragonborn hefted it like a javelin, took a hop-skip and threw the icy bolt.

It skewered the swift-running Khajiit dead-center upon its back, remaining lodged as the cat-man kept running for a good ten steps. Then he stumbled; staggered after a few more dazed movements, and fell.

Ulfric could no longer see anything more. *What a fan-fuckingtastic way to die,* he thought in self-deprecation. Almost, he would have preferred a clean beheading at Helgen’s chopping block, for he could feel a nearly electric current of pain coursing through him as bits and pieces of him alternately went numb and then flared up in white-hot agony. His hearing was the next to go; vowels stretching out like pulled taffy as what he could still see of his soldiers flowed beneath waves of grey, murky water.

Something stung him again, nearer to his throat this time. He coughed, feeling a leaden weight upon his chest as he struggled to maintain the rhythm of his breath.

**Painpainpain!**

-The pressure imploded like a smith’s tongs around a bar of iron. Sluggishly he fought against it, for the nausea and popping spheres of light against his retinas were disconcertingly vivid. He could not escape the pain; the agony of claws pressing down repeatedly into his sternum, and he felt a hollow wrench as his inner ears popped.

...As sound became his once more. “-Push! Pushpushpush, ye malingerin’ malcontents! I doon care if ye have tae break ribs...dinnae let his heart stop beating! Again...pushpushpush!”

A strange wetness coated his lips, and he licked them; only to hear a soft ragged gasp and find that something feather-soft was pressing down. Pushing, pulling - air that was notable only in that it tasted of desperation and fear. Ulfric felt almost nothing, but he was sure that this was significant. Somehow.

He lost his battled with the rising tide of grey as the repetitive prattle faded into obscurity. Until everything faded, all new. An enigmatic tranquility he was curious to find pained him far less than the previous fight had hurt.

Drifting, he stopped breathing.

And accepted that he had, at last, drowned.
Gaaaargh cliffhanger! *gasp*

The Gaelic Blessing Nemain gives is Saol fada agus breac-shláinte chugat, or Long life and good health to you. Dawww.
The Vow

Chapter Notes

Read the tags, people. READ THEM.

"Sorrow eats the heart, if you cannot tell someone your whole mind."

- The Havamal

Long, thin fingers. A sizzle of electricity. And that old, familiar stench...that of burning flesh.

Dear thing...I do so love it when you struggle. Dark, heat, flash of fire, crackling electricity and unwanted guilt stained pleasure, here again and coming for him though he cannot get away, nonono-

Sounds that were not the nightmare-memory made themselves known: rough and drunken singing. The plinking of a lute plucked with more enthusiasm than skill...and the cheeping mewls of smaller forms hitting the floor with heavy thunks as he thrashed about in fear.

Where? What? He hardly remembered anything before the...the...

Pushing out with all the vigor of a newborn calf, Ulfric writhed weakly against his attackers as he awakened to terrifying blindness, to a dark, hot night. “Off! - get off!” He snarled, trying to break his assailant’s hold upon his arms, but they - she - just held on tighter, strong fingers tangling in the embroidery of Ulfric’s collar, her expression gentle enough to be an actual ache.

“Hush. Hush...wherever you be a’going in yer head right now,” Nemain said, riding out the violent surge of Ulfric’s protest, “you’re no truly there any longer. Peace. Calm.”

He froze. The breath caught in his chest and his muscles clamped tight, eyes fixed on that bare bit of light streaming through the timber-planked roof of - where was he? Her last word spoken with the weight of magic soaked into him like mead, and he could actually feel his thoughts spiraling, the exhaustion and stress and struggle of his near-death picking around the edges of old wounds he’d thought had finally scabbed over…

…and yet no, clearly they had not. Perhaps they would never completely heal. But he could make himself ignore it for now. He could be reasonable. In control. Talos, he needed to be in control of himself.

He let out a long breath, muscles relaxing. Next to him, face so close he could feel each puff of breath hot against his cheeks, Nemain also started to relax. Her fists slowly unclenched, letting go of tight handfuls of Ulfric’s tunic.
“Ma?” A small, sleepy voice came out of the dark. “Is everything all right?”

“Aye, mo chroi.” Nemain replied, never taking her eyes from him as she placed her hand upon his forehead. Seemingly satisfied with what she felt, the woman turned her head...causing a sweep of her loose tangled hair to swipe across his face and chest. Making his skin itch. “Go back tae bed, dearies.”

The child yawned. “M’kay.”

He silently willed himself to lay still and not react, as two small wiggly bodies crawled over and upon his legs, invading the space of his bed. Their bed, for Nemain was still here, and he felt the cool, glass lip of a bottle against his lips as she prodded him to drink.

“Here...drink this up. Then go back tae sleep. You still be no’ outae danger, not yet.”

Ulfric did so with difficulty, for his sandpapered throat did not wish to obey him. His entire body felt as though he had been trampled by mammoths, and he wrinkled his nose as her hair tickled him again. But the potion was as sweet as wine, and he drank it all - managing to lick his lips for the last drops as she pulled the bottle away.

“Sleep.” He could feel the hitch of her breath as she slid back down into his arms, her own arms going around his neck as her hips arched and she wrapped her leg around his knee. Unable to resist her prudent command, Ulfric turned from gazing at the roof to watch what he could see of her instead. To watch the rise and fall of her back, his eyes blinking more heavily as they finally closed.

He fell asleep to the rhythm of her deep breathing...the slow play of her fingers in his hair. Her voice, humming gentle and soft, in an everwinding tune that lulled him to slumber, as the warm weights of the two children clung to his back and both his and Nemain’s legs.

And there was no longer any voice from his past to trouble him, which he was unerringly grateful for. No Elenwen to taunt him, safe as he was in this tiny, cramped attic room. Bound in the spell she had cast.

This trusting, dreamless sleep.

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

Nemain came awake in the dense heat of the inn loft, some hours after the children had crept away to eat their supper.

She rolled away from the sound of raucous laughter downstairs, halted by a heavy, musclebound arm wrapped around her waist as she tried to will herself to rest. It was late—early?—the night advanced enough to show a hint of starlight through the boards of the ancient roof above. This was the hardest time for her to relax; for if she hadn’t been pulled down into sleep thanks to sheer exhaustion by now, it was not going to come at all.


Longer hold. Out. Beneath the sound of her own breathing was the creak of the inn’s activity all around; more drunken singing and cheers as the Stormcloaks celebrated their ‘the Jarl is alive’ party,
the sound of armored boots clumping against the floor and outside upon the cobbled streets. Smells of sickness mingled with smoke and sweat...the whisper of wind against the carved eaves; the soft *whiskwhisk* of someone sweeping a broom in brisk, swift strokes.

And beneath that, beneath the sounds that should have been comforting was the slow and steady thrumming of Bear’s heart, beating in syncopated and regular rhythms. She sighed in contentment.

He lived.

*Sleep. Y’need sleep, woman, you have slept but one afternoon intae the night, and that much was broken intae snatches.*

Careful not to disturb her patient, Nemain rolled onto her back with a frustrated huff, one arm flung over her eyes. She could still feel each pulse through his arm like the strike of a hammer...and was grateful for it, even as he tightened his grasp and let out a muffled groan.

“...by the Darkness that eats all things,” she spoke with feeling while hurriedly reaching for a waterskin. “Dinnae ever scare me like that again.”

The Nord looked terrible, but not nearly so bad as he had earlier that day. His face had a sickly green cast that eased as she began waving her spell-bright hands over and around him. Those blue eyes she had despaired of ever seeing awake and aware were cracking open like slits of glass, as she finished healing the purplish-green bruises upon his chest. The worst was where she had urged his rawny general to continue pressing when she had thought all was lost; pressing until the bones of his ribs cracked.

Pushing amidst the sickening snaps...to keep his poison stilled and stopped heart continually pumping blood to the rest of his body, while she prayed to Dibe and Hircine and even Sithis for the antidote she had administered to take quick effect.

*Too close. Far too close a shave t’death, this time.* He nearly choked as she helped him sit up, to drink again. Rest and fluids, that would do it. Rubbing his back in soothing circles, Nemain ignored the spiking pain of her own mostly-healed stab wound, and concentrated on him. “How do ye feel?”

"Like a draugr rising from the tomb. Today," he murmured, "could have ended very differently." He grimaced as her hands caressed the largest bruise, which faded even as she pressed a restoration spell against it. “Where are we? How long have I been asleep?”

"The Bannered Mare, in Whiterun. You’ve been out of it fer most of the afternoon and the night. ’Tis late."

Ulfric sighed. “I take it the assassin is dead, then?”

“Mmm. Sae rude o’ him, really, resorting tae such sneaky measures of manslaughter. I’m simply glad he carried the antidote along with him. Some poisoners be not quite sae cautious.”

"Catfolk are ever inclined to treachery, though a fair fight would have had but one outcome. So... it seems he decided to solve the problem of my existence,” the Nord wearily stretched his neck, making it pop, “while it was there offending him, by the means he had at hand."

She snorted. “More like ‘at paw’.”

Ulfric’s eyes slid to her, a faint smile curling one corner of his mouth. "Good thing you were there."
A slow warmth began to unfurl in her chest, causing her to flush even in the heat. Ulfric saw it; his smile widening to brighten the blue of his eyes, and in a moment of sudden boldness Nemain leaned over and placed her forehead against his.

"You wouldae survived without me. Too stubborn tae quit, that’s you, y’lummox." He chuckled in response, his fingertips feathering over her arms...drawing patterns as they both breathed together.

Syncing their breath as she felt contentedness steal over her, a calm counterpoint to the noise erupting from below stairs.

She would not tell him that once she was satisfied that his heartbeat was stable, she had pulled the still conscious and skewered Khajiit into an unused shed - her fury making the burden light, along with the help of some of the stoically frowning fear thuaidh who bore Ulfric’s bearpaw banner.

The cat had been a professional; no notes or identifying insignia of any kind marked his leathers. She could find no trace of his employer in the bare utilitarian contents of his travel pack.

So, she sliced him open...pulling out glistening coils of his guts to divine who had sent him to kill. It had been some time since she had practiced the question-magic of haruspex, but she remembered; and whispered the invocation at the exact moment her knife made a hooked cut at the base of the curling loops, looking into the blood spatter for patterns that would tell her true.

_Thalmor_. The assassin had remained defiantly wordless until his last, agonized gasp, but his innards had divulged precisely what she wanted to know. Through it felt sae damn good, tae rip him apart...this one who stabbed me and near kilt Bear.

I wish it hadn’t.

...And the generals and thanes who had stood around in hovering bunches, to watch, had not spoken at all either; though she had been taken aback to feel their hands clapping her shoulders, gripping her hands when she left as they whispered oaths of gratitude and retribution.

Fear thuaidh. Even after all this time, I swear - I’ll ne’er completely understand what runs through their braided blonde heads.

Curling her fingers in the thick furs beneath them both, Nemain pushed herself up and away. Conscious of the quiet regard he was currently fixing her with. “Ulfric, be there anything I can fetch tae make y’more comfortable? Some food, or drink? I’ve some more potions around somewhere, if there be pain.”

He patted his chest, a gleam in his eyes that could be described as nothing but impish. “Do you have a spare heart somewhere? I’d be much obliged. This one seems to be having some issues.”

She didn’t even have a good answer to that, but the laugh it stole from her felt so good that Nemain couldn’t bring herself to care. It amazed her, truly, to think of the unlikely friendships she’d made since leaving Markarth. The bonds that went as deep as her previous _dílseacht_, or loyalties had ever managed, grasping roots finding cracks in her armor...effectively binding her to this world of Nords. This cause...and this man.

“ ‘Fraid I be fresh out o’ hearts. Daedric or otherwise. You must take care of the one y’have...you’ve only the one tae give after all, y’ken. Now that Solveig’s in the wind and Brenna be a whelp, you’ll have tae start all anew. And I willnae be helping with that.” A trace of sadness stole through her, as
she looked away. “Not anymore.”

In the dim light of the single candle, the man sitting up beside her took a long, wavering breath. And spoke. "I did. Give my heart, I mean. I did a long time ago, before I'd even realized what I had done. It's not a very good one, for it is a bit patched with scars, and old- but it belongs to you, Reachwitch. So...have it. If you like."

The words had the ring of careful practice - but Nemain heard the nervousness beneath them, felt the anxiety in the tips of his fingers as they slowed their tracery of scrawled runes on her arm. This was a simple fear to ease, made easier by the strength of her own feelings. By the heady, unfamiliar lightness of free and open affection...the raw knowledge of knowing how easily life could be taken away.

They were alive. Both of them, despite the odds. She would not think of tomorrow. Or the next day, or the day after that. There was only room for truth in this expectant lull stretching between them.

Grasping his rough hand in her own, Nemain pulled until she could press her lips to his palm; then she slid her hand over his until their interlocked fingers rested between her breasts.

Speaking quietly, Nemain whispered back, "S’alright. Mine’s been yours too, for ever sae long. So dinnae fret - I willnae go anywhere now. Truly, there be nae other place I’d rather be, than right here. With you, Bear."

Ulfric grew very, very still. Then he shifted, and without freeing himself from her grasp, he raised up his head and kissed her. There was no heat to it, no savagery, no need as their mouths pressed softly and carefully together.

Instead, it was an avowal. A promise.

She could not respond with any more words, for eloquent though she could be Nemain currently seemed to be at a loss. How could one describe feelings that ran so deep?

Nor could the delicate thing currently occupying her heart be classified, for it was too fragile to name. Instead she gently kissed him back, savoring the moment; and when Ulfric pulled away he lay down again and held her tightly against him. As though she would be torn away if he loosened his grip by even a hair.

"Well. Alright," he said, his voice quiet and low, rougher than it had been. “Good.”

She yawned, despite herself, as his warmth surrounded her.

“Mm-hmm. Alright, then.”

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They lay like that, entwined and at peace for what felt like an age. Nemain’s eyes were slowly sliding shut; then her hand came up to slide against the breadth of his chest. Without quite meaning to, her
fingers bent under the urge to touch the curve of his neck below his ear, where the skin was so very soft; and when Ulfric neither spoke nor pulled away she grew bolder...sliding her fingertips to thread into his hair.

He disrupted the carnal flow of her thoughts with a fervent whisper and shake of his head. "I did not know it then, but...being trapped with you in that rockfall was the most important thing that has ever happened to me, Nemain."

She drew in a quick, startled breath. "You be tearing my heart out with words, now. Subtle. Vicious. Be this some new strategy to wind the Dovahkiin round your fingers?"

He shook his head again. "I would never...you must know that after High Hrothgar I would have given my heart to you on a platter if you had asked." His voice spoke, low and true. "- against my better judgement, I would have done so. Though you’d have been the death of me, irregardless. The death of the man I had been."

For a moment her eyes clenched shut: as if she had stared too long at something too bright, and when at last they opened again they shone with tears. Tilting her head up, Nemain wriggled until she could kiss him properly, and then she said against his mouth. "S’pose your heart will have tae just keep beating in yer chest, then. If only to pamper me with such sweetly spun bardic bosh. Really, Bear...where did you learn such romantic shooping?"

She could feel his lips stretch in a smile, as he brushed his nose against her own. Could feel his chest hum when he growled. “From this stubborn Reachwoman I know. Who has the voice of a lark.”

Pulling her closer, he nipped at her ear...and pinched her thighs. “And the arse of a plank.”

“Augh, leggo! Ouch! You craven wooly-headed knapdarloch, geroff!”

“Shhh...quiet! You’ll bring up half the tavern with all that racket!” He cupped the nonexistent curves of her rear and jerked her tight against him, laughing quietly as her words choked off and were swallowed in the sudden realization of this...this newness that had been built brick by brick for so long, unknown.

There was hope, now. There was promise too, and purpose. A decision that once made both bound and freed her at once, come what may. Why had she waited so long to tell him how she truly felt?

Not yours, or anyones, Astrid had said. Sodding Astrid.

Happiness gave her courage. The hardness ridging against her hip made her brash, and with reckless abandon, she sank her fingers into his hair.

And felt him shudder, as she seized Bear so that he could not pull away. And gave him a hot, messy, desperate kiss.
It took all his willpower not to take advantage of Nemain right then, right there. His mind was filled with tumbling images of him pushing her up against the cold stone wall or the furs of the bed, naked; but he could not help himself as she feverishly twined her tongue into his mouth, for he reacted by dragging one of her thighs up to hook around his waist.

The thin nightgown she wore fell back, letting him slide his hand up whisper-soft skin, letting him push past her smallclothes to slide sword-rough fingers into the slick clench of her body…

Nemain’s muffled gasp was more urgent than gentle, now, and he took joy in it.

Her heel dug into the back of his knee, pulling down his already loosened pants...and when he tilted his hips to rock forward he blasphemed Shor’s body parts, for he could feel her; his hand caught and pressed between their two bodies. He could feel her need, the scalding heat of her against his hand, his cock.

Which made him peel off his pants in near-record time, reluctant as he was to remove his hands from touching her, his woman. Gods. She’d be wet. Sweet as fuck, and so goddamn ready as he imagined spreading her open with his thumbs, to drag his tongue along her folds. He wanted to taste her so badly. He wanted to feel her come apart beneath him.

Please, his blood seemed to chant with each stroke of their tongues, each panting breath. Please, please, please. And she threw back her head with a broken cry, as he circled her clit with one of his thumbs. Making him nearly lose all that tight-held control at the sight, so beautiful and real.

Not a dream, or a miserly fantasy. Real.

There was a knock at the door. “Ma?” A plaintive voice called at the door. “Are you all right?”

“Aye! Yes! Doon come in! I be fine!”

Swatting at his head, Nemain gestured wildly for him to get off and get down, as the knocking picked up even more loudly than before. “Ma! This is Aventus. I heard it too, Sofie...are you both okay in there?” And as Nemain began writhing in his grip, to stop the children before they walked right in on them, Ulfric watched as the door latch began slowly lifting. To open.

He grinned evilly. There was only one answer for such an untimely interruption.

Ducking away from his lover’s frantic battering, he kicked out his leg to stop the door and rucked up her nightdress to her neck. Sliding down, he blew a loud, flatulent noise into her stomach that was - he silently laughed as the muscles of her abdomen jerked - simply just perfect.

“Gods, do not come in here! Ugh...the smell!” He yelled, nearly being brained for his efforts by Nemain’s furious swipes. Tightening his grip upon her thighs, he gave in to his earlier desire and tore away the scrappy excuse for small clothes that she wore. Feeling her legs draw up together as she glared at him for his pains, he pressed his thumbs into her sex. Earning a small, bitten off moan along with yet another frustrated glare.

“...Must be something related to her injury!” Ulfric continued to call out, pinning the woman between his knees as she mouthed what were surely insults in retaliation. “Don’t worry, I’ll give her a sleeping potion. You go downstairs and-” Her hips were working in helpless little ruts as he continued massaging her, Talos wept, she was leaking all over his hand, “-and, shit, get some sweetrolls or something.”
Reaching over, he nearly fell off the bed as Nemain bucked and squirmed...locking the door with a relieved sigh, as one of the children behind the entryway muttered ‘ewww.’

“Oh. Okay. It just sounded like Ma was hurt. We’ll go listen to Mikael, then.”

‘Doon ye dare stop!’ Nemain hissed between her teeth, grey eyes glittering as he trailed his finger down the center of her cleft. One long, fluid line that made the woman arch her back. He said nothing, conscious of the children who were still climbing down the ladder outside their room. And when that sound ended, he listened instead to her breathing as it grew thinner and more rapid. Absorbing the delicious hushing of fabric sliding over skin, as he ripped off her nightgown and pulled it over her head, nearly falling off the bed as she gripped him in her hand.

Making his mind nearly implode into a storm of want, no, need as she stroked his length once. Twice, until he shied away before she could bring him in her hand.

“You are impossible,” Ulfric swore, as she laughed darkly. He kissed along the sharp line of her jaw, then licked back into her mouth, tongue stroking deep. He felt powerful and powerless all at once. He felt, strangely, more like his true self than he had in a very, very long time. She was the one who made that possible. She was the one who had given him this...a safety and freedom in the bedroom that had eluded him for ever so long.

...for never before had he realized that such a key component had been missing: trust.

They lay there for some time, bodies seamed together, kissing as if they had all the time in the world. His blood still boiled with need, but Ulfric found that he could ignore the urgent pressure of his body if it meant feeling her tongue dancing against his, feeling her fingers gliding into his hair, feeling her - so soft and warm. So vulnerable...this sharp, cynical woman who lay pliant and dazed beneath him, at his mercy.

Her thumb traced the raised silvery line of a scar on his cheek, her needy expression softening as she studied the many marks he’d gained.

Proof of a life well-lived. “We’ll have tae be quiet. D’ye think we can manage that?”

In answer he shifted, his erection brushed across her stomach - sliding down until he settled between her thighs as they both sucked in a sharp breath. The scalding heat of her was driving him insane... -And when he moved his hips in a sinuous roll, he smiled victoriously at the choked cry he’d wrung from the Dragonborn. “Can you?”

Something dangerous moved behind her eyes. “I can try.” And with that, she laced her legs around his waist and pushed him down, into her.

“Fuck,” Ulfric hissed, his grip on her thighs going tight. Too goddamn tight. She was tight as a fist; wet and perfect, and he knew at this rate he wasn’t going to last very long. Rocking back, he thrust forward again, again, falling into a slowly building rhythm. Starlight framed her dark hair, casting shadows that shivered across her face. He watched, meeting each of her needy thrusts with a growing heat, hands mapping her body as he committed her to memory.

And then he buckled over her as the pleasure built, his arms taking the bulk of his weight so he would not crush her as his hips fell into a more frantic rhythm. She sobbed in a breath when his cock slid out of her, then back in, rubbing along the desperate throb of her clit. Again, again, Ulfric angling his hips to make it good - to make her come below him. He couldn’t take his eyes off her - didn’t want to ever look away - as he took a hard grip upon the back of her neck, feeling her chest,
her bouncing breasts, her body as it tightened more and more about the endless ache of his cock, needing, needing…

Yes, he thought, reaching blindly between their seeking bodies and dragging his fingers along where they met. He dipped inside, eyes locked with hers, and circled her center of pleasure once, twice, three times - sucking in a breath when her grey eyes flew wide and she came around him.

Nemain gave a shattered cry; a cry he barely managed to muffle with one his hands, gods he was laughing - he never wanted this to end, for he never knew...never thought it could be like this - but it was too much, too good as her body clenched and fluttered around him. He growled and caught at her waist, rearing up and lifting them both until they were sitting up against the wall, their bodies still connected as she writhed and came. He cupped the back of her skull, fingers of his other hand still rubbing quick and hard circles against her clit, driving her higher and higher even as he thrust deep into the too-tight clench of her.

He was so close. So close.

Ulfric had her wrapped around him like a torque, the curve of her spine pressed tight against the headboard, her hips still jittering as he rose on his knees and drove deep into her body. Nemain cried out against his neck, her heels digging into his skin even as her nails raked across his shoulders. “Bear...ugh, gods....shhh! They’ll hear us!”

In answer to that, he began thrusting even harder, so that Nemain’s head began slamming against the headboard of the bed, for he couldn’t stop. Not even as she started screaming something in that rasping brogue of hers that sounded absolutely fucking delicious.

The feel of her coming around him was goddamn incredible, the aftershocks of her orgasm driving him into a frenzy.

He pressed in to capture her when his own orgasm hit, crying out against her lips with the force of it. It flashed through him like a lightning chain, sparks lighting him up from the inside as he came hard - hips slamming into hers again and again, hot and slippery where their bodies met.

It was, it was...just, Talos, it was so good. Everything, everything he’d not known he wanted; she was everything...down to the nails scoring his back now, marking him as her own. Branding him with the heat of her body and her smile and those clever, piercing eyes.

Don’t ever leave me, he thought...pushing out his thoughts as though he could will her to hear them, and then he dropped his forehead against the curve of her neck. Breathing through the shaking aftershocks.

Faintly, he could hear her gasping for breath. Shit ...he’d forgotten in the ferocity of her lovemaking that his woman was nearly half his size. Ulfric rolled his weight off of her, drawing her with him in his arms. And there they lay, nearly drugged in a haze of pleasantly burning warmth and sticky fluids.

He smiled, his face hurting from so many smiles as he heard the unmistakeable sounds of cheering rising up from the downstairs tavern. Dimly he could make out someone making a toast, along with a few whistles and catcalls.

“Next time, I’m blaming you, ye stook.” Nemain grumbled, her sweaty limbs locking tight around him as he pulled out the furs and blankets from where they had tangled beneath them both. “Aye, you can be th’ one tae break wind, and I’ll scoff and laugh with the bairns at the poor damn fool who cannae hold his jibs.”
The laxness of his limbs felt nearly boneless. In fact Ulfric had a hard time remembering the last time he had felt so relaxed. “I had to figure some way to get them to leave.”

Nemain pressed her face into his chest. “Welp. It worked, I’ll give y’that. Cor, this room reeks o’ sex. Here...open one of the shutters...up a’t here by the roof.”

It did smell. Anyone who entered the attic room would know immediately what they had just been up to, if the noise they had been making had not clued anyone in the immediate vicinity in. But he was loathe to move...or do anything, really, but lay here abed. The longer he stayed in repose, the more swiftly he realized that he had just spent whatever gains had been made by his hours of rest and healing.

He couldn’t think of a better use for such health, however. He regretted it not a bit. “Mmph. Too tired to open shutters. Besides - I nearly died today, woman. If that doesn’t earn me some right to relax, I don’t know what will.”

“It’s not as though my men did not already think we were sleeping together,” he added as Nemain made an aggrieved noise. “Shhh. Rest, if you can.”

“Y’keep doing that, and neither of us will be gettin’ any rest,” she muttered, trembling as his hand crept down the flat expanse of her stomach...trailing down to the softness and warmth below.

“I’m not tired.” And he would never tire of this. It was a shame there were not more inns along the road home to Windhelm. Though his imagination then furnished for him some very pleasant images: Nemain in the sauna, wrapped in a sheer towel. Nemain in his bed. Nemain wrapped around him upon the roof -a recurring fantasy ever since they had begun lessons there. Nemain astride his lap, bouncing with her hair loose as he sat upon Ysgramor’s throne...

And that last image sent heat prickling all the way through him, until he was covered anew with a sheen of sweat. He winced in embarrassment. Of all the god damned triggering thoughts to have.

“...Liar. Yer shakin’ like a leaf, Bear.”

She shook his head, denying the truth even as he yawned widely. “Time enough to rest in the grave.”

“-Stop it.” She flicked him in the nipple, which actually hurt. “Y’need rest almost as much as I do. Ugh...I think I shall nae be able tae walk or ride, tomorrow. Doon plan on makin’ me hobble all the rest of the way tae Windhelm, do ye?”

He laughed fondly. “I would carry you on my back.”

“Psshh. Yer men would poke such fun. Tis not in fashion, y’ken, for men tae care for their mistresses.”

At those words, he rolled them both until they were facing one another, on their sides. “I am not a follower of fashion,” he replied softly.

Watching as a trace of pain came and went behind her eyes, Ulfric lifted his hand and pushed back a damp tendril of her hair. “…and you are no mistress, Nemain. Nothing so light as that. By my sword and my God, this I vow.”

Lifting his amulet of Talos, he kissed it; keeping his gaze directly focused upon Nemain who was paling even as he continued to speak. “I will love none but you for the rest of my days, however long they may be. Truly, I pity whatever wife I eventually must marry. For she will have nothing of my
“I hope this vow doesnae come t’give you grief in the coming years,” Nemain whispered back. “I’ve been in love before, Bear. Tis not always a constant, eternal thing. Do not make a promise ye cannnae keep...or ye’ll end up as Forsworn as my people have been. Particularly with such a promise tha t’will land ye in hot water with yer people, that indeed already has in mair than one occasion.”

Pulling her closer to him, she came willingly as he rested his chin upon the top of her head. “What can I say?” he slowly spoke aloud. Kissing the top of her head, he felt her tension slowly ease as he continued to stroke her back in long, measured passes.

“...I am, after all, a rebel. I am in no hurry to wed. And I think you’ll agree the last few women that were sent to me as brides were entirely unsuitable. It’s not my fault if all the marriageable ladies my thanes keep sending me are not up to the task.”

He felt her huff against his neck. “Right. Like they’ll no be hounding ye day and night tae take a bride...particularly when y’become High King.”

Thinking it oddly strange and yet reassuring that she viewed his success as inevitable, Ulfric shyly cleared his throat. “Hmph. Well...perhaps you could be persuaded to adopt a half Nord, half Breton baby in the near distant future.”

The breath that was currently tickling his chest hair stopped entirely. “What?”

“...out of the charity Mara has blessed you with, of course.” The sweat upon her back had dried by now, and his hands slid against it like silk. “Since you seem so keen to take on every beggar and foundling you come across. Perhaps you should try your luck with an infant of your own.”

She continued to lay still in what he thought was shock, as he made his voice calm. Conversational, even. “-you seemed so at peace with Iona. But, if the idea isn’t to your liking...”

He nearly swallowed his tongue, coughing as Nemain gripped him in a fiercely tight, controlled hug. “Bear-”

“Yes.” Ulfric responded to whatever had made her voice stretch so tightly. “I do want that with you, and more.”

The Dragonborn was practically shaking apart around him, and he wrapped a leg around her knees. Tucking her more thoroughly against him, as he listened to her express her fears. The warmth within him growing as he realized she was no longer talking about leaving, anymore. For she was using words like ‘we’ and ‘us’, and he breathed a ragged sigh of contentment as she kept talking, always with the talking.

“...I dinnae know what the future will hold, a rúnsearc. Could be that we both lay dead tomorrow, or in a month. You in your war, and me in this ferlaghin’ struggle tae find Alduin and somehow do him in. T’bring a child intae that...I must think upon it.”

He hummed in thought, thinking about how best to address her fears without invalidating her concerns. “Death comes for us all at some point. Yet while I am alive, I intend to live as fully as I am able, and bring to pass a new age of peace and prosperity for those I am accountable to.”

There arose a companionable silence as both thought long about what the other had said. He continued to stroke her back, pulling his hand through the long strands of her hair. Slowly snaking his fingers through the dense thickness of it, until he reached her head.
She made a little squeak as he scritched the back of her scalp. “What does a rúnsearc mean? You have used it before.”

“Ah...ooh! Right there!” Nemain shifted beneath his hand, placing his fingers at the base of her skull. He kept rubbing, waiting for her to answer as she made little sounds of pleasure at his touch.

“Mmph... a rúnsearc means ‘my secret love.’ Or ‘Beloved,’ though tis not commonly used.”

“Huh. I like it.” Feeling the familiar drag of lethargy come back upon him, Ulfric yawned again. “A rúnsearc.”

Nemain giggled. “For all y’know, I could ha’ called ye ‘shit-fer-brains’ and you’d be none the wiser.”

Blinking, he looked down his nose at the smiling woman in his arms. “I think you’d probably carry a different inflection in your voice if you were constantly calling me ‘shit-for-brains’ when we were intimate. At least, I hope so.”

Laughing together, they continued talking and touching...their words becoming more scattered as the yawns became more prevalent. Until sleep found them entwined together, as Ulfric kissed the Dragonborn’s head one last time...her face soft with slumber.

And prayed for this feeling that he held -like a rare gift, priceless beyond measure- to never, ever depart.
The Fall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The times are nightfall, look, their light grows less;
   The times are winter, watch, a world undone:
They waste, they wither worse; they as they run
   Or bring more or more blazon man’s distress.
And I not help. Nor word now of success:
All is from wreck, here, there, to rescue one—
   Work which to see scarce so much as begun
Makes welcome death, does dear forgetfulness.
Or what is else? There is your world within.
   There rid the dragons, root out there the sin.
Your will is law in that small commonweal…

-Written by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The beast snapped and snarled, revolving in agitated circles around her tree.

Sofie dug in her heels, scooching even further up the trunk as her fingers bit into the bark. All she had wanted to do was pee without any Stormcloaks looking her way...she hadn’t meant to walk so far away from the group! Holding tightly, the Nord girl whimpered as she tried desperately to fight the urge to freeze, willing herself to move.

To fight. To do anything but cling to the tree like a milk drinking baby.

But now it seemed her shame was going public, whether she wanted it to or not. Ma had found Sofie’s hiding spot...no surprise, since she’d been hovering over her, the Jarl and Aventus ever since they’d left Whiterun a few days back.

The Breton’s voice was a rough rasp. “And what be y’doing all the way up a’there, lass?”
Getting a better grip on the tree limb, Sofie had to clear her throat a few times before managing an answer. “W-wolf! W-watch out, Ma!”

The animal in question seemed completely focused on her. And Ma - wherever she was - certainly didn't sound scared. If anything she sounded as though she was trying not to laugh. “Well, are ye a mage or aren't ye? Fry the bastard!”

“R-right! Okay!” Sofie yelled, working up the nerve to release one of her hands from the tree in order to aim a spell. Not having had the chance to practice much of the school of Destruction (there were only so many skeevers to zap in the Grey Quarter, and in the scrupulously clean kitchens and pantries of the Palace of Kings there were none at all) she felt unprepared, but Sofie knew that tone of voice.

It was the “This is for your own good, lass” tone of voice. The “Yer nay growin’ any younger!” voice, that Sofie both despised and adored. It was, she thought crossly as her left foot slipped, both her bane and an unlooked for boon, to have someone who cared so much that they nag, nag nagged to the point of being obnoxious.

It wasn’t like she was helpless. She could have helped with the vampires back in Dragonsreach, had she not been stuck with the younger children. Stinky snotsuckers. She had spent the night listening to them cry, filching treats from their greedy hands and drinking horrible watered down ale in the kitchen...ugh. At least Dagny had let her play with her pretty doll for a while before snatching it back. The doll had a silver embroidered silk skirt and sapphire chips sewn in for eyes. Silver and gems! For a doll!

Earning a branch in the face for her effort to readjust her position, Sofie grunted as her foot slipped from its precarious perch. She might not have been able to fight well...or accomplish anything save becoming a snack for the undead, Ma had said pointedly again and again...but she itched to do something. Anything really; anything that would bring her the attention and respect her foster brother seemed to garner by doggedly following the warriors in all things.

*It isn’t fair that my magic is more improved by reading than showing off,* she thought viciously as the wolf continued to growl and circle. Maybe now that Ma was back from her travels she’d teach Sofie a thing or two. Something amazing...something to scare people and make them look at her the same way the Stormcloaks looked at her brother.

Her fireball hit the wolf straight and true. A horrible yipping sounded as the smell of burnt fur clogged her nostrils, and Sofie nearly retched at the smell as she threw another fireball, and then another. And another, until the animal wasn’t moving - or making that awful noise anymore.

Ma’s voice sounded nearer, now. Droll with wry amusement. “Grand, Sofie, verrah grand. Y’killed a wolf sae elderly an’ infirm that he doesnae have hardly any teeth left. Get you down from there and we’ll talk.”

Sliding down from the tree, Sofie’s knees quivered and nearly collapsed beneath her. A big hand caught her just in time; a hand attached to the Jarl of Windhelm who smiled kindly at her. Setting her on her feet, the scarred Nord (whom she often fancied looked more like a pirate than Ysgramor, as folk in Windhelm were fond of saying) peered over at the dead wolf. “Now what is going on over here?”

Ma folded her arms, sniffing. “An object lesson. Cannae keep you mewed up under guard all yer life, lass. Ye did well, killing the wolf but that be not the end of it. Get out yer knife.” She arched her
brow. “Y’are carrying a knife, aren’t ye?”

“Yes. You remind me to wear it every day. Why do I need it now?”

“Tis for good reason. Best way t’learn tae do things be to do them yerself. And so...I have noticed,” Ma continued, “that ye like tae eat meat.”

Sofie shuffled, irritation plain in her voice as the Jarl held back a cough. He was laughing…the Jarl of Eastmarch was laughing at her.

She could die. “So what, Ma?”

Nemain clicked her tongue as Aventus showed up to stand next to the Jarl...making a face as the stink of burnt fur and acrid blood wafted his way. Sofie was close to gagging herself.

“So. Tis only respectful since ye took the beast’s life tae make proper use of all its parts. Ye were in the right tae slay the wolf - it t’would hae eaten ye otherwise. But needless death be a great stain upon the soul. This wolf’s spirit will rest easier if it sees that its slayer was properly thankful fer the sacrifice of its death. Here.”

Ma beckoned Sofie over. She trudged forward unwillingly, dragging her boots. “...Pull out yer knife, girl, an’ we’ll butcher the beast together. Yer old enough tae learn. Best not to let anything go tae waste, though the meat is likely tae be tougher than scales t’chew.”

"C’mom. Cut open the middle of the stomach an’ we’ll begin."

“T’will make a fine supper.” Ma nodded approvingly as Sofie awkwardly sliced down the middle of the wolf’s thinly pelted stomach. A puff of rancid warm odor clogged the already muggy summer air. Aventus took a step back, disgust plain on his face as the Jarl continued to watch them all, chuckling as Sofie grumbled in pursuit of her task.

“Naught better than wolf liver n’ onions, for all that yer mighty foe be more ancient than the inn of Auld Hroldan. Care t’stay and help out, Aventus? Bear?”

Ma lazily gestured to the wolf carcass, which was growing smellier and uglier the longer Sophie hacked at it. “Give ye the best bits, if y’linger. First dibs and all. We’re nae greedy.”

Jarl Stormcloak raised his bushy eyebrows, though Sofie thought she could detect a twinkle in his eyes. “Hmph. Think I’ll pass...no offense, but that cur looks as though it holds more worms in its innards than meat. We’re camping here by the river for the night...expect I’ll go fishing for my supper. You coming, Aventus?”

“Yes,” Aventus said fervently. “I’ll take fish anyday over old moldy wolf.”

“Fine, fine. Go on and fish, y’louts. Y’doon ken what yer missing.” Waving them off, Sophie caught Ma blushing as the Jarl mouthed something silently. She nearly sliced her finger open, trying to figure out the unspoken message she could fairly feel zinging back and forth between the two adults. But the Jarl must have noticed her watching, because he turned to her and winked slyly. “Good luck with your wolf, Sofie. Don’t bother saving any for us.”
Ma pursed her lips, though Sofie could tell she wasn’t upset. “Y’sure ye dinnae have more important things tae accomplish than fishing with Aventus, Milord? Such as that meeting tae discuss tactics with yer general? Aboot that thing we discussed earlier?”

The Jarl shrugged, his smile never faltering. “Planning tactics will keep for an hour or so. I’m not worried. Now Aventus, do you know which saplings make the best fishing rods?” Resting back on her heels, Sofie watched as Aventus and the Jarl began walking down to the riverbank, testing the flexible give of different branches as they walked on.

Her adopted brother’s voice was confident, becoming more faint as they disappeared from her view. “Willow is good for fishing poles, and so is aspen. A greener branch will bend where others will break-”

“Sofie!” Ma’s abrupt call made her jump, causing her knife to nearly raze the gutsack containing the wolf’s fecal leavings. Mentally she thanked Shor and Kyne that she had not ruptured the intestines...one of the Stormcloak hunters had made such a mistake the other night. Half the meat had been ruined by the ensuing burst of gases and...yuck, fouler things.

“Dinnae dawdle - dress that meat and haul a bucket o’ water fer the broth and the washing o’ the heart and liver. We be pressed for time tae hunt wild ransoms an’ elves ear tae cook this beastie with, and I'll no raise any daughter o’ mine tae be a poor cook. Stir yer stumps!”

*Gods, she is so bossy! But at least you have a Ma to boss you, now,* a little voice in her head chided her. Better. It was better to be nagged than to be starving and cold and alone, picking flowers from the fields with wind chilled hands to sell. To eat, petal by petal when the selling brought in not even enough for a bowl of thin soup at Candlehearth Hall and the scraps in the wastebins were frozen solid or too rotten to swallow down.

She knew she was still pouting as she carved, cut and dressed the wolf under Ma’s exacting tutelage. Much good it did her, for Ma never gave an inch when she was convinced that Sofie needed to learn a lesson. Another thing to hate and love about her new Ma.

But later that night, as Sofie tucked into her stew she had to agree that all that hard work had been worth it. There was an abundance of ransoms - wild green onion bulbs that had gone into the stew, along with some chunks of fleshy gourd and a peppery green riverweed that Ma had called watercress. The meat was truly as tough as Ma had warned, but she was starved enough not to care. The other warriors seemed to favor it as well, as the stew rapidly disappeared into the bowls of the Stormcloak soldiers, leaving not a drop left over.

Seeing the warriors downing her stew gave Sofie a warm burn of pleasure that might have been pride. Hunger truly was the best spice, like Ma said, and the woman herself had given Sofie a tight hug as spoons clicked against bowls, the sounds of slurping a wet accompaniment to the crackle of the fire.

“A fine job you did, darling. You kilt your terrifying wolf and cooked it intae nourishment for others - that be one step closer to self sufficiency, m’dear. A valuable skill...grand work indeed.”

One of the generals had nudged Sofie then. “This your cooking, little wench? Should have known...hope this swill doesn’t split me guts later.”

Another soldier laughed. “Like an old woman’s purse! Remember last Frostfall? The clam chowder that had gone off, but you scoffed the whole lot anyhow? Hahah...you can shovel up the next privy
if you catch the ploughing squirts like that again, Hrothmund!"

Ma had planted her hands upon her hips, giving the general her best set-down stare. “The only gut-wrench ye’ll experience t’will be from yer own foul attempts at vittles, ye muckly reprobate. Doon listen tae this lot, Sofie...they gladly eat skeevers. Skeevers. And they doona even cook ’em properly - dontcha ken that staking meat o’er the fire makes it dry an’ tasteless? All the fat n’ drippings run off intae the flames...wasted.”

Hrothmund had turned an oily shade of puce, shaking his head in surrender as Ma poked him and the other men laughed long and hard. “Serves y’right for bothering the girl aboot her first stew. It shall be healthier by far than any of your troll-dung tossings. Now eat up and shut up.”

“Remember the Khajiit, you sod!” Another Nord called out, as Hrothmund peevishly ladled his serving of stew into a bowl. “Don’t cross the Reachwitch, or your next meal will be your last, hahaha!”

“That be the Jarl’s Reachwitch to ye, Sinmir y’huddy lout. Now, shut yer gob and eat yer stew. I’ll look over that sore tooth you’ve been olagonin’ aboot later.”

Thinking very hard about the lessons Ma had drilled into her that day about butchering and cooking, Sofie nearly burnt her fingers trying to grab chunks of salmon from the plate Jarl Ulfric offered her. Juggling bits of flaky fish and melted cheese-on-toast, she blew on her hands and chewed furiously as some of the Stormcloaks struck up a song.

The singer - a blonde dreadlocked Nord with a voice like a bassy growl - continued belting out his tune as another warrior pulled out a drum. Another lifted a flute from his pack, and soon the small fireside camp took on a festive air. “…with three beers down, the Orc did frown, and bid the Elf goodbye…”

Aventus sat by her, carving what he proudly announced would be a spoon from a stick of pine. Sofie thought it looked more like a spindly plank than a spoon, but she said nothing. She was too tired - her belly almost painfully swollen with food to bother provoking a fight. If he said it was a spoon and not a hound’s chew toy, then it was a spoon. If he asked her tomorrow, she’d tell him it looked like a backscratcher.

She sat, poking a stick into the flames...stirring up sparks and listening as the Stormcloak was joined in song by at least four or five others, creating a chorus that swelled the night air with music. “…for none could know, ’twas not for show, and someone had to die…”

Across from them on the other side of the fire, Jarl Ulfric puffed away on his pipe, looking content. Ma sat next to him on the log, a rare smile appearing on her face as the Jarl reached out and wrapped his arm around her waist. Pulling her even closer to him, as she whispered something in his ear that made him laugh quietly. She shuddered. Ew, gross.

Blinking away her sleepiness, Sofie watched as bits of leaf fell from Ma’s hair down to the ground as the Jarl’s fingers absentmindedly stroked through her hair. Where had those come from? They hadn’t been there before Ma had been pulled off task; leaving Sofie alone to stir and tend to the cookpot as Jarl Ulfric dragged her away on some errand that apparently couldn’t wait.

Sofie wrinkled her nose...what was it the Jarl had said? Something about Ma riding below the crupper and red sleeves. Houghmagandy? Though how that gibberish had led to Ma getting mashed leaves and dirt in her hair, she couldn’t have guessed. Aventus just laughed when she asked him
what scrogging was, because that’s what Yrsarald (the redheaded general who always kept treats in his pockets for her) said Ma was doing when Sofie asked oh-so nicely.

Picking at her burnt fingertips, Sofie sulked. Surely it wasn’t her fault if she couldn’t understand half of what adults talked about.

Grown ups were so weird, sometimes.

“Sofie, where be that bucket from earlier?”

She nearly cracked her jaw as she yawned. “Umm...I think I left it by the river.”

“No no! I’ll go and get it!” Sofie hopped up from her spot by the fire. She knew Ma would make good on her threat - the one time she had sassed Ma after spilling a bottle of potion, her foster mother had spent an entire afternoon tediously teaching her how to brew a smelly replacement from scratch, up on Wuunferth’s alchemy table in the Palace.

No way she was wasting another night on some stupid craft project. She had learned her lesson...no backtalk. And no assuming that things idly misplaced or broken would be easily replaceable. “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t wander too far.” Twin streams of smoke curled from the Jarl’s nostrils, mixing the sweetish scent of skooma with the wood tang of the fire. His voice was a gravelly burr. “Stay by the river, where our sentries are. Trust me - it’s much harder to climb trees in the dark.”

Some of the Stormcloaks snickered as Sofie sighed - she was never going to live that one down. Never. “Okaay, I’ll be careful. Sheesh.”

She picked her way through the wagons and bedrolls just as a new song started up, even more men joining vigorously in as someone began plucking a very flatly tuned lute. “...once was a woman, as fair as an evenin’, of springtime in old Stros M’Kai..."

Their song was soon drowned by the chirping of crickets, and soon Sofie could hear nothing but the hushing rush of the river and the throaty croaking of toads. The moons Masser and Secunda were bright enough that she had little trouble finding her way on the path, though finding the bucket amidst the black shapeless forms of the bushes took her much longer than she had planned.

Picking up the bucket, she banged it against her shin in her eagerness to get back to the camp. Though it was plenty warm, the night had an oddly tense presence to it. Sofie had an eerie feeling that persisted, even as she briskly walked back to the path...a subtle sense that she did not belong here. That something was not quite right.

And when the bushes near the river rustled, she couldn’t help but emit a high, squeaky shriek. Flinging the bucket back into the darkness, she jumped at the sight of black skeever-bright eyes glittering. Staring right at her, as fingers of shadow stole across the moonlit ground, seeking, finding her... “Aauugh!”

A voice even harsher than the toadsong floated out of the bulrushes. She could spy the speaker just barely, for the hooded bulk had stirred up the midges and dragonflies, creating a cloud that brushed
past Sofie’s ears as she hyperventilated. “Settle ye doon there, wee lamb. Settle ye - tis naught but an auld crone stuck tight near yon stream. Prithee come ‘here, aye?”

Her heart began to slow down from the frantic hammering of her earlier shock. It was nothing but an old lady - from the sound of it, another Forsworn like Nemain.

Like Ma - nothing to fear you big baby, she told herself crossly as she cast a forlorn glance at where the bucket had disappeared to.

The undergrowth rustled once again. “P’raps the young Nordling wouldnae mind helping meself outae this bind. I seem tae have caught me pin on a snare, and cannnae break free.”

The familiar accent was soothing. Fixing in her mind where the bucket lay, Sofie pulled out her knife from its sheath and parted the rushes, finally reaching the one who called for her help.

When she came to face the woman on the riverbank, Sofie blinked in surprise. This had to be the oldest, ugliest lady she had ever seen. Her eyes were black as pitch, beady and shining - completely absent of any hairs that might have furnished a set of eyebrows or even eyelashes. What she could see of the crone’s face from her heavy hood was twisted and pitted with wrinkles and liver spots; the hooked nose curving almost to meet the warty, hair studded chin.

A long-fingered hand waved her forward. “Come nearer, lass. Please...cut me bindings, and I’ll give ye a boon in return. Lassies like treats, aye? Come! Come nearer!”

Licking her lips nervously, Sofie edged closer along the muddy ground to where the woman had stuck out her ankle. The old lady had enormous feet - twice as long as Ma’s, and covered in what looked like oilcloth wrapped in twine; with a wire rabbit snare twisted tightly around the knobby joint above her heel.

Trying not to gawk, Sofie censured herself as she placed the sharp tip of her knife against the crone’s mottled skin and carefully cut away the snare-wire. Don’t stare - it’s rude. Maybe she is sick with something. Her stomach jumped as the old woman cooed, almost a birdlike wisp of breath. The woman’s breath smelt awful. Ate something bad, most likely. Phfew.

The woman’s breath smelled like...like something had died, rotting in her mouth. Sofie pressed her lips together and willed her nostrils to ignore the stench, determined to be nice to the poor old woman who reeked like a dungheap. Perhaps she had lost control of her bowels...I’ve heard that happens to some of the elderly. “Are you all alone out here, lady? Here...I’ve got the wire off your foot now. I hope you can walk to wherever your home is. Is there someone I can call for, to help you return?”

The black robe shifted, and Sofie fell on her butt gracelessly in the mud as the old woman grinned. She had very yellow teeth - sharp and plentiful for such an old hag. “Me son awaits me nae very far from here. You’re sae thoughtful, wee lass - might I give ye a treat fer yer efforts tae free me? Compensation be only fair, after all.” A long tongue bumped along the old woman’s wrinkly lips. “I do have a soft spot for bairns such as ye.”

“I guess so, sure.” Sofie whispered.

Still sitting in the mud, the Nord girl watched with slowly widening eyes as the old woman drew out the shiniest, reddest apple she had ever seen. It was nearly the size of a melon!

“Here, m’dear. An apple. For ye.”
Sofie reached out with a single finger to touch the apple. It almost gleamed by itself in the starlight, without a single spot or blemish. It was so very red.

-And too pretty. No way could she eat it - gosh, her stomach was already curling up into knots and something in her brain was prodding, pushing her away as she slid on her rump in the mud. Further from the old woman, almost into the water. “I couldn’t possibly. You eat it...I’ve already had s-supper.”

The woman laughed, a screeching sound that bore the barest edge of malice. “What? A lass refusin’ a plump bit o’ fruit sich as this? ‘Tis a rare, special apple, this ‘un. Gives ye sweet dreams. Aye, and beauty fair. Ye’ll ne’er grow auld or want fer anythin’ agin.” The woman’s clawed fingers caressed the apple. “I’m of a mind tae eat it meself, but I promised ye dearie. Tis yours. Fer being sae kind, sae caring of an auld one sich as I.”

Before she knew it Sofie was holding the beautiful apple in her hands. Staring at it, she found herself swallowing back saliva - it looked so good. And if the lady wasn’t going to eat it, then...

“You said it gives you good dreams? Is it a magic apple?”

Black robes fluttered around her - the woman had somehow circled around Sofie, and she coughed on the ripe miasma of her old lady breath and the musty aura of mold gusting from her robes. Which prompted Sofie to lift up the apple...to take in another sniff of its freshly tart scent.

Not even Hatti and Skjora’s apple pies back in Windhelm had smelled this appetizing.

“...Aye, tis magic dearie. Magic that t’will keep ye from aging. Magic tha’ll give ye the most wunnerful dreams ye’ll e’er desire. I know what be best, dearie, sae take a bite. Eat it all up. Eat!”

Brushing her niggling fears aside, Sofie opened her mouth and took her first mouthful. The juice was like sunshine on her tongue. Delicious! Crunching into it a second time, a strange lassitude took hold of her, rippling like a warm woolen blanket over her thoughts as a voice called out in the distance.

“...Sofie? Sofie where are ye! Sofie answer me!”

She tried to call out to Ma, to tell her where she was. That she was here - by the river with the kindly old lady she had saved, but somehow her lips were tingling. Numb. They would not shape words, and as her last bite caught in her throat the apple fell from her hands...rolled and disappeared with a wet shploopp into the water.

A strange rush of cool blue light surrounded her, and she felt an aching pull that sharpened unexpected into an acute agony. Ma’s voice was nearer now; the old woman’s mashed face rising up to fill her vision...her wrinkled mouth set in an oddly triumphant smile as the thready pulling stole Sofie’s breath away. Stole her thoughts, all energy from her twitching limbs, the old woman’s face smoothing and plumping like a dried flower wilting in reverse even as she stared in frozen awe.

Bathed in blue light, Sofie watched in a sort of stupor as the old woman whom she had thought was the ugliest woman in Tamriel became the loveliest woman she had ever seen in her life. The kind of beauty Sofie would have been hotly jealous of; had she spied her in the market or on the road passing by, except that the black hood had fallen back by now and behind the woman’s head two feathery wings unfurled.
Wings that were blacker than a spill of ink, blotting out the aurora’s haze...*what in Kyne’s name was going on*?! …

Sharp spikes of pain drilled into her skull. She would have cried out, would have screamed but the apple lay lodged in her throat. So sweet, still...the juice trickling like a cool icicle melting into her belly until Sofie lay on her back in the mud, still and cold. Staring up at the stars as they slowly winked out beneath a creeping mist of grey, even though her eyes were wide open.

Stars. Pretty, pretty stars that became a roaring, a rush and then -

Nothing.

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It had all happened so fast.

Nemain had begun to fidget as night wended on, listening with increasing irritation as the Nord drinking songs became even more bawdy and slurred. Bear was practically asleep...leaning heavily against her side, dozing as his pipe slipped from his fingers.

*Small wonder he was so damn tired,* she thought in smug satisfaction. They both were acting more akin to giddy, lustful youth than respectable Hold leaders. Over the last four days of travel down the southern loop towards Falkreath, they had managed to find numerous bits and snatches of time to be together. To quench the new and intense longing they shared, to be one in body as they were now in heart.

It was no simple matter. Making time for intimacy, finding places where they would not be disturbed was a right chore -she had the scratches and tickbites to prove that having sweaty, vigorous sex in the forest was not all starshine and rainbows- but Nemain could not help but smile for the joy of it.

Her grin stretched as she recalled just how lusciously sinful it had felt, being hammered tits over ass like a sword upon an anvil earlier that afternoon. Feeling Bear’s heated breath tickle her neck, the cadence of it catching - stopping almost completely as her lover lost his grip of all that hard-won control and nearly Shouted the cliff next to them into a crumbling landslide.

Which would have been funny, albeit disastrous to the safety of their Stormcloak comrades. Nemain sighed. Though none of the battle hardened fear thuaidh seemed to bat an eyelash at the public displays of affection their Jarl was lavishly heaping upon the Dragonborn, she was certain that their tolerance would only extend so far.

Nemain’s shoulders slumped. They simply would have to be more circumspect, more careful once they reached Windhelm.

Straightening her skirt primly, she felt another blush boil beneath her skin as Ulfric’s big hand squeezed the curve of her waist. Almost, the pressure of his palm banished the stress of all her musings upon the future. On finding and ending Alduin, the status of the Reach, the bloody war...even the pain of the blisters she had gained from being tupped bare-arsed against a tree trunk
yesterday faded in lieu of the comfort she found in Bear’s arms.

*Gods, I hope the spot we chose today didnae have any ticks. I was picking the little bodgers out o’ me legs and arsecheeks fer what felt like hours yesterday.*

After scrutinizing the movement of the stars to verify that yes, Sofie had been gone an inordinately long length of time, Nemain had pecked Bear’s cheek with her lips, wriggled free and ordered him mock-sternly off to rest in bed. Earning a lazy smile and a lingering kiss in return, she watched with wistful longing as he stretched and walked off towards the dark huddled mass that bore the camp collection of tents and bedrolls.

Nothing for it. Before she could join him, Nemain would have to find - and drag - her errant foster daughter back to camp from wherever the girl was undoubtedly dithering. Likely daydreaming and getting into trouble. Again.

Standing, she had then prodded Aventus (who was listening avidly, wide awake as the generals began describing apple dumpling breasts and even wetter, dripping tartlike quims that they’d like to eat, *Sweet Dibe* did they not notice that there were children here!?) to follow her into the night. To find Sofie, who had taken far longer than she ought to have, fetching a mere bucket from the river a few minutes walk down from the camp.

Her first clue that all was not as it should be was the lack of a Stormcloak sentry guarding the path. The footsteps that patterned the muddy patches of cobbled road were erratic, mixed with the twin-crescent stamping of some deer or other split-hooved beast.

She took hope in the obvious lack of any circular hoofprints, for that would have signified a mounted rider - a tangible threat. And there were no other tracks save that of the deer and the Nord’s broad bootprints, wandering into the wilds. Sofie’s tracks were smaller, softer - muted by the moss and grass the girl favored stepping upon instead of the muddy road. Her steps quickened after that discovery, and Aventus joined his voice with hers; calling out every so often. Ever calling out for Sofie to answer and return.

A terror had gripped her upon finally spying the girl who lay so calmly, half submerged beneath the river shallows. Even from here, roughly twenty paces away, Nemain could see the ravaging effect of the spell that the hooded mage standing nearby had used.

For the girl...her Sofie resembled a withered reed whose marrow had been sucked dry. Her lips had shrunk back, pulling away to reveal bare gums in a soundless snarl. Her once lively eyes were dull and unmoving, filmed over in a milky cast. The long brown braid that Nemain had fashioned just this morning for her had been reduced to a thistle wisp of white rope that rippled snakelike in the water’s current.

It was the only thing about Sofie that moved. Sofie, who would never again speak to snark at Nemain, or sigh with preteen angst, or ask a nonsensical question. Her heart thudded wildly, raw in her chest. *Never again.*

*Ochone! Ochone, oh no oh no no nonono - what in holy Hircine’s name had happened here?*

Her peripheral vision barely caught a glimpse of Aventus suddenly blurring into motion - lifting the mace he devoutly carried at all times to swipe at a figure charging towards them astride an elk.
Before she could register the strangeness of such an attacker, she felt a shuddering jolt of magic
carom off of her shoulder, like the static backwash of a lightning storm.

*The feel of it was...* she acknowledged the familiarity of the magic. Sparing it only the barest pause of
attention before gathering a fireball in her left hand; a fireball that lit up the riverbank in an orange
blaze, to fling at the hateful figure in black who had stolen away her little girl’s life.

The flames hissed against the river as the figure nimbly pivoted out of range. Nemain squinted...were
those wings, or the sleeves of some trimmed robe?

Turning, the winged woman raised a hand to spray forth a brilliant white light that broke through the
Dragonborn’s hastily erected shield spell like wet paper...enveloping Nemain in a cloud of noxious
light that battered away at her mind. Beating like the frantic flapping of birds wings, *let me in let me
in-*

Somewhere beyond the vast serenity that strove to claim her being, she could hear Aventus; his
breath sobbing as the hot night rang with the sounds of steel on steel. Hoarse cries filled the air as
heavy blows found their mark and landed, the slick sounds of flesh parting a brutal counterpoint to
the meatier pulp of tearing muscle.

If she strained her ears beyond the swelling tinnitus brought on by the illusion spell (truly a first-rate
spell, it took one Illusion Master to recognize another) she could almost *hear* the blood dripdripdrip
to the dirt beneath the fighters. Et’Ada knew...she prayed with all her soul that it was not her son’s
blood being welcomed into the dusty embrace of the earth. Disappearing into the dark.

Nemain would have liked nothing better than to turn and assist her brave boy in dispatching the other
warrior, but she could not move. Not a finger. Gods, her muscles had somehow locked into iron-hard
sticks ridged with pain; the effort of denying the other mage any control was forcing her head back
as her spine curved like a bow...as though claws had dragged her by her braid to bend her skull
towards her toes. Her very vertebrae arched under the anguish of the pain-spell; the command spell.

A spell she now recognized from her youth, for precious few knew it well enough to cast it so
casually. *Obedience.*

*Máthair?*

*Oh Máthair what have ye done!*?

...But Nemain had never been what anyone would have termed dutiful or even mildly subservient,
not even as a child. Especially not as a child. Gritting her teeth, she pushed with all her might against
the will of the mage who desired to subsume her, to incorporate her into the mana of another’s might.

She wouldn’t! Not even if it was her whom she feared!

The mage stepped daintily towards her, sliding up behind as she fights, writhes against the grip of
punishing pain. A hand fists hard in Nemain's hair, and a thin serrated blade comes to rest gently,
point-first, over her throat.

She hopes the mage has a sturdy grip, because she is utterly unable to stop the jerking thrust of her
limbs as she battles against the command to give up. To give in.

"Stop," says the mage holding her, but the word means nothing for how little attention she deigns to give it.

Her night vision is back, more or less, and she can see...Aventus is now flat on his back, eyes closed. The spell-light surrounding her is still flickering with sporadic, unsteady flashes and she cannot tell if he is breathing or if it is blood that decorates his tunic or merely a splatter of mud, gods let it be mud-

"...Let go!" she snarls, lifting her hand - gaining control of this much, at least - and Nemain yanks hard on the wrist that bears the knife. Slapping away the arm that is thin and pale, and can only belong to a woman to match the brogue of that utterly familiar voice.

A small victory, but she would take it. She would stop them! “Et’Ada take you, you râicleach bítch! I’ll get ye for that, just ye wait! Aventus?! Aventus!”

Her boy stirs at the sound of his name, and for a moment Nemain feels nothing but relief. But a figure coalesces from the shadows and forms into a young man; naked from the waist up. The night has darkened - that, or her eyesight has been permanently wrecked by the bursts of witchlight dancing in queer sparkles inside her vision; but she felt sure - she would swear by the ancestors that the warrior was a Forsworn. For his hair was dark, and his skin that odd pale mixed with a drop of darkness, just like hers...and amongst the sawn off heads dangling from his belt, staining his kilted leathers she could make out the unseeing blue eyes of a Nord head trailing beaded blonde braids. The Stormcloak sentry, then.

It could not be, but...Nemain swallowed back bile, for it certainly was. She’d know that face anywhere.

Her teeth were clenched so tightly that his name issuing from her lips was more a hiss than any appellation. “…Galan?!”

The Briarheart’s voice was lighter, more clear than she remembered. And utterly expressionless, to match his stoic features. “Nemain. Took us long enough tae find ye.”

She watches dumbly as the young man - who had seemingly not aged a day since she cut out his heart to replace it with a briar - kneels down to wrap his hand around Aventus's throat, in what was clearly a threat.

Still stunned at the close proximity of Galan -Galan!- Nemain jerks against the fingers fisted in her hair with a choked, inarticulate cry of frustration, as dead black eyes track her every movement.

"He lives," says the woman into her ear, cold and impatient, "as long as ye cooperate. Though it would hae been far easier had ye come calm an’ quiet with the vampires I sent tae fetch ye. Now stoppit! Cease yer struggling this instant."

Aventus's eyes open, then - a sliver of dazed brown beneath what must be blood smeared over his forehead, and she forces herself to be still. She is sure, now...only one woman ever wore that scent.

Sickly-sweet nightshade and musky mora tapinella. Máthair used to dab it behind her ears and upon
the pulse points of her wrist, every day after her morning ablutions. Nemain had spilled a glass bottle of that particular scent once...it had seeped into the hand-braided rug and she recalled sniffing it, lying face down upon the rug as a child.

- Smelling that unique scent, to try and recall what Melka had smelt like when her mother...when Máthair had gone away. Only to return no longer herself. A hagraven, ugly and cold; replacing the lovely woman who had murmured stories by her bedside and had cried true tears of despair during their flight from Markarth.

Yes. Nemain remembered Máthair before she had become Melka.

“I’d have come happily not e’en a few months back if ye’d only hae responded to me letters, Máthair.”

The woman barked a short, unamused laugh - more like a caw, and tightened her hand in Nemain’s hair. ”How little ye ken, Dragonborn. Fer that be what the fear thuaidh call ye now, ’tisn’t it. Grav...” Nemain felt her Máthair spit in revulsion, the spittle landing upon her cheek.

And all the while, the spell was grinding its way past Nemain’s mental faculties. Boring like a red-hot bark beetle into the sanctity of her very mind. She couldnae allow it in! “-tae think me own flesh an’ blood would stoop sae low, t’be seen in company with fear thuaidh. Yer far overdue in deliverin’ the Bear o’ Markarth’s heart, daughter dear. Nepos has given up all hope in ye.”

She had to swallow, twice, but she managed a tolerably cool response. “I believe I’ve changed my mind aboot that, Máthair. And for verrah good reasons, which I’ll explain in good time, with pleasure. Release me. Let go of the boy and we can...talk aboot it. Please.”

“Change yer mind? Change yer mind? Och, the abasement ne’er ends, does it! How the Stonetalon Clan be fallen...och aye, that I do live, live tae see our clan’s fell descent! Cor - doon try tae speak or dare defend y’self. I can smell th’ mead-taint o’ Nord cock an’ cum on ye, m’gel. Be ye silent!”

A pounding drumbeat seemed to be synchronizing with her heartbeat; breaking Nemain’s skull apart with every red tinged blow. Nearly making her miss Melka’s following words, for she had to focus with all her strength merely to remain standing. “....ye wily wee traitor. But ne’er mind that now. This be not the time nor the place fer sich things.”

Melka’s feathers rustled ominously. “Attend me, Galan. Bring our steeds. And dinnae forget tae bring the boy.” She chittered a laugh. ”I may yet be an hungered on our sojourn tae th’ gathering. Kraaaww.”

...out of time! She was out of time! Forcing herself to act instead of panicking, to Shout despite every inclination to wait and hear her Máthair and the silent shell of her childhood friend out...Nemain turned her neck amidst the sparking torment of Máthair’s spell and allowed the Shout of Fire to well up. Deep from within, where all the shock, sorrow and rage of losing Sofie simmered like a furnace beneath her breastbone, gods - her very neck muscles seemed to rip and tear, but it would be worth it, aye, worth the pain, to not feel helpless any longer.

To see the hagraven matron burn, BURN for her apathy. For the hardhearted aloofness, her disregard. Nemain had never heard of any handmaid of Hircine who had ever managed to regain her
lost beauty, but trust Máthair to find a way. *Ever has she been obsessed with power, of any kind,* Nemain thought darkly.

*Much will it cost her.*

Yes, the High Priestess Melka Stonetalon had found a way: for which she would pay dearly, in scars and blood. The Shout nearly flayed the Dovahkiin’s lips as it left her throat, a satisfactory ache. Necessary, for though she loved what remained of her Máthair Nemain felt in her bones that she would be glad: happy to see her mother suffer a pittance of pain. For Sofie...small, innocent Sofie’s sake.

*Ne’er should the young be sacrificed upon the altar of mere ambition! Never again!*

*“Yol Toor SHUUUL!”*

Dropping like a stone as the Shout erupted from her mouth, Nemain panted in hollow triumph as Máthair released her and screeched. Wheeling about, black burns sizzling the left side of her face as she howled and gnashed her teeth. Her black wings flopped and beat the air, her taloned feet almost trampling her daughter where she lay as the hagraven tottered and spun.

*“Kree-augh! You horrible, ungrateful child! Heeee! Briarheaaart! Where be ye, y’useless baggage! Kraaawww!”*

And just as Nemain was about to test her ability to stand, to fight, a paralysis spell suspended her in a contorted arch. Her hand half-frozen as it reached up as if in entreaty.

As Máthair continued to swear and scream, Galan lowered his hand from casting and unhurriedly led the elk he had arrived upon closer towards her, the clopclopclopping strangely punctuated amidst the hagraven’s squeals. She could not blink or move her eyes, but Nemain gathered by the lack of breathing and the rot-mold scent of decomposition that the Briarheart’s mount was of the reanimated type. *Yick.*

A wave of lightheaded euphoria replaced her previous migraine as Galan began to heft her in his arms. If she could have shivered, she would - Galan’s flesh was cold as ice.

*“Tarry ye, Galan.” Melka’s voice was ugly. “Are ye no forgetting summat?”*  
*“What am I forgetting.” Even his response phrased as a question was blank - flatter than cold clay.*

Nemain watched from the numbed shell that was her body, helpless as Melka scampered over. Black talons digging into the soil as her head leered close, her nose nearly touching Nemain as she breathed in and out through yellowed and sharp teeth. Watching her daughter like a worm on a hook.

*“A paralysis spell, kree-aahh...tha’ will only hold one sich as her sae long, Briarheart.” One of her talons flickered towards Aventus. “I wish my daughter tae be incapable of runnin’ from her dear family.”*
Melka’s black eyes bore like blades into Nemain’s skull. “Indeed. I desire that she shall ne’er run away, ever again. T’was far too much effort tae catch her the once. Be I understood, Galan?”

“Yes.” Moving smoothly, the Briarheart lowered her stiff form to the ground. She had an excellent view this time around, and so was aware of every sickening moment of dread...

Every second that it took for Galan to placidly pick up Aventus’ mace. To step steadily; a metronome of miserable expectation that did not even allow her the release of screaming in pain as Galan brought the mace down once. Twice; each blow crushing the joint of Nemain’s ankle and foot into a fleshy, useless pulp.

And she felt it all. In the hot, timeless stretch of torture that marked the first swing of the mace to the lurching motions of Galan slinging her upon the skeletal back of the undead elk. Nemain suffered every snap of pain as though it had been split into ever-splitting fractals. Pain upon pain upon pain...the broken bones of her foot floated and bounced like peas in soup; her legs flopping at odd and unkempt angles as Galan mounted up behind her. As Máthair loaded an equally frozen Aventus upon her own elk.

Nemain’s still face brushed a rent in the elk’s hide. She could see the small white tail ends -or were they the heads?—of maggots, squirming like barley grains pepperling the grey dessicated flesh of the beast. Incapable of closing her eyes, of even managing more than the barest breath necessary to sustain life...Nemain ignored the sight of the maggots and mentally fixed her mind upon the last sight of Sofie.

-Alive and well, exasperation plain in the curve of her baby-fat cheeks and pouty lips as Nemain urged her to go and fetch the damn bucket. That damn fucking bucket that had spurred all the tragedy that ensued this night!

Her legs ached, her feet were burning pillars of fire that caused sweat to pop upon her forehead and she had no damn idea where the galloping elk bearing their grisly burdens would be headed.

But it was not her fault. She had to remind herself of that, even as her head slapped against the ribcage of the undead elk. Her hand had not been the one to cast the spell. She had not siphoned the life and vitality of Sofie for her own gain, for all that she keenly felt the shame of not preventing the incident. The chest-hollowing guilt of arriving a moment too late. Truly, her laxness would haunt her to the end of her days, but she could not claim the brunt of the guilt.

That millstone deserved to be hung round the neck of none other than Mother Melka.

That misdeed - that violation of every code of sacrifice Nemain had ever learned in her years of becoming a shaman was Máthair’s burden to bear, and Máthair’s alone. Even now, acknowledging what had happened caused Nemain’s heart to burn in impotent rage. A High Priestess of the Coven should ken better than that!

And Bear...her rúnsearc. Her great love.

She continued to stare at the jaunting sides of the elk as tiny maggots squirmed and fell out with every pounding stride. Ulfric was far from unobservant, and more clever than her kind had ever accorded him to be. He would know - he’d have to see. See the body of Sofie. A testament to the
events of the last hour.

He would see their tracks, begin a search, and doubtless he would find her. Find them. It would be up to her, the Dragonborn -the responsible adult- to not give into despair. To ensure that there would be something left for him to find.

_Gods!_ She was helpless and bound. Unable to crook even her littlest finger or whisper a word. But, she mentally vowed as the elk bounded off into the trackless deep of Falkreath’s wilds, if it were the last thing she ever did...she would end Melka.

The Dragonborn would murder the hagraven she had once known and loved as her beloved Máthair, and do it gladly. With vengeance that would rival even the Great Red Eagle himself, Faolan, for its ferocity in her breast. No matter what revelations the future would bring, no matter what awaited Nemain and her poor, trapped son at their final destination she promised herself; as the elk heaved and ran with the boundless endurance of the dead. She would make it happen.

Nemain swore it to be so. And as sunrise lit up the jagged rock formations that Galan informed her marked the way to Orphan’s Rock, Nemain reminded herself that she could wait. Could willingly bide her time, as the Briarheart recast the spell of paralysis upon herself and upon Aventus one last time.

There in the clearing of Orphan Rock awaited not a mere few Forsworn (accompanied by the obligatory Hagraven and Briarheart or two) but a mighty horde of mingling clans. Still dead in most respects and unable to react to the world, Nemain observed her prey in silence. Storing up what knowledge of her surroundings she could bear to see for later. _For there would come a chance. Later._

She saw the tight dreadlocked heads of the Boneshaper Clan wandering about the redoubt, decorated in bits of bone beading. Wielding tooth-tipped femurs that rattled like the fall of shale scree. She spied the red tipped swords and axes of the Bloodthorns; raised in a wailing circle meant to promote the bloodwrath of the berserker. She heard and bore witness to the ululating shrill cries that told her that the Clan of Rageclaw had come out to play. And her own clan, the Stonetalons, they wore their feathered finery and chanted in solemn dirge as Nemain was brought out on display. As she was fastened to chained manacles mounted deep in the granite of Orphan Rock.

Incapable of anything but drooling spitefully, she tracked the progress of Aventus as he was led, white faced and brave, to a bone cage where a smattering of thin and sickly children sat.

Staring listlessly at nothing, the children's depression caused Nemain's fists to tighten into red knots as she finally -FINALLY- wrenched free of her magical shackles. And re-attained the grace of movement -sweet freedom of movement! once again. _Out o' the frying pan intae the fire_, she thought in a desperate stab at humor, as a filthy gag was forced past her teeth and tied tightly around her head.

_Vampires, werewolves, orsimer or Reachfolk...it mattered not. She would be patient. Dragons -and Dragonborns- were long suffering, persevering hunters. Wily and dangerous...she’d killed enough of them to be certain of that truth._

Nemain would hold in her wrath for the opportune moment.
Rattling her shackles, she renewed her mental oaths. She would watch...aye...

And wait.

Chapter End Notes

Ráicleach: Pronounced Raaaaaak loch (think 'Loch' ness monster). Literally translated as a woman of questionable morals.

Appropriate, no?
Monachopsis

Chapter Notes

Monachopsis: The subtle but persistent feeling of being out of place.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Briarhearts were always watching.

Aventus had counted six nights since being thrown into the deepening pit enclosed with mammoth ribs. Seven days and six nights of fear and uncertainty. Watching his skin heal the purpling-green bruises so very slowly from the painful journey to the Rock. Seven days of the ever-present, starving hunger.

Would it kill them, he thought in annoyance, watching the nearest Forsworn bite into a thick stack of sliced meat and cheese, feeling his guts twist in sour need, for them to feed us more than the odd vegetable scrap or burnt leftover? If they’re trying to fatten us up, they’re doing a sodding lousy job of it.

Scrubbing his face with the back of his dirt streaked hand, Aventus roused himself to become more alert. Aware...gods, if training daily with the Stormcloak warriors had taught him aught of worth, it was that anything could happen, at any time. Opportunity waited for no man but the vigilant. And being actively aware gave him purpose; his watchfulness granting a sense of control where there was none for all the bloody good watching and staring did, because he felt so goddamned worthless, seeing Ma twist on her ruined feet as she hung from her chains...

Tearing his eyes away again from Ma, Aventus looked up at the bit of blue sky overhead that was not crowded out by the crags or the tops of evergreen trees. At least it wasn’t raining. Nothing you can do right now, so think about what you can control instead, Jarl Ulfric’s voice whispered, a bygone remnant of his lessons. Lurking in the shadows of his skull where his fears seemed to stray.

He shook his head. Think! What do you have as a resource, Aventus? Aside from yourself...they took away your mace, but you’ve still got your mind! You walked by yourself all the way from Honorhall orphanage back to Windhelm, gods, if you can survive that you can do anything! Focus!

Aventus took stock of his immediate surroundings for seemingly the thousandth time. The pit was roughly fifteen paces long and eight paces wide, ringed in mammoth ribs that dug deep into the earth before ending at the sharp slope of the mountain wall behind him. There was a shallow, foul-smelling hole in the corner of the pit that he and the other children squatted over, to defecate and piss in. And it rained here in the mountains often (enough to churn the dirt of their cage into mud, forcing them to huddle like sparrows together for shelter) so that they were not overly plagued by thirst, but the hunger …
His stomach squeezed like a fist, no longer growling after the first few pitiful days of making its presence known. Hunger. It was the only constant in this shifting swarm of motley people, the war camp that had assembled like some nightmare in this forsaken place. He scratched out a bug that was trying to crawl into his ear...watching as the nearest rag bundled child quivered and shook in suppressed tears. Well. The only constant thing here aside from the Briarhearts.

The Briarhearts did not need to eat or sleep...or piss or tup like normal men, it seemed. There were about five or six of them guarding their section of the camp at any given time. And they were more wary than he would have liked...raising serrated blades in warning if the children placed so much as a toe out of the barrier that was the cage. Grunting in censure if they cried overloud, or screamed in their sleep.

He had been fascinated in the beginning, watching the orange-gold globes pulse with unlife in their pale, sewn-up chests. But the longer he beheld the actions of the briarborn the more he became convinced - they were more automaton than men. Like those Dwemer machines Ma had once told him about...the ones buried deep in the earth. Metal faces rigid and unchanging...their behavior consistently ice-cold and indifferent.

No real person could watch what went on in the Forsworn encampment and not be moved to do something, to care. But then, maybe the Forsworn weren’t really people at all. Aventus picked at his teeth and worried at a hangnail on his thumb, watching as a passing trio of hide garbed Reachwomen jeered and threw clods of dirt and rocks at Ma’s hunched form. They left only when her Briarheart unfolded himself from his statue-like pose and chased them away.

He sucked at his swollen lips. Maybe...maybe they really were the fearsome animals he’d heard other Nords state to be certain truth, in all the stories and rumours that had milled around Windhelm about the westfolk. The Reachpeople who dwelt in the crags of Markarth, with their stubborn ways and their weird words.

Maybe they were monsters instead of men.

He hadn’t touched the latest selection of garbage, thrown carelessly into the cage by what looked like a tattooed half-blood orc dressed entirely in fur spangled hides. Mostly because it was offal, spoiled and stinking, and he had backpedaled away from the pile of it; hissing at the other children to beware. By Shor, the smell. And you thought Sofie’s old wolf smelled bad.

One of the small ones had ignored him. Had leapt upon the lot, champing and swallowing like a farmer tucking in after a harvest reaping. Like a rabid thing, Aventus thought in worry, watching as the boy growled at them...his mouth covered in blood and gristle. Eyes wild-bright with the madness of it, the chariness of too much want.

That night, he had kept Aventus and the rest of the children awake, unable to rest as their sleep was broken with his piteous moans and cries. And Aventus had watched, dry eyed and hard, as they carried out the boy’s body -covered liberally in bloody diarrhea and vomit- the following morning.

When he had been thrown in the cage, there had been five other children in there with him. Only three were left, now.
“...they ate Moof! They ate Moof! They ate him!” The girl who called herself Dotta had stopped gibbering only after a nearby vampire threatened to suck them dry, but Aventus felt the words rattle like beans in a gourd inside his head. Casting hollow echoes long after the girl whimpered and sobbed herself silently to sleep.

For they had eaten Moof. The fourth day, when a delegation of werewolves had arrived from the far north, a Briarheart had pulled the tiny Dunmer boy away from Dotta’s tight grasp and had unceremoniously bashed his head against the rocks. Leaving a dark red stain that drew Aventus’s gaze even now. Like a many petalled flower, drying to dust in the sun.

...and he had buried Dotta’s face in his chest, holding her firmly to stifle her sobs, as the diverse mob of foreigners that he was learning to hate roasted and filleted baby Moof’s blue-gray flesh. Picking it apart with knives, they remarked in their garbled accents upon the tender sweetness of it. He had then lifted his head to catch eyes with Ma, whose bloodshot and angry gaze had unerringly fixed on his. Blinking with a starkly clear message. A warning.

Fine. He would watch. He would wait. If Ma could bide her time hanging in those chains drenched in her own piss, struggling to stay erect on her broken and mangled feet with that creepy Briarheart guarding her constantly, then Aventus could do no less.

...But Dotta no longer spoke to him anymore. For when he looked at her to talk - to break the ennui of doing nothing but sit and stew in anxious foreboding - she began to sniffle and cry. Making him even more uncomfortable. But what could I have done? What?!? And the pinched sallow faces of the other two girls betrayed a dull hopelessness that he feared was contagious, the longer their imprisonment lasted.

Aventus didn’t swear much, but he surely felt like it now. Shit. Shit, damn, fuck! Where was Jarl Ulfric, with his mighty force of men to rush in and heroically rescue them from all this death? What could possibly hold them back from arriving any second, perhaps even now?

He played out the scenario like a much-loved story in his mind’s eye. Repetitively, the details changing as the days wound on to include heaping wagonloads of food and drink...sometimes fixating on the worse days upon the righteous, gory and inevitable end of their Forsworn captors. How Yrsarald would smash the mammoth bone cage and tease them all about needing a bath, oh god a bath! And he especially savored the illusion of joy on Ma’s face as healers fixed her legs right as rain, with Jarl Ulfric sweeping her up into a dramatic spin as Aventus swam lazily in a huge cauldron of sweet ale, with friendly Nords all around them applauding the show and laughing...

He was so. Thirsty. He wasn’t sure which was worse...the hunger or the thirst, for it hadn’t rained in three days and they had only shared a small skein of water between the four of them. It was not enough. Wishes and dreams are shit...they’re not real. Stay awake, Aventus! Stay aware and in the present!

As the sun climbed higher on the seventh day, Aventus watched as the disparate mass of fighters argued and grumbled. Small knots of like-minded folk flitted from group to group like bees fetching gossip-laden pollen, faces of Reachmen interspersed with the roughly hewn tusks of orcs and the leaner, sly slant of elves. More fighters arrived at Orphan’s rock every day, and the redoubt was practically teeming with harsh chatter and the familiar not-familiar noise of tented camps being
erected amidst alien cultures.

Aventus observed it all, shivering at the sharp-fang smiles of the pallid and hungry-looking vampires (who had disappeared to the caves with the coming of dawn). He almost forgot his hunger when the bonfires burned at night...listening to the Forsworn sing a weird wailing. A beautiful ode to their nameless gods; and he could now tell apart - he was almost sure - by their raucous laughs and lambent eyes who was a werewolf and who wasn’t from the rest of the rabble. He memorized each and every one of the were’s faces who had partaken of that grisly feast, holding them clear in his mind’s eye. For later.

They had a jittery sort of energy about them, the moon called: like they had each drunk an enormous pot of dragonstongue tea to stay awake. Their restless vitality lit them up like torchbugs compared to the slow plodding grace of the giants, who walked through the camp occasionally and shook the ground with every ponderous footfall. In fact he could spy a werewolf watching him now, seated on a nearby rock as he sharpened a wicked looking blade on a whetstone.

Scritchscritchscritch - the metal scratch of knife against the wet slurry grated on Aventus’s ears, and he flickered his eyes away. More talking. More arguing; the parchment yellow faces of the High elves were new, but they mingled like everyone else in the ebbing pile of moving bodies. Coming back to watch the werewolf eventually out of boredom, Aventus yawned as he saw the knife’s edge slowly become smooth and gleaming sharp.

Abruptly, he realized that the beastman’s leg was bobbing in time with something that had a rhythm...becoming more frenzied and fast, speeding up...the horn-hard foot nearly tapping the ground like a dance as he realized-

It was bouncing in time with his own racing heart.

No longer bored, Aventus shrank further back into the cage as the werewolf emitted a craggy laugh. Showing off the black ridges around the gumline of of his broken, cheese-yellow teeth...as if he wanted Aventus to get a good look at them. “...Nar sae stoopid as they say, hmm young ‘un? Th’art a hash little ‘un, tae stare sae brawwly at oi. Doon ye ken tis a challenge tae stare plain-faced at a shapeshifter, bairn? Mayhap tha t’will make thee a foine warrior in place o’ cauldron fodder, eh?”

Turning the knife to the other side, the werewolf tilted his head. Fixing Aventus with a knowing dark eye. “Shall ‘oi put in a wird wid th’ hagwimmin, aye? Oh, fer she’s got it in fer ye, nae matter what sich as oi may blether...haw, fer yew and yore precious mum. Look at ‘er loik yew look at me, cor an’ yer death will be cráigh indeed! Hahah hah haw!” His laugh petered out into a wet phlegmy cough.

His spine stiffening in dislike, Aventus chose to ignore the werewolf and so he turned to face his fellow prisoners. Dotta was lying on the ground in a dejected daze, staring at nothing - and the two younger ones who had not offered up their names were picking lice out of one another’s braids and eating the pests. With relish.

Ugh. “C’mere. Hey you two...c’mere. Stop that. Let’s play a game, instead.”

Pulling them apart, Aventus guided their hands into a clapping pattern that made the two younger
ones squeal in delight. “Shhh...we have to be quiet or the Briarhearts will poke us. Come on, Dotta...bear up. I’ll teach you a song. We’ll all clap along, and whoever forgets to clap or misses a beat has to sit out a turn.”

Dotta shifted, her blue eyes blinking slowly as Aventus started them out. Hands patting his knees, the muddy ground and slapping together as he began to chant the foundling’s rhyme:

Who killed Cock Robin?
I, said the Sparrow,
with my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin.

“Ey! I know the words to this song!” Proclaimed Dotta. She scooted herself up and squidge her skinny form next to Aventus...a slow creeping smile stretching her gaunt cheeks. “Gran used to sing this with us, with…” she sucked in a shallow breath, her eyes glassy with tears. “…with Moof, when we gathered pinecones for the fire’s kindling. Aye...let’s do this!”

Dotta sang the next verse alone, her keen fervour for the distraction making Aventus smile.

Who saw him die?
I, said the Fly,
with my little eye,
I saw him die!

Faster and faster their hands beat into the pattern. As Aventus smashed his hands together, down and apart, he smacked them against the bony fingers of the girls. Furiously concentrating on nothing but the merry tune, the words that would bury the hunger. Bury the despair.

Somewhere near, the werewolf whistled cheerily along...the scratchy tine of his whetstone now being replaced by the pfwip-pfwip of the knife now being beat against a leather strop, to delicately hone the edge.

Oh gods. He made his voice strong. Untroubled. As the oldest and only boy in the group -nearly thirteen winters old, or was it fourteen?- it would be shameful for his voice to waver in fear.

Who caught his blood?
I, said the Fish
with my little dish,
I caught his blood.

...pfwipfwipfwip - No! He didn’t want to see another child be butchered! He couldn’t watch, no, he couldn’t bear it! Pushing the hand-clapping into an ever-faster run, Aventus closed his eyes and blocked out everything but the words.

While the cruel Cock Sparrow

The cause of their grief!

Was hung on a gibbet next day

Hooray!

-The song ended with three harsh, syncopated slaps, the three sets of hands mirroring his. Their smiles causing a shrike of icy fear to crawl up his neck, for the girl’s grins were spare of all baby fat or flesh; like little skeletons.

It won’t happen! They won’t die!

Resolution steadied his heart. He wouldn’t let it happen. The next time a Briarheart reached into the cage, he’d bite the damn thing’s hand off!

The Fish did play

and the Fly shout hurray

as Sparrow fell to the heath

to his death

Like a thief thief THIEF!

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

Time stretched on like an unbroken pane of glass...shattering in slivers at pivotal moments.

Indeed Nemain had plenty of time to think, as she hung from her chains. As she slowly pushed up on the mutilated remains of her toes...alternating from leg to leg, she prayed that her painstaking efforts would bear fruit. For even though she still could not bear even the slightest amount of weight on her legs, she had not the slightest desire to live out the remainder of her life as a cripple.

And so she worked at it, for there was nothing else to do. Forcing her feet to move, to wriggle despite the cracking pain. Resting when the pain caused tears to drip from her eyes, only struggling
to stand when her arms could tolerate the hanging weight of her body no more.

The first few days she could attempt nothing. She hung by her wrists, knowing the cessation of pain and onslaught of numbness through the entirety of her arms and back was a very bad thing. Occasionally a curl of discomfort, stronger than was typical, would crawl up her nerves and stop her breath. Causing her to choke, wheeze and snort against her gag as she fought so hard not to cry.

To pull herself erect...for the right leg was ever so much worse off than the left. She had looked down only once and had sorely regretted it, for the right foot was bloated and marbled like a swollen corpse, the left less so if still blackened. With toes like fatty sausages poking out below the leavened lumps of her ankles. Nemain chose not to look down again.

Galan spoke rarely, but when he noticed her agonizingly slow struggles to stand, he commented on it. “Try not tae struggle so, for ye’ll never be walking again Nemain. I’ve made sure of it...and Máthair Melka must have had her reasons fer ordering me tae do so. She usually does.”

Nemain must have gawked at him in obvious dismay, for the Briarheart had then laughed - a dried up, tuneless sound. “Dinnae fash yersel, Nemain. I’ll carry ye around, if it comes to it. Say that you’re dreadful sorry fer the part ye played with the Stormcloaks, do a wee bit o’ begging and I’ll be crivens t’ jinks that Melka will accept ye back intae the fold.”

Seating himself back upon the ground, Galan had then turned his head away. To stare serenely at the crowd of mingled Forsworn and westfolk people who were not even bothering to pretend not to ogle him back. “And then, taisce, all shall be as it was before.”

She was being guarded by a madman. *Perhaps a Briarheart whose personality was set in stone at the time of his creation could see the reasoning in such twisty logic, Nemain thought unhappily, but I’ll be malkied if it doesnae sound right improbable. Máthair be absolutely furious.*

*Corn, it had sounded sae much more tempting when Bear offered to carry me around.*

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Two days. Five days. Seven days had passed.

Nemain hung, exhausted and listless in her chains. What had not been bruised or beaten ached like she had run the seven thousand steps of the Monahven in a single attempt.

...And after the Dunmer child had been cooked and eaten, she was utterly devoid of the desire to lift her head; to see anything else. Her heart was an aching wound. Heavy in the cage of her chest.

But at least Aventus still lived. She had a clear view of his prison, and it seemed he was now playing handclap games with the children to distract them...a simple tune drifting in the air towards her, though she could not quite make out the words. *Smart wee little pip.* She smiled at the sight.

Galan then walked in front of her, blocking her view as she winced at the unconscious move she had made, to shrink back from him. He was with her practically at all times now -like some statue of a guardian daedra who had been summoned to serve. Only moving to sharpen his blade, Galan would occasionally stir himself to speak to some of the various people who approached their side of the camp. More often he shooed away the hecklers who managed to throw things, or who stood within ten paces screeching obscenities.
For the first time since Sofie’s passing she found herself profoundly grateful for his presence. For earlier a group of men - orcs, Bretons and elves - had approached her, united in purpose and by the clear and dangerous intent blazing in their eyes. To do what all Forsworn men did to the women in their thrall.

To teach her what her place was...namely, below them.

Nemain shivered. It had taken Galan just one silver-swift blow to slice off the closest man’s arm. He had cleaned his blade with patient, even movements afterwards, watching the would-be rapists stagger off as she sagged in her manacles with relief. Watching with the Briarheart in companionable silence, for once, she shook her head as a fly landed atop her eyelid; as the shorn arm leaked a stream of ruby-bright red in the dirt. Blood that eventually became mashed with everything else...the piss and spilt alcohol, spit and muck that formed the slodge of every outdoor camp, as someone kicked the arm out of sight and likely, out of mind.

Her wrists flexed. Serves the bastard right.

-And she was grateful, though Nemain knew it had more to do with her parentage and value as a prisoner of war than any false notion that her old lover had acted to protect her virtue. She knew - had seen it herself in the past what was done almost without fail to women taken on raids. The youngest and most pleasing often bore the worst of it, for an elderly matron might merely have her throat slit, or be put to work as a drudge if labor was lacking, but a beautiful woman…

Nemain stretched her fingers, bound as they were in cloth and metal. She did not care to think of what lay in wait for her after her short string of usefulness ran out. The People cared little for anything related to the Nords, and what was more Nord-like than the Dragonborn, their Talos God reincarnated? Damn them all if she couldn’t convince them somehow that Alduin levied a far more significant threat than the Stormcloak’s forces, focused as they were upon Solitude and the Empire’s Legion.

Shite on a stick. That threat of rape had jarred loose a shot of weak adrenaline that tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to stimulate her limbs to move - to run.

But she could not run. She could not move, or even speak. They had bound her tightly, too well to wriggle free or form a Shout with this massive wad of cloth separating her teeth and tongue.

...And there was not a god damned thing she could do about it. Yet...she mentally rousted herself from the apathy that threatened to drag her into quiet defeat. There’s nought ye can do fer yourself or Aventus...yet. Bide yer time, until the most opportune moment arises tae break free.

Abide.

If only the opportune moment would come soon! Nemain mentally groused, because the indignity of her capture was stealing slowly what strength she could spare. Days were flitting by, and she wasn’t getting any stronger. Not with this highbrow penal treatment. Et’Ada, I’d hate tae see what Máthair wouldae have planned fer a prisoner she hated worse than me.
She was left to shit and piss in her own robes the majority of her hours...her sole source of relief coming at dusk, when Máthair arrived in a rush of ceremony, self-importance and a musky sweep of scent. She almost looked forward to it, if one could say that interrogation was to be avidly anticipated. For it was the one bright spot of time when she was freed from her torturous position, spread eagled on the hateful granite wall.

It went almost as regular as a Dwemer timekeeper. Click. Máthair would cast her spell. Charming her into blind, unwavering obedience as - click - her gag was removed and her manacles released; to drop her into Galan’s arms before she could collapse to the ground.

“I order you,” Máthair would say without fail “…tae be obedient, daughter. Dinnae harm me or any o’ mine, by Shout or spell or any violent intent. And hearken tae any directive Galan shall give ye…” which was usually followed by “-cor, what a stench! Clean her up, sharpish, an’ I’ll be back anon.”

But once put under the heady bliss of the obedience spell, Nemain was never quite able to manage the urge to fight back. To do anything but weakly sigh as Galan poured bucket after bucketful of clean water over her head...scrubbing her limbs with soap, sloughing free all the muck and filth that had built up on her person during the day. And after Galan spoon fed her soup bite by bite, like a bairn, Máthair would confront her as Galan dressed her.

Barking what eventually would become a firestorm of myriad questions.

“What be th’most pertinent information ye can relate, tae account fer the Stormcloak army and their fortifications, their strengths? How many do they be, and where be they headed next?”

And almost every night, Nemain would blink owlishly and stall. Striving to guide Máthair into asking a more broad, easily deflected question. “I dinnae understand, Máthair Melka. Of what d’ye wish me tae speak?”

“Have ye no the sense of a drownin’ hen, child? What be Windhelm’s strengths an’ weaknesses?! Speak tae me now, and tell me what I order ye tae say!”

*Ye can make me obedient, but ye cannae say which information I be willing or capable of imparting.* Licking at the sores which wept at the corners of her mouth, Nemain would guide Máthair into a question that would not reveal too much truth, yet the pleasantly foggy cloud that the spell wrapped her in would inevitably prod her to answer. Obedience demanded it.

It was a struggle, but Nemain managed to list every salient fact about the winter wheat that was grown in the farms of Eastmarch.

Every hectare dedicated to red wheat or white, how many tallies of wheat fields, where they lay and who worked on the land and who sharecropped it. Each and every boring fact she had soaked in during Ulfric’s tedious trade meetings Nemain atonally blathered on about in stultifying detail to answer the force of Máthair’s questioning.
Imports and exports, the price of eggs in the Stone Quarter; Melka’s reactions causing her to mentally snicker as she watched the beautiful hagraven’s face grow more frustrated the longer she waxed on about mead tariffs. She managed to draw out the benefits of growing cabbages versus onions in spring for two nights, and had spent four evenings talking brightly of the roaring trade in salmon, cod and slaughterfish to the inner villages and cities of Skyrim.

Máthair would hae been better off demanding the exact location o’ camps or knowledge of the sea currents that Ulfric’s dragon ships do sail. That information might actually hae been useful to her...bless me own jammy luck that she doesnae suspect that I be knowing more than I let on.

And when Nemain managed to continue extolling the virtues of pine lumber over fir in the production of furnishings...well. It didn’t take long for Máthair to furiously shove the gag back into her mouth and order Galan to secure it tightly round her head. Her moment of freedom would end then, as Galan rechained the Dragonborn back to her manacled post. Leaving her to daydream in waves of nauseating pain and boredom yet another day. Waiting and watching for her chance.

Eventually her robes had disintegrated into rags and she was chained up with nothing more than a loincloth and the skin she had been born with for protection. But it was something to be grateful for, Nemain cautioned herself as the rain began to fall. This way, it wouldn’t hurt so damn much to be scrubbed clean at dusk. Exposed to the open air, her sores could heal. Think positively, Dovahkiin! Yer nay dead yet!

And every night, as the spell of obedience was laid to place her under her mother’s control, Nemain attempted to break it.

Seated upon the ground on the seventh night, Nemain closed her eyes as a rush of cold lakewater drenched her hair...flowing in tiny runnels down the bends of her ribs...down. Down to the pulsing ends of her mangled limbs. Gathering her fingers into a ball, she ignored Máthair’s rambling torrent of words that were directed to Galan; allowing herself a dreamy smile as the smallest lick of fire heated up the mud now coating her hands.

A spark, one that could become a mighty flame. A little friend and familiar foe, this fire.

Her magic was back.

She could wait just a little longer. Learn to break the spell, bit by bit. She could learn to master such a high level spell, for hadn’t she done so before? Harmony. Calm. Peace...all were one and the same, with the added edge of Command to bid the bespelled to answer. She had been fighting the obedience spell all wrong. Yes...wedging it apart; picking at the weft and weave of the threads that tied the magicka together until she found a flaw…

It would work. She could manage it...keep picking at the spell as she deflected these questions. Until obedience no longer held her under its sway, and then at last: she would be free!

Free to kill. Oh, she hungered for it; yearned to Shout a lullaby of obliteration that would raze this war horde into a charred grave.

They would not understand any true words of compromise. She knew that know...had seen and heard the desires this lot had put into words, and the truth that went even further. Exposed in eyes that could not be veiled.

Nemain watched as the stars winked into existence one by one, the red sun sinking down into the
dredge black of the west. In front of her, Galan sat with his eyes closed.

She watched him meditate. Wishing there had been another way - that she could turn back time, to redo the events of that fateful night so long ago. To give this cold slave of her Máthair a life like she had lived - full of mistakes and lessons, scars and wrinkles earned in laughing and crying. With a history that he’d now never know of the poignant and sharp pains of a life lived in love.

*No. My tongue could become iron, beloved brother-enemy, and still you wouldnae stay yer arm.*

This army she had watched were far more akin to the mob who had sought domination of her body than any noble force like Bear’s; struggling to establish a sovereign land of their own free will and choice.

She could gabble until her throat went dry of the family values and stalwart integrity of Nordic culture; the brotherhood she had found unexpectedly with the maligned and odious fear thuaidh, but her people would only maim her for her pains.

Nemain allowed a joyless grin to tilt up the sides of her mouth. Scratch that. *They already had.*

No...for her people only understood the language of the sword. And so, she promised herself as her legs twinged and ached, her words would become the mighty roar of war.

Hidden in her left hand where the rope cords binding her fingers had frayed loose, a tiny ember sparked.

-And burned.

Chapter End Notes

The nursery rhyme of Cock Robin is an old English tune, written sometime in the 1700s. I make no claims to originality save for meddling with the last stanza.

Gaelic translations:

Cráigh - painful
Taisce - treasure
Máthair - mother, a more endearing form of the title.
Occhiolism

Chapter Summary

Fair warning, folks...the ball is gonna pick up some speed, here.

Chapter Notes

Chapter theme music: 'Berserker', by Danheim.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qj1RS9vHcsw

Occhiolism: The awareness of the small insignificance of one’s perspective.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Golden girls and boys all must, like chimney sweepers, come to dust.”

-William Shakespeare

It was the sixteenth day of her capture, and Nemain no longer bothered to open her eyes.

When she did, they cracked open merely halfway; first to check upon Aventus and the children, to notice where Galan was standing to guard her, and finally to ensure that Máthair was nowhere near.

And then she would close her eyelids, paranoia put to rest. For the light seemed overly bright these days...almost as if the rays were prizing her head apart along with her shoulder joints. She was slowly losing the fight to stay standing, for her right foot was infected with what appeared to be trench-rot...bruises and sores suppurating with a greenish sort of ooze. The tender limb was hot and rigidly swollen...bumping it against the wall behind her was an agony that she took especial care not to repeat.

And the noise! The nattering din of the camp was louder than ever, making it damn near impossible to catch the sleep that she only ever managed at odd intervals. More arguments were now breaking out amidst the various factions present, devolving into small scuffles that she took notice of only when they approached her or Aventus. Coming too close for comfort.

Comfort. Nemain could not help but groan aloud; her exclamation muffled by the gag. Sleep. What she would have done for a full night’s slumber, in a real bed with thick furs and clean nightclothes! If I balance on me left heel …
Nemain shifted her stance to gingerly stand on her left foot. Gods, it bleeding hurt...but immediately the fire knotting her shoulders eased; the position bringing instant relief to the stress being placed on her shoulders from those goddamn shackles. Rolling her neck from side to side, the Dragonborn was managing to enjoy the gritty press of her toes, digging deliciously into the dirt when she heard it.

It was a distinct sound; the fluid tones unique to voices that had been carved by elvish into silk. Silk that stood out like silver from dross against rougher accents that even now tweaked at her ear. Rising and falling in cultured discord.

“...point has been belaboured enough, Rulindil. I stand by my earlier words, and I’ll thank you not to delay my return trip north any further. This conclave was an error from its inception...ultimately, Winterhold stands alone.”

“But our, we - my affairs in Solitude hang by a mere thread!” protested the black clad Thalmor who struggled to keep step with Ancano. The crowd of Forsworn split for them as he made a beeline towards Nemain, as she watched them both through eyes narrowed into slits. “-starving! They are eating boot lacings and grass, Ancano! Grass! Surely you must see the value of our Mer brotherhood...the justice in maintaining a united front at this point in time! The location and resources of the college could prove invaluable. You could win our war! By Phynaster, you must see reason!”

“Why must I? And where were you and the others, when Winterhold was under siege? Again I say no...the seclusion of the stronghold that I have fashioned suits me well. And I will not compromise the integrity of my newest acquisitions from some softheaded ideal of justice. You reap what you sow.” Ancano slowed down as he neared the massive log that stretched across the cliffside, connecting the rock promontory with the rest of the sloping ridge.

“Tell Elenwen to be content...she has gained a neutral bulwark between herself and Windhelm. Not only a neutral one, but a fortress peopled by mages; the magic touched and the trusted. Not a soul remains who survived the Eye who was not carefully vetted by myself or Mirabelle Ervine.”

“And also, pass on the pertinent rejoinder that I alone hold the key,” his head dipped towards the staff he was currently digging into the grass, to climb up the ridge towards her, “-to safely enter through the barrier of wisps left by that Magusborn abomination. I control Winterhold, and you do not. Simple as that. It would behoove the Thalmor to remember it, so long as the Dominion continues to hold a sword over the head of my cousin.”

Rulindil stopped in his tracks. “What you say is treason.”

“Treason in the sense that it is not condoned leverage, you mean.”

No other Mer she had ever met managed to sound quite so dour with such sophistication. She carefully straightened in her shackles, to listen. And stare in unfeigned curiosity as she took in the impressively ugly robes Ancano was now wearing. The beaded fringe of the botched creation flapped about his narrow hips, widening at the shoulders as the hood showcased a shining diadem anointing his brow. His eyes below were yellow fire...narrowing in recognition. And pity: pity that flashed into barely veiled anger.

It pleased as much as it pained her to see it. *Pride does go before a fall, and you’ve heaps of pride, apparently.* She closed her eyes, feeling a sudden rush of wooziness come over her. By Dibe’s cankles...she was so. Very. Hungry.
"...will mean a break, Ancano. Elenwen will not be pleased! What you are doing is tantamount to declaring all out war! Remember the Tower, Ancano! Surely you need no further proof that these decisions you make are bound to end in pure folly?"

"War is already upon us, whether the Dominion chooses to call it such or not. I assure you, I mean every word. Winterhold College and the lands surrounding it are mine. I am Arch Mage -not Elenwen. And I will maintain my nonpartisan efforts despite your incontinent bleating in order to keep Gethhel safe and sound from the Council’s machinations. You do remember Gethhel, hmm?’ Her friend’s voice sounded scornful.

‘...Your estranged wife’s nephew by marriage? My cousin? The one whose life hangs in the balance, back in Auridon where he leads, dancing on Thalmor puppet strings!!’

Rulindil blinked rapidly; his teeth snapping shut. ‘You walk a fine line, advisor.’

‘I take no advisement now save my own. Spare me your tedious importunations...they shall earn you no credit with me.’

Ancano stopped walking, his pointed features haughty and stiff. Only his eyes betrayed sorrow, a sadness that she felt reflected like a prism in her soul. In three long strides he was in front of her, his fingers lifting her gagged chin high, turning it from left to right. As though she were a pent-up cow being evaluated by the butcher for slaughter.

‘And what has this loathsome wretch done to deserve such salient treatment?’

It sent shame ringing through her, to be aware of how low she had fallen. Being seen like this...naked. Beaten.

Covered in filth, and all alone.

-Drooping as he released his hold on her chin, she did not look up as the werewolf Forsworn who had been guarding the children’s cages walked forward. ‘Wot, ‘er? She be the Dragonborn. Accused o’ bein’ a blood traitor or some sich rot. As if anyone ‘ere sides the higher mucketty mucks care wat fear thuaidh cock’s been ‘nside er. ’Spect no one cares but herself, haw haw haw!’

The werewolf flicked a ball of snot from his nostrils into the grass. ‘Pchaw! Th’ harvest be a’comin’ soon, an’ all this blether t’will be a foolish errand. Cannae fight fer vengeance onna empty stummick. Harr...tis all posturin’ an’ pucklesome drivel.’

Ancano primly eyed the snotball. “I see.” Turning so fast that the fringe of his robes刮 scratched her in passing, Nemain breathed in the incense-ash smell of him as Ancano summarily dismissed her. “That minds me of something else, Rulindil. Would it terribly inconvenience you if-

Something touched the side of her nose. Bumping along until it found the point of her chin...grasping it as she struggled to hold her face still in what was obviously Ancano’s hand. She hardly dared to breathe, much less move as a slow trickle of healing light seeped into her skin.

The itching, scorching roil of sepsis in her right leg faded. It banished her fatigue, and Nemain felt refreshed. And was now tormented by a newfangled challenge in resisting the urge to sob, or draw
any other attention. *Galan be chatting up another Briarheart not twenty paces away!* Gods, if they saw him...if they knew-

The robes before her shifted again. He was still speaking to Rulindil and the Reachman, so she bent her head forward to rest upon the cradle of his wrist; the better to relax into the spiced-mead feeling of being pain free after so very long, as the Mer continued to heal her.

One long, slender finger caressed her cheekbone. She turned her face towards it, kissing what she could reach of his hand through her gag. His fingers tightened on her jaw before pulling away.

Keeping herself listless in her bonds proved to be a struggle, for gratitude made her yearn to lift her face...to show him how happy such a simple action had made her as her friend removed his hand and walked forward. But prudence won out...she stared instead at the churned-up dirt and grass of the clearing. Digging the toes of both her (brokenly healed, she could feel where the breaks had mended poorly) feet into the ground as Ancano turned once more. To examine the Forsworn’s most notorious captive to date.

“...well then. Do tell me what you are planning to do with her?”

The werewolf hocked and spat. “T’aunt fer me tae decide. Talk be split at the mo’, but mark me. The hagwimmen be choosin’ what’ll be done, wid her and the bairns.” His westfolk brogue was so strong that he pronounced ‘bairns’ as ‘barns.’

A kernel of hope flared bright. If Ancano was truly unencumbered by Thalmor orders (and leaving!) perhaps he would be free to help in other ways as well. Holding his gaze, her imploring eyes cut quickly to the children (who were poking their faces through the cage, cautiously curious) and then back to him, praying he would take her meaning.

It was too late for her to contemplate escape, even if Ancano were to offer it. She would stay to end Melka, somehow, and then linger to disperse this farce of a gathering. With this new healing she felt mammoth-strong - ready and capable. She’d break Máthair’s geas and take her pound of flesh.

But the children. If by some small chance the children could be spared...

He understood. If anything, Ancano’s lips compressed even more tightly. He turned to Rulindil, who was wringing his hands in ill-concealed desperation. “Now that I think upon it, there is something you can do for me. Due to the depopulation of Winterhold, I find myself in need of servants to assist me in the running and maintenance of the keep.”

He waited expectantly as the other Mer gave him a blank look. Heaving a put-upon sigh, Ancano turned to the Reachman.

Nemain squinted, for the merry-eyed beastman looked familiar. Very familiar... *was he one of her numberless cousins?* “I could not help but notice that you have a small selection of females ripe for the task.”

“Dis lot? They be nought but wee bairns.”

“Perfect. Their youth and inexperience will allow me to I train them up correctly, in exactly the
manner I wish,” drawled Ancano. “I realize that your kind…” He allowed his gaze to take in the
grotty appearance of his companion, from his gnarled toenails to his matted tail of brown beaded
hair... “do not employ servants, but may I say it is simply devastating to hire on a new manservant or
servingwoman...only to find out that they simply will not suit. The younger the better, I say.”

The werewolf shrugged. “Boi ‘oley Et’Ada, I bain’t be one tae care. Take ‘em. Saves this lot th’
distraction they pose...mair gallicky than a cock in a henhouse this gabble, all a peckin’ wivvout any
vinegar or blood. I wiz told there’d be blood.”

“I concur. Rulindil, a pleasure. Do pass on what you have learned. If you would be so kind,
Reachman.”

Concealing her triumph, Nemain watched as Ancano followed the werewolf to the bone cage, where
he untwisted the latch and gestured impatiently for the children to emerge. Creeping out one by one, they formed a little huddle...Nemain’s breath catching as Galan appeared out of nowhere to stop
Aventus from fully coming out, as he was the last to leave. “What's tae do here?”

“Aiding allies.” Said the werewolf, curling his lip. “Dis lot be better off wivvout mair scares, an’ th’
Mer be givin’ em a place tae stay. Their own home an’ hearth, 'haway from all this t’do. Let em go,
Briarheart.”

For one achingly silent span, Galan and the Reachman stared at one another.

Then Galan dipped his head curtly. “I will allow it. But only two shall be freed. The others be
needed as hostages, ensurin’ our main captive’s compliance.”

The oldest girl hugged one of the younger girls, who was holding the other tightly by the hand as
Galan broke their grasp; leading the littlest to walk next to a solemn faced Aventus as the Briarheart
began pushing them back into the cage. The Reachman looked on, his dark eyes serious as the wee
one latched onto Aventus. Beginning to hiccup and cry as the bone bars closed.

“-Botheration.” Ancano muttered. “Here!”

A clink of gold punctuated her piteous wails, as Ancano jostled the girls who clung to his sides in
order to dig into his pockets. He offered up a sack of septims, his thin face pinched in annoyance.
“For all three. I understand your desire to keep the boy, but I will pay for the privilege of not being
forced to endure any more girlish weeping on the long sojourn north.”

Galan’s face was always difficult to read, but everyone seemed to begin breathing again once he
nodded slowly. Ancano curtly bowed, barely more than a dip of his head. “A small price to pay.
Truly.”

Grasping the gold in his paw, the werewolf grinned. Nemain marveled: she had seen uglier smiles,
but not by much. “Ye drive a hard barg’in, Mer. All three be yore’n, now, fer good r’ ill. Haw hah-
haw!”

Stepping past Galan, the Reachman pulled open the cage. The last little girl ran, knobby knees
pumping, straight into her sister's arms as Nemain felt a great sweep of relief flood her inside. *Poor pip...tis just him and I left.*

*I wonder. How many be left that live in Winterhold? Did the Psijic order help with that blighty Eye? Perhaps by reburying the thing in Saarthal? And how in blazes did a Thalmor spy become elected Arch Mage?*

*Nelacar had best not be dead, or I'll drag him back from the afterlife meself.*

Nodding briskly, Ancano bid his farewells. All three girls were now gazing up at him in adoration as he led them away like a string of bedraggled ducklings...the Mer looking distinctly uncomfortable as all the Forsworn in the camp stopped what they were doing to watch them pass. The eldest girl cast a lingering glance back at Aventus. He was watching them go with an expression Nemain could not decipher.

*Verrah canny, pip. Keep 'em guessing.* The Dragonborn schooled her features into oblique blandness, relaxing into her shackles as Galan resumed his position in front of her, eternally on guard. The werewolf hummed a jaunty tune, strolling directly past her as he threw and caught the bag of septims like a knucklebone ball. Tossing it in the air higher and higher, as he passed out of sight behind Galan-

--and reappeared, Galan studiously ignoring him as he smiled that ugly beatific smile at Nemain. As though they were the bestest of friends. Puzzling her even further, as he broadly winked. And then left, carelessly tossing a loaf of bread through the bars of Aventus’ cage.

*Still humming.*

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

She should have known that releasing the girls would deliver a series of consequences.

The next night as the sun sunk below the horizon, Nemain practiced breath-hold meditations through her nose. Wondering if she could Shout through her nostrils...the concept as ludicrous as it was appealing.

Meditating made her think upon Ulfric and his teachings. Bear had taught her the importance of maintaining inner peace by exerting personal control. She could almost hear the man’s low, rich voice whisper in her ear: telling her that hunger, pain, thirst, lust…all of those things were nothing more than insects biting at the soul.

She rubbed her wrist where it chafed, swollen against her manacles and huffed in frustration. Anger was nought more than the other side of fear…and both could drive a man -or woman- to their knees. But a true Master of the Voice never fell prey to anger, lust, or fear. The three most dangerous
emotions.

Bear must have forgotten to mention guilt.

She tore her eyes away from where Aventus was lying behind the bones and put her mind to other things. Wouldae ‘Shout’ through the nose then be termed a ‘Snout’? I bet Bear would laugh. I bet he’d try tae outdo me own efforts with his own monstrous hooter.

_Gods, I wish he was here. Or not._

Consumed in the task of maintaining a clear airway in order to breathe, Nemain didn’t notice Galan come closer until he was blocking all light from the setting sun. Casting her into darkness.

He wasn’t alone. Behind him stood Máthair Melka in all her glory, flanked by two crouching hagravens.

She wore a branching headdress made from elk antlers, upon which swung tails of hair and bone. The beads and bits made a clinking, chittering sound every time she moved. Her robes were deepest blue, and on her brow she wore an upturned crescent moon which shone brightly. Casting the burn scars (which were still there, to the Dragonborn’s vindictive glee) that stretched from her forehead down to her neck in rough distinction.

It was impressive. It was ceremonial. And Nemain felt an odd snap of something that warned her; a wary recognition that she had just run out of time.

The High Priestess spoke. A tingling rush enveloped her from head to toe, as her mother waved a hand in fluid incantation. “Obey. I order ye tae be obedient, causing nay harm tae me or any o’ mine, by Shout or spell or any violent intent. Galan, prepare her.”

The hagravens walked off as Galan approached her. He removed her gag, his fingers lingering upon her cheeks as his other hand pulled out his belt knife from its sheath.

“Measuring me head fer a box, aye?” She wished that her voice would not tremble, but it did as the Briarheart unshackled her from the wall and lowered her carefully to the ground.

The first tug of hair that he cut nearly made her jump in surprise. “Nothing sae dire as that. Just carryin’ out orders.” He did not venture to explain any further. The soft _shnnnick_ of her greasy hair parting under his knife followed his silence, and Nemain fought herself down -struggled to remain calm, as Galan began the demeaning process of removing every scrap of hair from her head.

She was the mountain in the wind. The flame in the void. She could handle a blow to her vanity if it meant getting out of this alive.
Instead of mourning her hair -her one true beauty!- she would try to reach him in the only way that mattered. There had to be some shriveled remnant of her original friend, somewhere deep in the thrall that was currently hacking off her tresses. Preparing her for execution. *No- dinnae think about it!*

“Galan. How much d’ye remember from...from before? Before I ki- before the Making, I mean?”

The *shnnickshnnick* sounded closer, as Galan sheared away handfuls of hair from behind her ears. “Not nearly enough. The memories be fading with time. I still ken why I chose tae go under the knife, Nemain. I merely cannae recall the feelings what prompted the reasoning.”

*That* stung. “S’pose that makes some sense. Yer essentially a reanimated corpse, after all.”

"If ye wish tae look at it that way, aye. But who I was be still who I am, Nemain...unlike some."

He sat her up higher, the better to reach the back of her head. Giving her a full frontal view of his chest, pulsing briarheart and all. “We Reachfolk...we’re grown hard. Unchangin’ as the mountains, and just as tough. But I’m nay sure you be a Reachwoman any more. All this talk o’ feelings...d’ye still recall feelin’ such, Nemain? Remember, *taisce*?"

Galan licked his thumb and ran it over his knife’s point, peering at the edge critically. “Loyalty?”

Nemain fumed. She *had* changed. But he...he was frozen in the same age and mannerisms that she remembered. Like a hazy dream from another life, more than fifteen years ago. “T’was them what cast me out, Galan. I made the best of what happened after. And ye can scoff, but it be far easier tae hate the fear thuaidh than go through the process of learning that everything we were taught aboot them be wrong."

Her head felt curiously light. Finished with the rough cut, Galan set to shaving her scalp. Peering down at her critically as he did so, Nemain blinked back as she fought off the floaty feeling of the obedience spell...struggling to summon that piquant regret she had felt so keenly a few days before. To recall her affection for this man, her first lover. Her childhood friend...the one she had nursed a flame for during long years of abandonment, starvation and want. Enshrining him in a rose-colored recollection; a hero worship that she now realized was no more realistic than her previous dislike of Ulfric had been founded in reality.

It made her wince, these thoughts that continued to startle her with new, unwanted insights.

Real or unreal, a wash of pity was now the only emotion that the sight of his face inspired. How she wished she could release him from this unlife! To let him die in truth...and be done obeying masters who used him with as little thought as they would give a horse, or a ladle. Or some other, lesser tool.

An asswipe, perhaps. Being a Briarheart had done his personality no favors.

He did not seem to feel the need to draw breath, save for speaking, and Nemain registered that strange fact before ploughing onward. She felt almost giddy with fear. “I s’pose Melka an’ the others willnae be asking any further aboot Windhelm’s resources, hmm?”

“I expect not. Though it was right *fascinating* ...” It was impressive how a voice so monotone could manage to convey such dry wit, “...tae hear the ins an’ outs of the Nord’s struggle tae grow crops in Windhelm’s permafrost, I do believe that instead they’ll be asking ye tae join them all official-like. In front of the gathering an’ all.”
Hah! When skeevers sprout wings and fly. “Sounds like a real pulleyhawlie. Shame they felt the need tae shave me like an egg first, though. Shall I wear me best frock fer the occasion?”

“Dinnae jest, Nemain. Yer sae brash, woman...did it no occur tae ye that coming along all meek an’ quiet with the vampires would hae been yer best option?”

He began scraping the top of her skull with the flat of his blade, checking for uneven spots. She was torn between amusement - would a head preserved in cedar oil have its value lowered, if nae properly shaved? - and a kneejerk urge to tell him to sod off. To stop pretending that he bothered worth a damn.

He had broken her feet...smashed them, in fact. They carried this conversation solely due to her inability to fight. It was certainly proving to be an enlightening encounter...his emotional castration gave him all the sensitivity of an anvil.

She wondered where he was going with this. “Why do ye care, Galan? And doon pretend tae feel anything ye dinnae rightly feel in that weedsprung chest o’ yers...one lovely thing aboot being Dragonborn is that I can taste the very air of yer words and discern if ye choose tae lie.”

This close, his eyes were like bottomless wells of black pitch. With eyelashes thicker than any man should rightly have. “Why would I lie? Tis you who be forsworn, my taisce. You promised...and ye broke each an’ every one we made t’one another.”

“Ye left me, Nemain...after promising ne’er tae part. Saying ye were mine and mine alone...how long did it take ye, tae fall intae another man’s bed? The leaving I can place behind me, for though t’was a fool move for ye tae cry after me Making, ye be a woman and inclined tae such things. But, what I truly...”

The fingers that had been casually holding her neck in place suddenly tightened into a grip that choked, “...canna forgive, nor forget be that ye sullied yerself with Ulfric. Ulfric Stormcloak, the Butcher of Markarth!”

Shaking her, hard, she felt her dry throat close in dismay as Galan’s face stirred with rare animation; his grasp making it downright difficult to breathe, “...the murderer of our kind, what sacked our homeland an’ spilt sae much blood, blood that poured red doon the streets tae stain the falls! I remember that raw day well, Nemain...can ye no say the same?! How could ye abase yerself so, tae take his side? Lie in his bed, when ye promised me all that ye gave him an’ more!”

The cold fingers clamping around her throat relaxed, easing away, and she coughed. Wiping off splinters of cut hair from her nose and lips, as Galan’s face cooled back into a detached wall.

-With a voice nearly as featureless. “I’ve spoken enough. The People are gathering tae hear what ye shall say in yer defense. I pray t’the Et’Ada above that mercy shall be shown ye, fer all the slander that’s been heaped upon yer name and yer bloodline does no cast ye in a favorable light. I wish ye hadnae burnt yer Mاثhair’s face, Nemain, fer Melka be not happy with ye.” He shook her again. “Not. Happy. At. all.”

The implied ‘or else’ sets her innards into ice, but she’s been hurt before and lived through it, and despite the threat there was still hope at the end of it all. For he could feel.
And he did remember, so perhaps she was justified in feeling some shred of faith, still, that he would come back to himself and be her friend. Her ally once again. It was a fool’s hope, but gods, if only for a mere moment...if only he would - "Galan."

“Screw yer courage tae the sticking point and make yer Máthair believe that ye’ve changed,” Galan said flatly. “If ye give her cause tae chop off yer head, then I’ll be losing years of hard work, preparin’ the Redoubt fer your eventual return. I’d hate tae think it t’was all in vain.”

“Years of work? What did ye do?”

His shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. “Why d’ye think Nepos called ye amongst all the other Forsworn workin’ in Markarth, tae hop along and assassinate Jarl Ulfric?” His laughter was a mocking thing. “Not fer any experience ye had in the matter. I’ve heard that ye promptly got lost an’ fell straight intae an Imperial ambush. Smooth.”

She ignored that, jumping to the topic that interested her most. “I always thought...damn, Galan. Ye mean tae tell me I wasnae selected because I was the most, er, efficient at me other tasks?”

“Nay, no even a wee bit.”

She studied him in the light of the dying sun. The golden glow matched the briarheart, throbbing away in the waxy skin of his chest. “Well. There goes the rest o’ me pride.”

“Such as it be.” His head turned at some unheard signal. “Almost time tae go.”

During their conversation Nemain had set part of her consciousness aside, to devote to picking apart the Obedience spell while he shaved her head. As he spoke, the spell unraveled the slightest bit, the loose end snagging against her will like a burr...lifting her slightly out of that cloud that befuddled her senses.

Sharpening her resolve. “Galan. I would not have left ye, those many years past unless I had no other choice. I loved you, and I meant all that I said, then. Truly.”

His head turned back, and he looked at her. “And ye dinnae feel that way anymore? Gods, Nemain. T’aint love meant tae be eternal an’ as unchanging as the stars? Whate’er happened to that? Was it as fleeting as yer fealty, woman?”

She could hear the crowd that had gathered around the rock promontory mutter and seethe, like the sea crashing upon a cliffside. Not long...no time to waste. Taking courage, she placed her hand upon Galan’s chest, which was cool to the touch.

“No. Nothing sae cold as the stars.”

They were coming for her. It had to be now. “...Love be like a tree, Galan. Easily kilt if it be not sheltered...nourished with small acts o’ love and selflessness, until the strength of it be apparent to all. Our love had roots, but no chance tae grow an’ flourish. Perhaps someday, I’ll forgive meself fer that.”
"But not today, mo cridhe. Not today."

And as Galan stared at her, nonplussed, Nemain hooked her fingers through the lacings she had placed upon his chest years ago, and pulled. Reaching in past the sinewy ties to grasp at the briarheart, magic calling to magic, as the heart pulped wetly in her fist. Bursting as she squeezed.

It was a swift second death. For the briefest second, her eyes caught his. And she knew: he remembered. Those black eyes warmed, and she was thrown back into a vivid whirlwind of happier times. His fingers tightened upon her arm, his thumb moving in a soft caress.

When he fell backwards and did not move again, Nemain placed the destroyed briarheart upon the ground. And began methodically wiping her fingers in the dirt to remove all traces of the foul fruit, as Máthair Melka stormed her way.

“What have ye done,” she hissed, her face white as she looked down upon the body of the Briarheart. The hagravens behind her cooed in sympathy, flocking in coarse flutterings of wings and raspy whispers of ochone, ochone. Whispers that soon became overcome by the roil of noise growing louder, as others shouted in alarm and the muttering reached a fever pitch. “What did ye do?"

Nemain felt numb. “Greetings, Máthair.”

It was not harm, because she had intended to help him. To free him from the likes of Máthair and her muckleheaded followers. That it had been necessary did nothing to salve the grief she was keeping at bay.

She was still fixated upon it, this grief, when Máthair’s spells slammed into her with the force of a galestorm wind.

Nemain could do nothing. She could barely draw breath as her toes curled and her back bent under the strain of fighting Máthair’s electric shocks; Ulfric suddenly in her mind’s ear, intoning that no man need be at the behest of their emotions. Certainly not to obey the call of pain, or the other fleshy urges of the body.

Time passed...how much, she could not say. The memory of his voice sounded like water running over pebbles, a long way away. Unimportant.

“Bring the lad!” She heard Máthair call, and suddenly she was being dragged along the ground by her arm. Her body protested this rough handling, curling up and away from the white-knuckled grasp Máthair was hauling her along with.

"No," Nemain gasped, sliding halfway off the log as she was pulled towards the rock promontory. Her skin chafed and bled as the rough bark bit into her skin. A rock altar suddenly loomed before her, ringed in torches...and the reflective irises of watchful warriors who had gathered. Who continued to stare, as Máthair suddenly kicked her...casting an Obedience spell so strong that
Nemain’s vision went white. "Ye can’t - dinnae hurt Aventus!"

She didn’t even see her move. The hagraven was simply gone - and then, she was there again. Easily lifting her with supernatural strength...forcing her to stand.

Nemain nearly falters for it hurts - goddamn it, it hurts, to stand for the first time in weeks on her own two feet, with not a shred of support. But she is more preoccupied by Máthair Melka who is nearly nose to nose with her, now, the spear-tips of her claws tickling the skin under Nemain’s left ear.

"I doon think," the hagraven says quietly, "that ye understand yer position, Dragonborn. I dinnae tolerate threats. I dinnae bargain with captives. I do what I like when I like and fer the reasons I like, an’ the sooner ye accept that the sooner ye’ll find the world easier tae live in."

"I've ne’er been one fer quiet acceptance," Nemain breathes, her voice more steady than she expects. Beneath the muzzy cloud of the spell -that damnable spell!- and the aftershocks of being zapped she feels angry. All this, only to end on some stone in the woods without a reckoning, or even any sort of last rites?

Fear and rage twine through her, as a wide-eyed Aventus suddenly appears. He is laid out upon the dark blooded surface of the altar by two slavering werewolves. Like an offering.

"...Dinnae test me, Máthair. Let the boy go. The Thalmor and others hae learnt that lesson, an’ ye will too. Permanently."

For a moment, the hagraven's eyes narrow -and then she savagely smiles, stepping back as she flares her wings. They spread, ink black, against the barest hint of light remaining upon the horizon. "Yer cockier than I expected, girl."

"That an’ 'shorter.' I get that a lot."

"Tis almost as if ye be trying my patience a’purpose."

"Ye overestimate my intelligence."

The hagraven snorts a low, unamused laugh. "Hardly. Yer me own flesh and blood, girl, that much be clear. Nay, ‘tis yer compassion I mean to gauge. Sae tell me," Melka adds conversationally, "how much do ye care for that Nordling boy?"

She does not look, but Aventus's lifeforce is a sudden, hot brand on her brain. Her pip makes a high, desperate sound but does not move, and when Melka lifts her eyebrow in expectance Nemain wobbles on her feet and offers her a shrug. "He's a good lad. I think ye ken that."

"Ah ken what I’ve heard. I want tae know what ye say."

*There it be ...*the warp in the weft of the Obedience spell. She can resist yet...just a little longer. "You cannae expect me to give away all my secrets yet, Máthair. We've only just reunited...no thanks tae you."
Melka’s lush mouth twists in irritation and she knows she's gone too far; then the woman gestures with one hand. The foul-toothed werewolf from earlier appears at Aventus's side, one hand on his head to hold him down on the altar as he struggles, the other hovering over his throat. At a lazy gesture from Máthair his claws lengthen: prodding the boy’s soft skin as they both watch, and Nemain jerks forward before she can stop herself.

The hagraven laughs, loud enough that the sound echoes back from the stone walls around them, sharp and bitter as nirnroot leaves. Some join in the mockery. Others do not. "Leverage indeed," she says into the echoes, and smiles.

*Shit*, Nemain thinks. An edge of panic is seeping slowly up her throat, making her swallow. "He doesnae have any part of this. Let him leave, and ye'll have me full cooperation."

"Wot did I say aboot bargaining?" Máthair asks crisply, raising her eyebrow again, but she moves closer nonetheless. "Ye have sae few strings I can grasp, Dragonborn. I have tae make do with the ones I can tug tae get ya dancing."

"What d'ye mean?" Nemain involuntarily replies, and she knows the answer before she asks it.

Máthair Melka's hand moves, slow and hypnotizing as a dragon’s gaze...gliding from Nemain's scarred neck to her elbow and down to her wrist where it hangs limply beside her. Her eyes flick up to Nemain's...something deep in them hot as coals - and then, without warning, the hagraven grabs her wrist and drives her foot down.

Twisting her heel into the meat of Nemain’s right ankle.

She does not scream. Will. Not. Scream. She wants to, desperately, but she will not give such satisfaction so quickly, yet her breath soughs from her like an emptied sail all the same...as delicate, freshly healed tendons pop. Breaking amidst rude jeers and laughter.

Somewhere nearby, Aventus is yelling and she comes back into herself. The pressure lifts from her foot as the hagraven stares at the boy, hunger evident in her black eyes. In desperation, Nemain says the most hurtful thing she can think of, to throw off Melka’s attention from the lad back to herself.

“Yer ugly.” She panted, her breath a harsh wheeze. “Ugly inside an’ out, Mathair, doesnae matter what ye say, or do, for tis plain as the nose on yer—”

*Crack.* The cartilage of her nose breaks, as Máthair hits her not with a slap as she expects, but a tight punch that makes her see double.

She is falling...falling even lying still and flat on her back. Her eyes have become unfocused. Blurry; and she loses the fight to unravel the spell even as sweet nothingness overcomes her and carries her away.
She remembers, in fits and snatches, unwillingly the memories she had long kept buried deep. Small shoves, pushes and insults, when she had been too young to know that she had not done anything wrong. A speck of rot spoiling the joyful naivete of simpler childhood recollections.

The first memory was so murky she barely could recall it, but it felt important and so she teased it out...to wile away the smashing pain of her headache as she slowly collected her wits back together. She had been very, very young...unable to totter about, but crawling she had still yanked on a bright blue hanging cloth.

Yes...Nemain struggled to open her eyes as she recalled the memory. Of breaking something wet and sharp that had caused Máthair to yell; hot slaps raining down on her back, rear and arms as she lifted her pudgy hands in vain to shield her face. The musk of nightshade and mora tapinella, filling her nose as warm arms hugged her...soothing her afterwards.

It seemed cruel to Nemain now, if she thought long upon it. To beat a babe for a mere spill. As awareness stole her back from the pleasant numbness of obliviation, more memories rose to the surface. Rising like oil spilled into the depths of a well.

It was bittersweet to see so clearly - to realize that the perfect adults she had so sought to emulate as a child were as flawed and prone to ill temper as she. She remembered...when Nemain was old enough to walk, her Máthair had taken things. Bits of hair, blood...once (and this memory had been cobwebbed over so thoroughly that she suspected magical interference) Máthair had held her down to cut off a slice of skin as large as a septim.

Her high towered broch bore many similar bundles of dried skin and nail clippings...Nemain could clearly see still the tufts of differently colored hair ranging from flaxen blonde and red to black. Gods knew how she had collected such things. And her collection had only grown after Máthair had taken on the aspect of the crone.

Shifting upon the uncomfortably hard surface she lay upon, Nemain remembered howling and screaming; the tight pinch that followed shutting her up more effectively than the words that came after. “Useless!” Her mother had rasped. “Tis for yer own good, ye ugly, power-dry little thing! What will I be doin’ with ye?”

Then afterwards, snivelling and rocking in raw confusion, her mother had clucked her tongue and gathered her up in her arms. As though the fault had been Nemain’s all along. “Oh hush, mo chroi, hush. I punish ye for yer own good, you ken. For ye’ll never learn unless I take ye tae task, wee Nemain. Tis true. There be other ways o’ compensating fer such weaknesses as yours. Och, I shall teach ye, when ye’re of age. Teach ye all I know.”

The humming that she had previously thought was part of the dream became a sibilant chant, jerking her fully awake. And aware - for she was lying upon the altar, unbound and stripped of even her loincloth to protect her from prying eyes.

Eyes that were firmly fixed upon her, as the last finger of light disappeared and the stars twinkled in their sharp, cold apathy above.

The altar was cold and gritty against the skin of her back. Yet it felt indescribably decadent, to lie
down after sleeping and hanging in chains for so many weeks.

It would have been better with a mattress and some mead, but one couldn’t have everything.

Bending her knees, Nemain sucked quickly at her cheek as her right ankle suddenly pounded with a second swollen heartbeat, all its own. *Gods fucking damn it. Just when I was getting used tae standing again...this.*

She was surrounded by Forsworn, orcs and vampires who clustered near the altar...werewolves that held a quivering Aventus tightly in their circle. The boy’s chin was thrust forward in a thin veneer of bravery. He looked so very small amidst all those bared teeth and shining, knowing eyes. A curl of desperation sent a shot of fire through her limbs, and she ached to stand. To retrieve her son, and take him far, far away.

But she couldn’t. Máthair was looming over her...that familiar face like the moon, so still and wintry in its solemn stare. The men and women around her continued to chant; her back vibrating with the pulse of many drums. Her ears pierced with the scraping scree of boldas, rattling bone filled gourds and wailing cries. Prayers to the night.

“I find ye guilty, daughter.” Her low voice echoed. “Guilty of treachery...of conspirin’ with fear thuaidh. Guilty of passin’ along vital information, of raising outlander priorities above that of yer own kin, and likewise fornication an’ other fell betrayals as such ‘as been described. How do ye plead?”

Her head was wet. When Nemain lifted a shaking hand to touch her bare scalp, her fingers came away stained.

*Aye. Red with blood...right ankle broken, her nose and now likely a head wound to boot. Small wonder she felt like shit. “I plead guilty as charged. Though I’d ask ye tae listen, before ye go on with whatever ye have planned. Tis important for the People tae hear.”* 

Antlers rustled, feathers and bone swaying in the wind. “We be listening.”

And so they all were, for the music had died down to the point where there was no sound save that of the wind and the assembled body’s staggered breathing. Nemain gathered her thoughts from the frantic scrabbling they had retreated into (*gonna die gonna die, I’m lyin’ on an altar, fucking Et’Ada, I’m goin tae die!* ) and drew upon the wellspring of vast calm that the Greybeards had instilled in her.

She raised her voice, and willed herself to be at peace.

“I’ve been reminded of late that Reachfolk be as tough and stubborn as the verrah rocks of the Druadach mountains themselves. Yet fer all our noble histories and clan pride, we have nae homeland. No kingdom tae call our own, fer all we squabble an’ bitch amongst ourselves o’er a few mines and scraps o’ glacier field fer farming. And it doesnae look as though Madanach be aboot tae change that anytime soon.”

“Who be you? Tae speak so hashly o’ the Ard-Rí an Ruigsinneachd?” Someone yelled.

“Me? I be his daughter. Think ye he’d be fair ashamed tae see ye now?” She knotted her hands into
fists, striving to keep her voice steady. For Máthair was watching her, inscrutable. Listening just as patiently as she had promised. “...Killin’ bairns fer youth an’ beauty? Makin’ a mockery of our sacred laws -stealin’ cattle and raiding villages when ye’ve the entire spread of Markarth’s silver tae mine, and the best, most fertile soil tae till! No two shakes aboot it...with the first taste o’ freedom, ye’ve grown indolent. And greedy.”

Nemain coughed, conscious of the stiff silence that now enveloped them. “And I’ve seen what happens to us, y’ken, if this greed doesnae be stopped.”

“How could yew ken th’ future, bitch?” Another called out. “Be you a walking augury?”

“I have Seen it. By Sight and the Threefold Eye passed on by me forebears, so mote it be.” She made the triskelion symbol that denoted respect for the power; watching in cynical pleasure as half of those assembled made the same, nearly instinctual motions with their fingers. Mother Melka looked as though she had swallowed vinegar.

“Ye wish tae know why I joined with the Stormcloaks? Really? Because one year ago, I would hae laughed long an’ hard, the same as any of you, had you been told that you’d thrown in yer lot with the Butcher o’ Markarth and his army of giant, knapdarloch-knittin' fear thuaidh.”

Reluctant laughter tittered back. Giving her strength. “But, I be grateful for my chance tae learn their ways. For I see what I may ne’er have seen otherwise. Aye, there be many fine lessons tae take from the way Ulfric makes war, and even peace. They stand together, fer one. An oath once given is held sacrosanct, and they doon stand there jabbering on aboot what they wish to happen - they make it so.”

"...'til it suits them tae break their vows!” Shrieked someone further back. "Fuck them cul tona bastards! Kill’em all!"

"Nary better than animals," Another muttered.

She would make herself heard. “Doon ye think that plucking at another’s faults be a mere cover for attending tae the troubles we face closer tae home? Gods, this greed must end! It must be stopped and stunted, afore it gains sway and ruins us all fer good. Trolls blood! I’ve been watching ye and I’ve come tae see that ye cannae even agree on something sae simple as what tae eat fer breaking the morning fast. How in bloody Hircine’s name are ye goin tae rule the west, if ye cannot cease this contention at yer own hearths!”

“Hear hear!” The merry-eyed werewolf laughed, shrugging as others fixed him with a gimlet glare. “Wot? Th’ lass be right.”

“An’ what’s more,” she continued, “ye’ve seen the dragons that have risen up from the bones of the earth, aye? Prepare, fer that’ll nae be the last ye see of the blighters. The World Eater has awakened...bringing all his mighty host to follow him on the wing. And as it turns out, it be my duty tae slay him. My duty and my right- fer I be among the few who be living. Living and capable of such a grand feat.”

"If you kill me now, you’ll nae only deprive yerselves of a well-informed tactician...but ye’ll also lose what chance ye have of taking the bastard doon.”

She felt ridiculous yelling her words out like this, flat on her ass as a crowd of armed and bloodthirsty warriors hung on her every word. But it was what it was. “Hearken tae me! ...So long as
the People dinnae care tae exercise their freedoms, those who wish to lord it o'er ye will do so! Fer tyrants like Madanach will devote themselves in the name o’ any number of gods, Et’Ada or no, tae put shackles upon sleeping Reachfolk. Taking ye in, unaware as ye trade one wicked master fer another!”

At that, some in the crowd actually booed. Someone sneered, “The Ard-Rí be a patriot! Unlike thee!”

“The Ard-Rí be a bully, hiding in Cidna Mine.” She would not be baited. She had lived her truth. “Sending young men and woman tae kill or cause chaos, with little reward and nae closure.”

Turning to her side, she struggled to sit up and failed. A huge she-orc stepped forward and lifted her to bend at the waist, her thick green hand steadying Nemain’s back as she wheezed. “Thank ye. And above all he be a careless lout, fer how long have ye been pressed under the thumb of those Silverbloods, all sittin’ pretty in Understone Keep. Malingerin’, stealing our silver...and yet he did nothing?”

“Starved an’ beaten we was!” A woman shrieked. “They took my man, fer no reason other than he wore th’ woad an' spoke a handful o’ Reachgab! Fie on the Silverbloods...the pain they earned be on their own heids! Fie!” Her cry was joined by several other similar yells.

“...Aye, he’s done worse than nothing. And it seems that our living hasnae improved with the retaking of the Reach. Unless I be much mistaken, fer no one else in Skyrim has heard otherwise. An’ believe me, I have begged couriers for news. Without success.” Nemain gripped the hard edge of the stone altar, feeling it cut into her palms.

“And what,” Melka asked, “have yer visions foretold of the future o’ the People, daughter?”

One grand use of words, Nemain mused, be tae hide one’s own thoughts. One of the futures she had seen would work...for now. “Truly, ye yearn tae ken it? Well I'll tell ye all: We diminish. We retreat into the westwold, unable tae come together tae drive away the outlanders as we hide in spare caves and dank holes, barely better than the Falmer whose lodgings we steal.”

“Nords, Redguards, Elves...it matters not who be the invader. In a few hundred years we shall be even more scattered, poor an’ leaderless than we be now - a hiss and a byword. Smoke in the wind. Our names shall be cast into th’ fire and shadow of old ballads and songs; a story tae scold Nord children intae their beds at night. But nothing more real than a frightful dream. That is, if nothing be changed.”

“Lies! Foul lies!”

“Kill ‘er! Kill ‘er an’ the boy now, an’ we’ll feast!”

“Láimh-derg abú! The Red Hand tae victory! Bloood!”

“I doubt ye’d be sae sanguine were it yer own body that the fear thuaidh raped and beat. Durin’ the massacre at Markarth,” Máthair said. Waving at the rest of the arguing mob to be silent, she fixed
glittering eyes on Nemain. “Nor do I believe that these visions of which ye speak be a true telling. Though it nae be yer fault, lass...ye had little t’no tutelage in the mystic arts of scrying afore ye were banished.”

An expectant hush fell, as the hagraven scraped at her chin with one long nail.

“I have decided,” Máthair did not need to raise her voice, for everyone quieted down immediately. “...that ye shall be spared the three-fold death. I shall nay punish thee fer doin’ what ye did tae survive, fer survive y’did Nemain, when it comes right doon to it. I will choose tae believe that ye joined with the Stormcloaks out of a sense o’ self preservation, fer when it coom’s tae power, everyone be of the same religion.”

Someone coughed, but aside from the occasional rustle of leather, all ears were tuned to Melka. “Blood tells true, and yers be as pure as bloodlines do be. T’would indeed be a sore waste, aye, tae squander such...talents, on a mere ritual sacrifice. Though ye shall be compelled tae tell me mair than Windhelm’s produce exports, if’n ye please. The next time we shall speak on matters o’ war, daughter.”

“But the boy…” Máthair’s face made the slightest moue of disgust. “-He be a Nordling. Not of our kind, enemy-born. Unworthy.”

"His blood shall feed the stone and th’ People, this night.”

Nemain cried out in shock, wavering as many hands slapped down on her back in congratulations. Aventus become lost in the crowd, any noise he might have made eaten up by the harsh squawks, screams and howls of the gathered. “No! Nooo!”

“Hush. And sit ye doon.”

Nemain sat woodenly, unable to resist the insidious power of her mother’s spell-strong voice. “You-” Máthair walked closer, parting the cheering horde as her fire-scarred face wavered in the torchlight.

“You willnae escape this night unmarked, daughter dearest.” She spoke softly to the Dragonborn, frozen naked upon the stone altar. Somewhere beyond her in the milling throng, Aventus screamed. And then screamed again. The drums began to pound, with a man whooping, starting the chain of a croaking war chant, as bodies spun away. To stamp and dance.

Nemain bit her tongue and tasted salt, grappling with the spell to reassert control. To move and defend...to flee!

She failed.

“You are Fuasgladh. Forsaken.” The hagraven flicked her fingers in disdain.

“Yer life will be spared, but dinnae think that ye’ll ever be one of us e’ermore. For ye be nae more fit
fer anything save drudge work or breedin’, after wot knowledge ye bear be reaped. Know this: yore belongin’s have been confiscated. Yer name will ne’er even be mentioned by Madanach or anyone connected tae power among us. Dia math, I may as well rename thee fer all the attention ye’ll be receiving."

Brushing an invisible speck of dirt away from her robes, Melka gave Nemain a coy glance. "How d’ye feel aboot the moniker ‘Skull?’ I think with yer new hairdo, it suits ye quite grand."

Nemain was completely incapable of speech.

"...And och, as fer yer visions,” the word seethed from Melka’s lips, as Nemain writhed inside. Creating only a twitch of a mere finger, for all her efforts, “-well. Ye’ll nay longer be granted the courtesy of having th’ People endure the ramblings of yore pitiful Sight.”

The hagraven leaned forward. Her breath smelt like carrion and wine, and Nemain managed to blink before the hagraven’s hands clasped her head; her sharp-taloned thumbs poised over her eyes. Touching delicately down.

“Truly, in point o’ fact…”

-Pressing. Piercing her eyes with unpleasant pressure, then abrupt blinding pain, as Nemain felt something thick and viscous run slowly down from her sockets, as she shook in place. “Ye’ll never need that sight, daughter. Never again!”

-------------------------------------------------------------------

Someone shrieked in a long, unending cry of despair. It took her some time to realize - it was her own voice.

She could not see anything save for bursts of flower-bright white, razing the nerves she could swear were hanging out of her sockets like worms, but she could hear-

-Aventus, screaming for his Ma. She had to go to him, to save him. Sounds of weapons rattling, fighting. The pitch of the torches snapping and popping, the deep rumbling of the drums as many voices rose and fell. Arguing. Celebrating.

...And the deep, satisfied breathing of the hagraven in front of her. A rusty chuckle and a sniff, as Aventus cried out so close. So close nearby, damn it, ochone! She could not see!

“Ma! Ma, no...oh gods no, what did she do - MAAA! Aaaugh!!”

Fury.
It ripped through her; a wildfire of pain and deep, hideous betrayal. She screamed again, feeling the rightness of it. The strength of her voice unbound, crying out to the gods, to the dragons, to anyone.

Anyone and everyone who was listening. They would feel her pain. Hurt, as she had been hurt. It was too late for anything else. There was nothing left, but to call the World Eater to her door. Here. Now.

Nothing else mattered, anymore.

“Ruth Strun Bah! Alduin Zu'u yah hi! Alduin bo wah zey, ful tol Zu'u aal oblaan hi! Zu'u jur hi wah vukein, Lein Naakin! Düst kiün do Bormah! Bo wah zey!”

-And then, she raised the dead. All of the dead, cracking the spell of obedience like glass, like ice- as she brought them all forth from their graves across the depth and breadth of Orphan’s Rock.

Every body she felt with the cool wind of her powers and touched, ancient and new. Rotted to bones or still ripe with putrid flesh, she raised them all...tearing them from their earthen beds with crooked fingers like claws. She could sense them, scrubbling for purchase on the earth with their skeletal fingers. Pulling free of rock, heeding her call to rip. To tear, to kill.

Tilting her head, Nemain breathed heavily, listening as she ignored the wet weeping of her eyes as they dripped down her cheeks. Avid for the tell-tale exhale that would betray her Máthair’s presence...finding it.

It was but the work of a moment to release a bolt of lightning towards the bitch. An arc of shivering might that nearly blew her back in a concussive blast, hitting the stone altar with a grunted *oomphf*, as the redoubt erupted in chaos and confusion.

A body shoved her aside, as more screams arose. A deep, awful roar sounded overhead.

She could *feel* with her magicka all the spells that were being lobbed willy nilly through the air, some hitting friends rather than foes. All around were the sounds of the dead and the dying...the drums being replaced by the foreboding flap of the World Eater’s wings. She cast 'detect life’, instantly becoming aware of all the solid forms running frantically about. Some falling straight off the promontory to their death, in their efforts to evade the massive aura currently blotting out the sky.

*Crunch*. The Firstborn of Akatosh descended, squishing something or someone soft beneath his claws. She could feel the acrid puff of his breath, roasting her skin as it seared her wounds with heat.

The Dragonborn smiled. It was good. A good day, a fine day to die.
-For the gods rewarded the brave, and the bold found their reward in the apple-scented halls of *Emain Ablach*. No Sovngarde mead-swilling afterlife for her...no matter that her chest fairly twinged at the thought of Bear and all the others, left behind…

*No.* Perhaps Galan had found his way and was sipping ambrosia nectar in the laps of the daoine sidhe, already. Pillowed in the breasts of the fair folk.

She hoped he had. She hoped someone somewhere was smiling. Nemain twisted her neck with a snarl, rejoicing in the freedom of being unfettered. No further distractions, now...she felt only hate. She saw only night.

It was likely that this fight would be her end. But her enemies would die as well, in far less peace than she. For her peace was the eye of the storm; a bitter wrath that could only be sated by death, death and more death.

Readying arms that fairly zinged with flame and frost, Nemain stepped away from the stone altar into the unknown. And ran, laughing as her hands bloomed with destruction, towards the void given form; as Alduin howled his welcome in the tongue of the dovah.

Greeting her lust for death with a hunger to swallow the world.

*“Dovahkiin, Zu'u koraav hi! Come to me, be in me, Dovahkiin. Zu'u tolaan wah du, I hunger. Come to me, and partake of your birthright! Eternal! Immortal...unchanging. Unyielding! Bo wah zey!*"
Zu'u koraav hi: I see you!
Bo wah zey: Come to me!

Gaelic

Dia math: Dear Gods
Ard-Rí an Ruigsinneachd: High King of the Reach.
The Opportune Moment

Chapter Notes

Chapter music: Mattia Cupelli's song 'Ascending.'

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jMokG1kQ48

Three stories in one chapter. Three dissimilar pairs. And three unexpected surprises.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ma! Ma, no...oh gods no, what did she do - MAAA! Aaaauugh!!”

Aventus had never been so scared in his life.

A big green hand grabbed his shoulder, spinning him away from staring in horror at Ma’s ruined face. She was still screaming...the tendons in her neck standing out like roots, as the warriors surrounding Aventus twitched, inching away as the Dragonborn continued to keen...

Like a nest of hornets. Muttering and swearing in that strange tongue, as bodies bumped and jostled him. Pushing him further away from Ma, into the crowd.

He had done his best to stand tall and brave. To not act scared in front of the werewolves who had kept him mewed up in their tight grasp. Dripping strings of saliva, as they licked their lips and spoke deliberately in Norse of all the ways they were going to cook him...bartering amongst one another for the juiciest morsels as that terrifying hag priestess spoke with Nemain.

Aventus had held it all together...until the moment Ma had been - don’t think of it!- then she began shrieking in Dovahzul and he screamed too and everything went mad.

Something warm seeped down the leg of his trousers as he gasped at the sight of the huge black dragon - so big, it drowned out the stars. Who? Who could fight that? His feet were planted in the ground, and he was completely, utterly unable to move. He could only stare, with Ma’s unearthly yell piercing his eardrums as more urine dribbled into his shoes, as someone - no - some thing clambered up the slope to the sides of the redoubt and bit into the neck of an unsuspecting warrior. Bringing them down. Eating, as the warrior fought back, more and more feebly as he watched in
horror. Then no longer fighting at all, as it...as...


*Ma! I can’t see her?! What did they do!??*

“No sooner had Aventus registered that the owner of the green hand had spoken to him -a monstrous large orcess, her tusks set in a grimace- when he was promptly picked up and thrown over her broad shoulder. “Hey!”

The queer werewolf who had given him a whole loaf of bread suddenly popped up from nowhere. “Baz!” His brown eyes were rimmed completely in white, and Aventus jerked in the orc’s hold as black dragon bellowed. Beneath them, the very ground shook with the beast’s ire. And all around, the slurping, chewing sounds of those things, eating. People shouting war cries, throwing spells. Dying.

“Baz, take the lad and go...go back tae th’ hoose! Dinnae delay!”

“By the Ashpit, Rhys! Don’t you dare think of dying on me!” Growled the she-orc.

The beastman laughed. “Och, dinnae think ye can get rid o’ me sae easily, wife.” Aventus dug his fingers into the straps of the orc’s armor, his teeth chattering as one of the undead lifted its head from feasting to stare at him with cloudy, blood-veined eyes. “I’ll meet ye there, after gettin’ me fill o’ blood an runnin’ off th’ malingerers. I’ll cover yer scent. Now, run! Run!”

She turned and ran, battering warriors and undead alike out of her way as Aventus struggled to hold onto the meager contents of his stomach. She pounded past the log bridge and into the scree. Down the sloping sides of the redoubt, as Aventus managed to hold on tightly...his entire body slamming up and down with every footfall. Bruising his ribs against the dark metal of her pauldrons, until he squirmed into a softer, less painful angle. Instinct bidding him to play dead; to be limp and unresponsive, as this new and unknown enemy galloped off with him into the night.

It was pitch black in the forest, and he wondered that his rescuer could see anything. Orphan’s Rock was still visible through the twisting tops of the trees, for a veritable starshower of spells had lit it up like a rainbow. Shriil zips of magic could be heard searing through the air, and more than once the she-orc dodged. Barely missing a spell thrown their way, as frost and fire blistered the trunks of trees. Somewhere back in the fray, the dragon roared again.

The orc named Baz did not stop, and Aventus dared not ask her to. Her steps never showed any sign of slowing, and she leapt and dodged fallen trees and rocks with the deftness of a deer. His piss stained trousers had long since dried, and despite the pitched fear of the night (and his grief, for surely Ma was dead... *blinded, how long could she last, gods?*) he was growing tired. His savior smelled strangely of milk and yeast...what with the warmth emanating from her big body and the rocking motions of her stride, he began to feel drowsy.

It was a toss up as to whether he was more hungry or exhausted, and Aventus spent a good chunk of
time bobbing on her shoulder thinking of all the things he’d like to eat, given the chance. It distracted him from swiping at the tears currently marking trails across his cheeks.

He had fallen asleep three times already, when the first light of dawn broke and Aventus felt the earth shift. Without warning, he was dumped upon a pile of straw...and as he coughed, spitting out the dust his fall had stirred he realized that they were no longer alone.

A gangly boy had a knocked arrow pointed straight at him, the bowstring vibrating as Aventus froze in place.

“Arhuid! Bow down!” The orcess ordered. The arrow lowered, and Aventus drew in a deep breath of relief. Stomping towards the stranger, Baz lifted a thick hand and patted his head.

“Well done. You kept watch, and guarded the others. Malacath is pleased with your strength.” The child -elf child-, Aventus noticed, for his tapered long ears bent as he beamed -then turned to look back at Aventus in obvious suspicion, his bow held casually. His eyes never left Aventus as he nocked another arrow.

“Mamma Baz! Oh Baz, thank goodness you’re here!” A willowy girl with golden skin ran through a gate in a wooden fence that Aventus somehow must have missed. He hunched in on himself, unable to ignore for long the sight of that sharp arrowtip. The elf boy smiled at the sight of his fear, thin lips pulled into a satisfied snarl.

How could I miss a fenced-in longhouse right in front of me?

Damn. I hope he’s a horrible shot. Somehow Aventus doubted it.

The girl skidded to a halt, offering up a tightly wound bundle that whimpered and writhed. “He wants you something awful! Hey...who’s that?”

“All in good time. Ah, sweetling, I’ve missed you too.” With graceful economy of motion the orcess unbuckled her axe and took off her breastplate. The shirt underneath bore two damp spots, and Aventus now realized why she had smelled so strongly before of milk. “Gar, y’little greedygut. Come ‘ere.”

With little fanfare, she bore one huge grey-green breast and the babe latched onto it. Sucking with small, contented snorts as the orc -Mamma Baz, he thought in some amazement- gusted a heavy sigh of relief.

“I think you’ve earned that bow, Arhuid. Good work, both of you...stop staring, Felan, go now and take your brother’s post on the watchtower. Don’t make that face. It’s your turn.”

“...Now as for you,” Having sent the two children scurrying, she turned her head to look at him.

The orc lady had the bluest, brightest eyes he had ever seen, Aventus thought dumbly. Like glacier ice, they were striking against the dark of her lichen toned skin and craggy features. Cradled in her arms, the baby burped. She patted its back and switched to nursing the babe on her other breast, idly
flicking away the length of her black horsetail before it could brush the little one’s face.

“...up. Come boy, change those clothes and rest. Inside the longhouse. You lot, you can gawk later. Don’t you have chores to do? Boy?”

The orcess said something else in a concerned tone that he didn’t catch. For he had tried to stand up, and was now swaying in the straw like a drunkard.

*Worse than a milk-drinking baby,* Aventus thought in despair. Right before he succumbed into a dead faint.

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

“Psst! Hey! Imperial boy, wake up! I wanna talk t’you!”

“Y’thick in the heid? He be a Nordling, norra Imperial!”

“Look at his hair! It’s curly. And dark! Of course he’s a southerner.”

“...Or part blood, like us.”

“Hshh! He’s waking up!”

Aventus kept his eyes closed. He was trapped...hemmed in by enemies on all sides. If he waited, bided his time until an opening presented himself then surely he could push through. He could make his escape. Make a bid for freedom. Sick adrenaline coursed through his veins, thrilling him with a spurt of frenetic energy, but he made himself lie still as though he were still asleep. Unaware. Prey.

*Weapons.* Where was a weapon, nearby at hand? He didn’t dare open his eyes to look. He’d use fists if he had to.

A man’s voice, rough and coarse, caused the children to scatter. Making Aventus’ heart nearly give out from the sudden, anvil-pounding terror it caused him. “Hauld yer wheesht, younguns. Cannae y’see he lies awake, listenin’ tae ye jawing off? Cor. He’s lain abed lang enough. Come on, lad, I ken tha’ ye hear me. Come on up, now. Up.”

*Think fast!* Aventus bounded up from the floor and darted towards the nearest bolthole: a dark space beneath a stairwell. Wedging himself in, he felt his breath come short and hard. Folding his limbs into a ball, he made himself as small as possible. Tiny. Unnoticeable.

If he hid, maybe they wouldn’t eat him.

Voices outside his sanctuary were softer now, with the higher pitched interjections of children ruining what he could hear of the adult’s whispered conversation. “...scairt senseless. An’ fer good
reason - the pack o' Lamh Laidir was treated with an offering at th' hagwimmen’s bequest. Ye didnae see, love, but t’was right horrid. Let the lad gather hisself fer a mo’.

“Wot’s ‘bequest’, Ma? Eh?”

“Yeah! What’s an off-ren? Can he come out now?”

“I wannae see ‘im!”

The she-orc snorted. “An offering’s a gift of something sweet, Svanrige. Sacrificed in hopes of gaining favor. And to those weres, nothing is sweeter than innocence. Tell me their blood feeds the earth, Rhys.”

“It does, at that. Nought left there but th’ dead, now...had tae leave it with flesheaters runnin’ amok, fer there be too many tae slay by meself. Place be crawlin’ wid em. Prithee - keep the gates locked an’ the bairns far away from the northern trails fer some time, aye?”

“Hmph. Will do.”

In the shadowy space where light fell away from his hideout, Aventus watched. Holding his breath as a bowl of something that smelled peppery, meaty and rich slowly slid into view.

The werewolf from before appeared, folding his legs and sitting down a good fifteen paces away. He could still hear the children whispering, but he was riveted. Consumed by the food which steamed so temptingly, barely an arm’s length off. So close...close enough to touch.

To taste.

“Slán leat, young man.” A shining brown eye filled the entryway to his hideout, and Aventus scrabbled even further back into the corner. “I be Rhys, an’ the beauteous creature wot carried ye tae me hoose be my wife, Bazoth gra-Shugor.”

“Call me Baz. Rhys, the children are in an ill mood. Get that boy out from under there...drag him by the scruff of the neck if you must, but get to the table so we can all eat. My food grows cold, and you know I don’t like that. Tastes wrong.”

In the dim, Aventus trembled as the owner of the brown eye sighed. “Ye havenae been a mere boy fer some time noo, aye?” The beastman asked not unkindly.

“Call ‘im a man, Baz, fer tha’s wot he be. Thought he wiz gonnae bite me hand clear off when I ushered them wee lassies off tae the Altmer.” A chuckle. “Good instincts, fer all that ‘e be shakin’ loik a leaf naow. Graw, he be nae so gone as tae be treated like a milksop. Start ettin’, an’ I’ll be oot in three shakes uvva jimmy. Ye’ll see.”

Baz huffed, and soon Aventus could hear the ringing of cutlery as the family outside began to consume their meal. Spit pooled in his mouth, and he swallowed - grimacing at the rancid taste of himself. That loaf of bread two...or was it three days ago? It had not been enough.
Lifting a piece of meat from the bowl, Rhys popped it into his mouth. Chewing with relish. “Arr, sae now ye can see - ‘taint be poisoned, aye? Am no gonnae eatcha. Fact yer prolly wunderin’, why the bugger did I e’en bother tae send ye away wid Baz? Stead o’ leaving ye tae the flesheaters. Eh?”

Aventus had been wondering that, in the mindscape left that was not fully occupied in searching for ways to escape...or to fight. He could not hope to fight a werewolf, not weak and weaponless- and so he stayed silent. Watching, as Rhys took another mouthful. Pushing the bowl a bit closer to Aventus where he hid.

“I ken Nemain fram a’fore, yeah? She’s me cousin. Knew er when she was nought but a scrawny, scowly liddle cuss. Ne’er cud stand tae lose a footrace, which allus made me an my mates laugh. Aye, I remember her...though she were jist a wee scrap then: all mud scraped knees an’ a great hunger fer trouble. Her an that Galan feller. ‘Spect nae much ‘as changed, considerin’ the spot she found ‘erself in there, at the end.” The werewolf sighed. “Arr. Ballocks.”

He could not help himself. Aventus reached out his hand and -lightning fast- snagged a wet handful of whatever was in that bowl and shoved it straightaway into his mouth. The flavor of rabbit (thank Shor, he had half expected it to be manflesh) exploded against his tongue, along with the slightly bitter flavor of frost mirriam.

Carrots, salt, and other spices he could not catalogue but that were savory and welcome all the same.

Chewing, he listened as Rhys huffed an almost-laugh. “Ye doon look much loik ‘er, liddle warrior. Too tall. ‘Spekt ye take after yer Da, then, whoe’er he be. Och weel, where was I? Ah. Jabberin’ on aboot the scrapes we’d get up tae in our youth. By Hircine’s hide, it minds me of a summer that I’ll ne’er ferget. Once, Nemain got it in ‘er head tae climb Crone’s Tooth Rock an’ gather the birds eggs from th’ nests up a’there, tae feed the smaller bairns wot cried day an’ night fer food. We had placed arra snares, loik always, but she wouldnae be stirred fram ‘er cause. Sae we-”

Rock climbing stories got him through two more mouthfuls. Rhys no longer took any more from the bowl, content instead to wax on about Ma and the wild exploits she had undertaken with Rhys and Galan...the stories becoming more fanciful as the were’s voice began to take on a songlike cadence. The rhythm of a seasoned storyteller.

Panic drained away as his stomach filled. Five minutes later, a spoon appeared and he took it; no longer slopping half the broth all over the dirt-flattened floor in his eagerness to eat.

“-wasnae any chance Mither Melka would nae see er, all pickled up in blue dye and drippin’ tae boot all oer the stone steps o’ the broch! Ha hahaw! Wot a tannin’ our hides got fram our parents! But it were worth it, aye, in the end. For our fresh dyed kilts had ne’er looked mair pretty. All purple they were...loik thistleblooms."

“Ye can come on oot naow, liddle warrior. Th’ others be eager tae greet ye.”

He had licked the bowl clean, and with only a bit of trepidation, Aventus unfolded himself from his hideaway and stood. Looking for a place to put the dish away to be washed,, as he hurriedly wiped his face with the ragged edge of his sleeve.

Aventus may have downed the meal like a crazed horker, but he could manage some manners. He
In the main room of the longhouse Rhys now stood next to Baz, with children in varying stages of adolescence huddled around them. All whispering furiously. The orcess was nearly two heads taller than her husband, but the muscled arm he had wrapped around her shoulder looked natural - a perfect fit. As did the yellow fanged smile he graced the boy with, as Aventus managed to take two steps forward. “Wot be yer name, son?”

He hesitated. “Are all these your children?” Ten steps. And there - a woodcutter’s axe. He could always make a run for the door, if Baz and Rhys turned out to be anything like the other werewolves at Orphan’s Rock.

A shaggy eyebrow rose. “They do be mine, aye, but nought by birth. Ah kin only claim this wee babby as me flesh an’ blood. The others ’ave come to us by happenstance or guid fortune, but I’ll let ’em speak tae thee on their own. Garzash, say hi ye liddle scamp.”

Baz lifted the babe she carried so that Aventus could see him. Plump cheeked and gurgling, the white-skinned babe opened and shut his mouth to babble, revealing the tiny nubs of tusks as Baz raised his fat hand. Making him wave.

The golden skinned girl stepped forward. Her eyes were a peculiar shade of clear blue-green that Aventus had never seen before, and they stared at one another in equal fascination. “Felandaris, formerly of Solitude. My mam was a Nord streetwalker what got with child by a Thalmor. She was going t’sell me to a Khajiit caravan, until Baz intervened and took me away.” She folded her skinny arms and smiled. “Grown up here ever since.”

The bow wielding boy he had met earlier cleared his throat and spoke next. “Ah’n Arhuid. A Bosmer - ‘arf Imperial, but ye cuid prolly see tha’ from me eyes. Rhys foun’ me robbin’ fram the Empires supply wagons arter me parents kicked th’ bucket inna bandit den.”

His knife-like ears twitched. “Tol’ me I wiz wasted bein’ a thief when I had th’ raw makins uvva first rate hunter. Got me first bow now, too.” His human-brown eyes became narrow slits. “Nae funny bizness, or I’ll shoot yew wid sae many arrers tha’ yer stomach’ll hauld nae more water than a sieve.”

Rhys flung out his free hand, stopping the others in their clamour to greet the stranger. “Enough, enough! Ye’ll fair overwhelm ’im, ye will. Now that greetins ’ave been exchanged, let us hear yore name. I’ll make it easy- we be practically in the Reach, arter all.”

The man bowed his head. “Rhys is ainm dom. My name be Rhys. Now, yer turn.” He gestured expectantly.

Sucking at his lower lip, Aventus glanced around the room. Two of the children were little more than clout-wearing toddlers, and had lost interest in him. They were currently rolling small wooden bears along the floor, making growling noises. Both were Dunmer; with the bluest skin he had ever seen. Like ripe bilberries.

The older ones were a mishmash blend of human and Mer mixing. One boy had a cleft palate, slashing his dark Redguard skin beneath golden Bosmer eyes. Another girl, not quite as attractive as Felan, was obviously part orc. Her height made sense with the bulk she bore, a marked indicator of
As if the tusks and that foul expression hadn’t given it away, Aventus thought sluggishly. Blonde dreadlocks draped against her blue woad tattoos, scrawled with runes against the strength of her bare arms.

They were all waiting for him to say something.

Feeling the last vestiges of fear ease, Aventus consciously relaxed his hands from the tight fists they had balled into. And bowed in turn.

“Aventus Aretino is ainm dom. My name is Aventus Aretino. And I thank you,” he turned to face Baz, whose face was set in a mild smile. “-For your timely rescue. I’m sorry for my behavior earlier.”

“Well met. And there be nought fer thee tae be sorry for, Aventus. Nought at all.”

Baz gave him a queenly nod. “It was our honor, to bring Nemain Stonetalon’s son away from that cursed place. By Malacath...another failed Gathering.”

“Aye. Take heart, wife. More will be called. Arra time will coom soon enou’, ye shall see.” Rhys stepped forward and wrapped his hand around that of Aventus’, shaking it vigorously as the others surged around them. Poking at his hair, chattering in excitement as the boy was swarmed by giggling, prodding children.

“-he is a southerner! See? Curls! He’s a’got dark, curly hair!”

“...I wanna touch ‘im too!”

“Gack, don’t bother. He smells worse than Rhys’ laundry basket! Worse than a privy!”

“That’s enough, Damien. He’ll bathe when he’s ready. Do not be rude.”

“Okaaaay, Mama Baz.”

“Hi, ‘Ventusss! I’m Sssings-with-Fisssh! Ssseee? Doesss he have a tail too, Rhysss?”

“Oy!” Barked Rhys, though his brown eyes were laughing. Aventus held stock still, unwilling to move as hands of all shades and sizes patted him from head to toe. “Hush, ye glaikin’ chatterly lot! Cor, cannæ hardly ‘ear meself think these days. Sorry Aventus.”

He was borne on a wave of piping voices, shoved towards what the lisping Argonian child told him was the bathhouse. “Hey, werewolf! Where am I in Skyrim?” Aventus managed to call out, causing Rhys to stop squishing baby Garzash’s cheeks.

Baz was clearing away the dishes from the meal, and she gave him a pronounced eyeroll as Rhys laughed. And answered, before turning back to tickle his babe’s fat feet as Garzash lolled about on his knees. “You be in mah longhoose set on th’ foothills o’ the Jerall mountain range, Aretino. South by sou’east of Falkreath, near Pale Pass.”

“Welcome tae ‘Arf-hoose, boyo!” Rhys called, out of sight as Aventus was unceremoniously plopped into an empty bathtub and divested of all his clothes.
“Arf-oose?” He gasped as fresh water sluiced over him, thrown in buckets from what felt like a glacier-fed stream. Gods, that was cold!

“Half House!” The elf maid Felan grinned at him, filling her bucket from an exposed aquifer. It bubbled from a black rock that seemed to form the back of the longhouse wall, making him nearly yell as she tossed yet another load of frigid water onto him. “Welcome to the family, Aventus! You’ll fit right in! I can tell!”

Arhuid sniffed at his wadded up clothes and retched. “Nae until he warshes guid an’ well wid soap. Ech! When did ye last bathe, Nord?”

“Naw, he be an Imperial, I say!”

“Nord!”

“Imperial!”

“Obviously he be both. Born on the wrong side o’ the blanket, eh Aventus?”

“Well, look at ‘im! His todger be huuuge!”

"...Definitely a Nord, then!”

Their laughter caused his cheeks to blotch a bright red, and he started scrubbing with the washcloth they gave him. Rubbing himself with the crumbly soap that might have smelled like snowberries, had the rank stench of tallow and lye not stung his nose and eyes. Making them water.

_Not because of how nice they are_ , he told himself savagely as Felan courteously took the washcloth to scrub down his back. _They’re strangers. Don’t get comfortable, Aventus._

_Stay aware. Stay sharp._

The water was bitterly cold. But somehow, as the other children jested and poked fun...splashing and joshing each other all in good faith, he realized.

Inside...he was warm.

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

Astrid had been in numerous dank holes and dives throughout her career as an assassin.

She knew -she had no call to be picky. Her dark craft was plied in cities, sewers, caves...villages, roadsides. Not even Dwemer ruins proved a barrier to one of her stealthy kills. For it didn’t matter where she went in the end, as long as her blades drank blood and her purse grew heavy. Though if
she were to be honest with herself, she had amassed quite a collection of places she would be thrilled-
utterly happy, to never step foot in again.

In her head Astrid tended to rank them. By location, by smell -or the lack thereof- the ease of getting
in and out unseen, and the company of the clientele inhabiting said places.

Pulling up her hood, she glanced around the sleepy hamlet of Ivarstead. Rustic. Inbred. With more
cattle and chickens than there were people. Likely every slackjawed inebriate can trace their lineage
here back to the first era.

Just the sort of broken-down farm village Astrid had once vowed never to live in again. Pushing
open the door of Vilemyr Inn, she was greeted with a ripe smell that made her abruptly reconsider
where she would place the inn in her ranking system.

Ugh. Foul. It nearly caused her to step backwards, bumping the solid form of Arnbjorn. His warm
hand steadied her....sliding down to cup her arse. She hooked a finger around one of her knives,
instantly feeling better as her husband squeezed his handful with a throaty chuckle.

With bladed edges -and men- Astrid always knew her way. Her thoughts cleared, and across the
smoky jumble she smiled in vindication to see the distinctly white-blond hair of her quarry. Hardly a
stone’s throw away.

“Gotta clean mug for ya. Give me a holler if you’re thirsty or hungry,” the inkeep called out.

She lifted a gloved finger in acknowledgement, her eyes firmly fixed on the elf who had sent her
such irritatingly detestable news.

The vomit-manure stench did not lessen once inside. Skirting around a wet patch that she thought
might have been the culprit, Astrid stepped carefully around the singing, noisome crowd of farmers
and travelers. Picking her way across the tavern floor, Arnbjorn a brooding shadow following
closely behind.

Though she had expected to find him here, the leader of the Dark Brotherhood was taken aback to
finally get a good look at the ArchMage of Winterhold. The elf seemed preoccupied by the book he
was holding in his long-fingered hands, though she thought any true observer might have noticed the
brackets around his mouth. The creases of angst rippling his high forehead.

-For he appeared to be barely holding on to his illusion of calm, as two handfuls of that shockingly
white hair were carefully being smoothed with a comb by a tiny Nord girl.

Another hank of hair was currently being braided into knotty pink bows by her doppelganger...the
ribbons flapping every so often against the Mer’s sharp-planed face as she hummed. He suffered
their work in silence, earning a silent commendation from Astrid as she noted just how miserable the
elf was.

And how very patient he was being, with two younglings from what his ilk would consider a brutish,
inferior race. How an individual treats small animals and children often speaks of their character in
myriad other ways as well, Astrid mused.

This interrogation was going to prove interesting. She was sure of it.
The girls did not cease their attentions as Astrid and Arnbjorn drew nearer. “Well, well.” Astrid drawled, for she knew by the whitening of his knuckles that the Mer knew who she was.

“I must say, I usually hold off on premature judgements of a new colleague’s character until after the first conversation. Yet I must admit - I did not expect you to be so, hmm. Tied up.”

“Straight laced,” suggested Arnbjorn.

“Yes, it seems the great Ancano of Winterhold has been leashed. Such twisted scruples you must have, Archmage, considering the missive that has put us in this bind.” Astrid assumed a casual, yet ready stance, her hands hovering over her blades in case the elf attacked her. “One might say...plaited, even.”

“Spare me your tedious attempts at hilarity. The- argh!” Ancano hissed, wincing as one of the girls caught the comb against a knot.

Astrid allowed a smile to warm her eyes as Ancano met her gaze; the gravity of the moment ruined by the little girl’s attempts to free her comb. Tugging it back and forth, she audibly ripped his hair out until Ancano pulled her hands away.

“You.” He imperiously tilted his head until the other girl was unable to reach the tangled mess she had made. “And you. You wretched imps in the flesh.” Astrid bit back a chuckle...her husband having no such reservations as his deep, growling laughter vibrated against her back.

“Go find Dotta. Go fetch some sweetrolls, and play in the room with your dolls until I come for you. I must needs speak with these two alone.”

Two pairs of blue eyes shone hopefully up at the elf. “Can we has honey nut clusters too?”

“Hey! I wanna sweetroll!”

“No! Honey nut clusters!”

“Honey nut clusters anna sweetrolls!”

“Ooh, and apple juice! Please, Cancano? Pleasepleaseplease??”

Sitting stiffly, Ancano’s attempt at dignity was defaced by a pink ribboned braid that had twisted loose. It fell like a gaudy banner across his nose, and he swiped it away with an irritated cough. “One.” He lifted a finger, glaring at the girls who merely giggled. “One sweetroll, and one honey nut cluster. Each. That and no more. I’ll not have you lie abed, singing and throwing straw as you were so inclined to do last night. Where is Dotta?”

“Here.” An older girl appeared, her freshly cleaned and damp hair gleaming like gold in the murk of the firepit. She took one look at the situation and swiftly pulled the younger girls by the hand, away from the three adults. “Come, you two. Let’s...um. Get outta Ancano’s hair.”

The elf actually sobbed ever so slightly as they disappeared from sight, still tittering like birds. “By
Phynaster,” he ripped the bows from his hair, his fingers snarling it up even worse… “Auri-El! Zenithar! Trinimac Himself would not have the godly wherewithal to deal with those..those-”

“-Cute little girls?” Suggested Arnbjorn, whom Astrid suspected was enjoying himself immensely.

“It seems you are in a bit of a situation, hmm?” Astrid took a seat on the vacated bench, making room as Arnbjorn slid smoothly onto the space next to her.

“Yes. No. Bah, it matters little to you I suppose.” Finished ridding his hair of all frippery, Ancano clawed his hands through the mass of it and blew out a sigh. “I expect you have come to regale me with stories of your successes at Orphan’s Rock. At least my courier found you. Tell me, how does Nemain fare?”

Leaning back ever so slightly, Astrid shared a look with Arnbjorn. “We haven’t been there yet.”

“What?” The Mer fixed them with a furious frown. “Truly, tell me you jest. I sent you that missive not three hours after leaving that seethe of homicidal bigots. The man asked three times the normal fee for carrying it to your dead drop in Falkreath...apparently your location has earned something of a reputation with couriers.”

“All those efforts…” Ancano made a disgusted noise, slouching against the bench. “- and you did not go.”

“You seem terribly well informed. How did you know that I have been searching for the Dragonborn, Ancano?” Astrid asked calmly. She would be stoic. Unruffled. She would not drag the elf off to a secluded room and tickle him with her blades. Torturing him for all he was worth until he revealed all that he knew. “How do you know our hierarchical terms? Who told you that Nemain is the Listener? I barely knew myself until confirming it in Whiterun. Speak.”

Ancano drummed his fingertips upon the table, flicking bits of pink ribboned fluff away. He gave Astrid a knowing glance. “How did you know to find me here?”

They watched one another guardedly. Astrid’s mind spun with the possibilities...either he had paid off some of the same spies she herself employed (and paid them quite handsomely) or he was far more well-versed in the signs and tokens of Sithis than she had heretofore expected. She would have to bribe her eyes and ears to inspire further loyalty. Again.

Or -more plausibly- he had known Nemain. He must have been near when the woman suffered the signs of her Calling. The dreams. The very voice of the Unholy Matron herself. Perhaps she had confided in him?

Behind her hood, Astrid frowned. How could he know?

The Altmer’s lean face stretched with a slow, growing grin. “I was raised in Firsthold of Auridon, madam. Where Queen Morgiah of Barenziah’s get colluded with Mannimarco and Sithis alike. I have been brought up to know the signs. To recognize certain key words.” He blinked, then looked away from the two assassins. “When last I saw the Dragonborn, she suffered from dark dreams. She heard a voice in the night, calling out to her.”
Ancano shrugged. “It did not take much, aside from confirmation through certain eyewitnesses and so on, to ascertain that she had been Called to serve.”

Her husband never sat still, but his giant form had frozen behind her. She tilted her head back, and Arnbjorn whispered into her ear. So quietly that none but she could hear. “The Bee and Barb. They were together...Babette and I saw it.”

Damn.

“You’ve made a grave mistake, coming after me instead of attending to her at your earliest convenience.” His amber eyes were solemn. “I do hope this reticence of action was more due to a desire to rescue my friend, and not out of any fear to be supplanted in your dear family’s feelings, Astrid.”

“Being Listener, after all, is a higher calling than Speaker. Is it not?”

She realized with an unpleasant jolt that her blades were half-drawn...her legs tensed and ready. Prepared to make a leap at this smug elf, who thought he knew so damn much about her. Her jaw tightened as she acknowledged that, at least in this, he was partially justified.

Bringing the Listener back to her home...her sanctuary? It would change everything. She was used to being in charge. Astrid was not sure that change, when it came, would be entirely welcome.

Hmph. The censure for her delay was perhaps well-deserved.

“What does this matter to you?” She whispered tonelessly. Unwilling to bring any more attention to their smelly corner of the inn, though annoyance had straightened her spine into a steely rod.

“It matters not. What should concern you,” His yellow finger tapped a spill of mead, tracing it into a circle. “is that your Listener is in captivity. Held in thrall to a powerful being who has no compunction about ending her life. No matter what it may mean for the rest of us, for Skyrim or even Nirm should she fall.”

“...That alone should have sent you straight to Orphan’s Rock upon reading my message.” Ancano flattened his hand against the table.

Seated as he was, the elf seemed to loom in the darkness. Growing taller, gaining an edge of danger that had not existed earlier. Bedecked as he had been in little girls and lacings. “Yet instead you have sought me. Have taken the time to make light at my expense. I hope the pleasure of my presence does not gainsay your devotion to your family. For I will be wroth to find you have injured through inattention any member of mine.”

“She’s not yours to protect, mage.”

“Ah. But she is like myself, though - a powerful mage. One of the strongest necromancers I have
ever seen. Nemain will always be held in high regard by myself and the others of the College. And with that regard comes protection. Such as it is."

His voice oozed with an edged, deliberate reserve. “I must ask. What will you do? To what lengths will you go, to save your Listener? If she is indeed Chosen of the Night Mother, then I imagine the efforts will not be inconsequential.”

She remained silent, the raucous merrimaking of the tavern patrons covering the tension that ticked on the longer she mused. Worry began to grip Astrid, making her shift in discomfort as she began riffling through what she knew of the prosaic Forsworn Gathering she had been invited to attend.

It was supposed to have been uneventful, according to Babette - a joining of separate, warring fiefdoms whom everyone knew could barely stand the sight of one another, except to shout Nord slurs and drink themselves stupid. Toasting the unlikely dream of retaking of the Reach.

Astrid could not recall if anyone particularly powerful was supposed to have been in attendance. She would have known if Madanach or Titus Mede was to appear, of course. By Sithis, even someone from House Indoril or Redoran would have sparked somewhat of an interest.

But to her knowledge, no one worthy of note was due to be there. So, she had received the invitation and just as quickly had dismissed it. Her hands were full managing the various jobs and contracts her little family had been engaged in. Too full to contemplate a night of navel-gazing boastfulness...no matter how diverse the guestlist was, or who she could have gained as a potential client contact.

Ancano watched her during this process, his amber eyes unerringly going to where Arnbjorn’s hand had settled, forming a rigid weight on her waist. As her fertile mind judged and rejected multiple scenarios she could practically feel the Mer’s pointed recognition of her relationship with the man at her back.

It made her wary. On edge, to have a weakness so blatantly revealed. Deliberately sliding her knives back into their sheaths with a metallic shiing, Astrid cocked her head at Ancano. And delivered him her response.

“I take care of my own, mage. Manage your own folk and trouble me no further.”

He made no reply. Only staring back, his eyes like embers on her shoulderblades as she spied the three girls emerge from their room from the corner of her sight.

As she walked away, Arnbjorn held the door open for her. More than a courtesy, it allowed her a spare moment to listen, as she caught Dotta’s furious voice carrying across the noise of the tavern.

"...she’s lying. I know she's lying...she won’t save ‘em Ancano! Butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth! Gods! Aventus is still stuck in that cage. I'm gonna go back an’ kill that Reach bitch. Kill her dead!"

In complete contrast to the girl's heated rage, the Archmage's voice was cold as winter.

"Not if I get to her first."
Later, as they made camp in a cave that had been uncommonly dense with wild bear, Astrid lay with her husband upon a rug made from their furs. Staring into the crackling fire, they enjoyed a rare moment of isolation; lazy and for once, fully sated. She made a noise of approval, humming as he trailed a hand down the smooth curve of her hips.

She stretched; Arnbjorn’s lips bringing out a sigh of pleasure as he nibbled along the length of her neck. “Astrid. You ever wanted children of your own?”

“Gods, no.” She managed to scoff, her voice turning breathy with want as he found that perfect spot between her neck and shoulder. Biting down, he worried her skin to the point where it was neither pleasure nor pain, but a bit of both. After so many years together, he knew exactly what she liked, and how she liked it. Pure, perfect bliss.

“Hmm. Alright. Can’t say it’s something I’ve ever thought about much. But we’d make some cute little murderers, you and I.”

“Oh, stop it. You call every child you see a selfish, snot nosed brat.” She pondered the obvious exception. Shivering, as his tongue soothed the rawness of that bite. “Save for Babette, of course.”

“Hah. If that bloodsucking midget doesn’t qualify as selfish, then no one will.”

“She can be troublesome at times, I’ll grant you that. Still…”

His nose brushed the shell of her ear. “What the mage said bothered you.”

It did no good to lie. Her husband could smell a falsehood, she was sure of it. “Yes.”

“Don’t see why. By fucking Sithis, you’re the Dragonborn’s superior in every way. Shouldn’t be threatened by any of that...besides. This way we get more contracts straight from the source, right? And more contracts mean more coin.” He lipped her earlobe. “More coin means more downtime. Can’t see nothing wrong with that.”

“Right. You are right, of course.” Closing her eyes, Astrid forced herself to relax. To enjoy the warmth and security of the one good thing that had happened to her, in the whole of her life.

No. She curled up against Arnbjorn’s scarred and naked body, conscious of the wickedly sharp blade that lay within easy reach upon the edge of the fire. The blade that she had worn since her youth, that she had slashed her grasping, sweaty-palmed uncle’s fat throat with. The blade that had won her this life.

Not the only good thing.

“I have decided. We shall venture to Orphan’s Rock next, husband. I do not trust that elf’s intentions...I wish to observe the Dragonborn myself. And once we have evaluated the situation we will help her, if there proves an opportunity to do so.”

Arnbjorn grunted in agreement. She preened, aware of how his eyes hungrily tracked her body. Why
It was early, yet.

“And then, husband, we shall see what there is to see.”

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In the morass of the red rain, Ulfric danced.

His blade bit into necks, shoulders, loins. He spun - turned and pivoted to cut off the leg of an Imperial who ran, screaming at him. The man’s eyes bulged as Ulfric fluidly pulled out his axe and slashed his throat before he could fall...stepping over a pile of seaweed to greet another with axe and sword. Bringing them the death they so clearly desired.

In the pulse of the present, conflict possessed his mind. Banishing all wayward thoughts, leaving no room for anything but the blood and the bodies that presented themselves as targets. The dance of survival that he knew like a prayer, bone-deep: patterns of combat honed and memorized since his youth.

It was like a song of fire in his arms. Burning. Weighing down his limbs, as the last body that bore Imperial mail gurgled and died. He sat in the cold surf before his legs could give out, hearing the cheers of his soldiers with nothing but a faint sense of despondency. Feeling utterly exhausted, as he shook with the effort of breathing in a normal fashion. In and out.


The shores that rolled beneath the shadow of Solitude’s great stone arch echoed his gasps. Back, and forth, the tides lapped at the black beach. In and out. Up and down.

Slowly, his heart retreated from its breakneck efforts to beat clear through his chest.

Wiping blood from his face, Ulfric felt himself settle more deeply in the wet sands as thoughts - unwelcome, bitter thoughts- returned. He watched the line of the horizon, as dragonships bobbed in the distant sea. Other things drifted in the waters as well - crates, boxes and bags. The wreckage from the ships that his men had been unable to commandeer, that had been burned. Bodies that floated, boneless and sometimes faceless.

The very salt of the air was saturated with the iron-rot redolence of war.

He blinked as a scaly tail flicked water in the air, disappearing with a wet sucking *glop*. *Slaughterfish*. A big one; dragging his prey into the deep with a splash. Ulfric hoped the poor bastard had actually been dead. Surely he was dead now. Scratching his neck, the Jarl grimaced as his hand came up wet with fresh blood.

He hoped the poor sod was dead. Whatever armor he had worn, they were all equal in the eyes of the gods in the aftermath of battle. Food for scavengers, for the worms. Ulfric sighed again, nudging
his axe and sword a bit further away from the waves. He’d clean his weapons later.

Out of the red mist that he kept blinking away, Galmar approached. Whistling a jaunty tune...stepping on a surviving Imperial’s throat until the man stopped struggling and lay still. “Not a bad fight, Ulfric. We only lost a bare handful, and the battle-maidens are healing those who’ll pull through.” His general smacked his lips and chuckled. “We took three of the milk drinker’s ships, even as they fired on their own cargo. Three more ships to harry Tullius and besiege their transports. Hah!”

Dragging a wooden box closer to where Ulfric sat, Galmar ripped open the lid and triumphantly lifted two fat bellied bottles into the air. “Hah! What did I tell you? Cyrodiilic brandy, put down in 122. Very good year, hahhah! We’ve never eaten so damn good. Stormcloaks, go and make sure these bastards are all dead, aye? Then...we feast!”

A bedraggled collection of war cries greeted that as the surviving Stormcloaks saluted, then trudged wearily through the shallows to check the shoreline. Pausing to cut the throats of any surviving Imperials, picking up anything useful among the flotsam cast ashore.

“Here.” Ulfric eyed Galmar as his second in command sat down next to him, slamming the brandy bottle in between his legs. “Drink up. Celebrate! We are four fucking leagues away from Solitude herself! The seat of kings in Skyrim. Their bloody, sodding thrice-ploughed capitol. And we just kicked their asses and reinforced our blockade...again! Why aren’t you celebrating?”

“I should have gone back for them.”

“Gods, not this again.” Galmar popped open the cork on his brandy and took a long, drawn out swig. “Ulfric, we sent Ralof to track them down. If anyone knows that stretch of Talos forsaken wilderness, it’s him. He grew up there. But if you would just listen to ‘my’ opinion…”

“-which I won’t,” muttered Ulfric.

“...Then I would say, let them go. Shit! Let ‘em go!” Taking another draught, Galmar spat into the sea. “How long did you think the Reachwitch would stay, lad? Once she had twisted you round her finger, think you that she’d vow undying love and play the courtier in the Blue Palace? Loyal mage and stalwart lover, eh? Hopping to your every whim? Bah, I thought you knew women a bit better than that.”

“She didn’t leave on purpose. There were no tracks to show where they went or why...there was only the body.”

“-and elk prints, with traces of magic on the river and the trees nearby, yes, yes…” Galmar’s gestures became more unsteady with every sip he took. “I know! We’ve rehashed the where and why of it too many fucking times to count! Damn that bitch, but she played you for a fool. And who’s to say she didn’t kill the poor little scrap as well? You really want to bring back a witch into our fold that could do something like that to a child?”

Galmar ground his teeth, staring at the sea. Ulfric turned to watch alongside him, as in the distance their fleet tacked sail and began ponderously moving east. Presumably running the shoals towards Dawnstar and then back again. “I’ve seen some shit, Ulfric, but I’ve never. Never seen a body so drained of life, aside from a draugr that.”
“Do not speak of it, Galmar.” The anger that he kept banked flared at the man’s accusatory tone. “It was not her, damn it. It couldn’t be. She loved Sophie.” And she loved me, she said so. I am sure of it. She wouldn’t just leave.

He did not want to consider the sinking possibility that Galmar was right and he was wrong.

“Well mages don’t just goddamn disappear leaving a trail of bodies behind, Ulfric! Something happened!”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Ulfric groaned. Blinking again, he decided that it was sand that was making his eyes water with grit, and not seawater. Peering at his sleeve, he decided that the underside was slightly less drenched in blood, and he lifted it to his eyes to wipe them clean. They definitely were not tears. He hadn’t cried for decades.

But the anxiety that shadowed his thoughts and stole his peace...that he knew for what it was. It was a familiar friend, the pain that pricked him. Compelling him to counter Galmar with the only right response. “I’m going back down there, to look for them. Nemain must have left signs of some sort. Ralof wouldn’t know how to mark a mage’s tells, but I can. Perhaps...once we’ve tallied our losses and taken stock of our presence in the Pale, I’ll go.”

“Like balls you are. I just managed to drag you north. You’re staying right here, ’til we get the message that our forces are ready to take Whiterun.” The empty bottle broke against the rocks as Galmar tossed it carelessly behind him. “You give the word, and that city is yours.”

“Whiterun is only a means to an end.” Gods, he was so tired.

“I’ve toured our camps. We’re ready, Ulfric. Our numbers have risen since we took Falkreath and made pact with those Red Wave corsairs. Salty cunts, those pirates...but you can’t deny. They’ve made our job a damn sight easier. More and more are flocking to our cause with every victory. And thanks to that goddamn fine navy you see, we can finally feed them too.”

Galmar leaned back into the sand with a contented grunt. “All that’s left to do is for you to sound the horn.”

Ulfric picked up his axe and began wiping away the blood on the leather of his pantleg. The trousers were ruined anyway. "Is any man ever ready to give the order that will mean the deaths of many?"

"No.” Galmar shook his head. “But neither is every man able to give that order when he must. 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. They are the meanest, toughest sons of bitches Skyrim has to offer.”

Putting his axe aside, Ulfric tended to his sword as he allowed Galmar’s words to part the fog that troubled his thoughts. “-And they want this, my king. They want this as much as you do. Perhaps they want it more.”

“Those Imperial bastards can defile our shrines. They can arrest our people, and they can silence our voices, but goddamn it the Empire will never destroy our spirit!” Ulfric rested his forehead against the silver shine of his blade, allowing his eyes to droop shut as Galmar finished his diatribe with a weighty stomp. “As long as we keep Talos in our heart, his legacy will never die.”
“Well said, Galmar.”

The Jarl considered what must be done.

He had been wild with worry, that first night that Nemain and her children had gone missing. After setting the entire contingent to scour the riverside and the foothills, only to come up short, it had been no easy choice. Following Galmar’s summons up to the Sea of Ghosts, where his presence had raised morale to create not one, but three triumphant wins over the past week alone.

It would do them no good, he conceded, to pine over what was no longer under his control. Nemain was resourceful...and cannier than the fox she so resembled.

She’d be alright.

"Send the word, Galmar. If we are truly ready, then nothing can stop us now."

“Yes!” Galmar leapt up to his feet, Ulfric following more slowly...feeling each and every year of his mortality pile up like stones upon his shoulders as he stood.

He licked his lips, tasting salt, and spoke. “A new day is dawning. The sun rises over Whiterun. Tell them. Tell them all to make ready. We will rise to break them, come that red dawn day.”

Galmar laughed, reaching around Ulfric’s shoulders for a rare -and rough- hug. "Aye, and the sons of Skyrim will greet that dawn...teeth and swords flashing!" Crowing with joy, Galmar pushed and shoved Ulfric until he stopped staring at the bodies that lay upon the beach.

He allowed himself to be pulled away, in thought and will, from the sea and its harvest of corpses. As Galmar drew him towards the light and activity of the Stormcloak camp, Ulfric felt the mantle of responsibility settle even deeper, as he watched as fists saluted him. Men and women stepped aside respectfully as he passed them, whispering his name. A loud cry went up at his coming.

“It is time!” Galmar shouted, sweeping his hand around the camp. “This is it, men! They say that our cause is false, and that we are nothing more than thieves, thugs and murderers! They say this, and they dare to sully our justice with lies!”

Ulfric watched as his soldiers - his men and women, his to kill and his to spare, cheered and raised their axes at Galmar’s words. “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. And because our hearts are bursting with anger! What we do here today and every day from this moment, we do for our country! For all the true Nords of Skyrim!”

Through the deafening roar that greeted Galmar’s little speech, Ulfric’s mind remained untouched. He was responsible for them all. He wouldn’t, could not let them down. Not now. And as they toasted the imminent attack on Skyrim’s largest, most prosperous Hold with mead stolen from the Empire’s own ships, Ulfric sipped and thought dark thoughts.
And so it begins.

The trebuchets were ready. A storm broiled upon the horizon, turning the blue-edged sky black. And Whiterun was laid bare...ripe for the picking.

All around him, Stormcloaks stood armored and alert. The fires of the farmholds burned, clouding the autumnal chill with dank smoke, and he dug his heels into his mount’s flanks. Turning the horse’s nose to trot through the ash black remnants of wheat fields. Scourged to the dust, as Galmar and three of his generals rode alongside him.

To treat with Balgruuf and the others, who watched. And waited, their own beasts pawing nervously as Ulfric bade himself to remain impassive. To show not a shred of emotion; not joy at the numbers with which Balgruuf had chosen to greet him, nor dismay at the presence of Haafingar’s Jarl Elisif herself.

Elisif the Fair, whose fine-boned pony danced and snorted at the sight of the warhorses the Stormcloaks rode. Her fur trimmed cape fluttered in the wind, long auburn braids twisting beneath the coronet she wore. Pretentious as ever.

Who rides a beast like that to battle? Ulfric thought in disdain, and he allowed the tenor of his thoughts to show clearly. As the would-be queen noted his expression, she drew herself up straight and tall. Not even deigning to look at him, as Balgruuf cleared his throat.

And spoke. “Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak.”

He nodded in return. “Jarl Balgruuf. Nice day, isn’t it.”

The reins rested easily in his hands as he waited for someone from Whiterun to say something else. He could wait. He could sit here, in armor his housecarl had buffed to a high sheen, all the damn long day if he wanted.

For behind him was spread a mighty force...countless fists of Stormcloaks, lathered in a righteous sweat of bloodthirsty furor, after the wake his generals had thrown in preparation of this siege. Battle engines had been built; trebuchets, ladders and battering rams. All ready and waiting for his word to be unleashed.

Though it was unlikely he would need them. Ulfric quirked an arrogant smile at the crumbling walls the defenders stood piled up against.

No. This would not take long at all. He half expected to be dining in Dragonsreach by the evening hour.
“Jarl Ulfric. Well met.” This time, his voice came from the high and clear tones of Elisif herself.

Ripped from the pleasant thoughts he always contemplated before going to war, Ulfric looked down his nose at her. “Elisif. What exactly are you doing here?” He looked around in an exaggerated manner. “I don’t see Falk, or any of your other advisors here. Can it be you have somehow formed a thought entirely of your own making, woman?”

If anything, her chin raised even higher as his generals snickered amongst themselves. It dawned on Ulfric that of all the Jarls he had borne the pleasure of meeting, only Elisif never slouched when seated upon her throne.

*The woman could use a stiff drink, and a stiffer man.* Ulfric allowed his lip to curl. It was just a shame that no true Nord would touch her with a ten foot pole. “I am prepared to offer you terms of peace, if you would concede to raise the naval blockade you have surrounded my city with, Ulfric.”

This was sounding better and better by the moment. Though Galmar wouldn’t like it...the man liked to compare ducking out of a fight to be as bad as a suckerpunch to the cock.

Too bad. He’d make them work for it. Pasting an insincere smile on his face, he enjoyed the view as Elisif’s jaw visibly clamped at his words. “And what are these terms, hmm? Full pardon for Stormcloak prisoners? A slap on the wrist of your Thalmor associates?”

His horse whickered as he reached forward to rub its neck. “Perhaps a letter of apology? For the untimely deaths that followers of Talos have had to endure, under the White-Gold Concordat...under your rule, I might add. Though it will not save you from our swords.”

Balgruuf blanched, but the woman kept her cool. He mentally begrudged her a measure of respect. “Hardly. Though my opinion of you has not changed since our last meeting, I have been in council with the other Jarls that remain in alliance with me.”

Her eyes were as blue as the skies, and just as hard. “I understand that you have overtaken nearly all the Imperial fortresses at General Tullius’ command. He chose not to be here. Yet here I am.”

“Yes you do not have to do this, Elisif.” Balgruuf spoke, just loudly enough for all assembled to hear. His mouth was set in a firm line.

“Yes I do.” The Nord woman held her breath. Then released it, in a sigh so defeated that Ulfric’s spirit sang to hear it. This was it! They had won, gods, without even the trouble of taking the city! Though he would thrill to be told that he must try for it, for was not the entire sprawl of his strength obvious and visible? Were they so chickenshit as to retrench, after all the bravado and grandstanding?

*Sovngarde fucking wept.*

—but her next few words froze his innards to ice, as he listened in dazed bewilderment to what the Jarl of Haafingar, Torygg’s widow had next to say.
“I propose an alliance of marriage, my lord. Marry me, and our Holds will be aligned in peaceful union. Stay your hand, and let Whiterun live...for Balgruuf assures me that he will bow to my wisdom in this.”

He had no words, and so he could only watch dumbly as Elisif’s horse daintily stepped towards his own stallion.

“Marry me, and I will send Tullius home to Cyrodiil along with all his forces. The Thalmor embassy has already moved its base to be aboard a Dominion ship - I know not where, but their halls have been abandoned. Marry me, and I will reinstate Talos worship and yield to the decisions of the Moot. Come what may for Skyrim, and all her people...if you stand down now.”

He had to give it to her. She was trembling, the nearer she drew to approach the killer of her first husband...but every word rang strong and true. “What say you?”

All attending both sides of the putative conflict held their breath. Nothing but the silence. Nothing but the waiting, as Ulfric turned it over and over in his head. His head was rife with activity, but somehow in his chest there was nothing but leaden weight.

...he would do it. It was the best offer their people had by far, with the least loss of life. He had conquered her. It would be done. “I accept, Jarl Elisif. You will remain Jarl of Haafingar, of course...unless you wish to resign your position to another’s hand, in lieu of your efforts as Queen.”

Relief flashed through the woman’s face, and she did not smile. But she did bow, as he bowed his head in return. “I am happy to hear it.”

One of his generals turned, dropping his spare axe in full view of the army to the ground. There arose a dim whoop from Ulfric’s assembled forces; a cheer that gained ground as those behind the walls of Whiterun began crying out as well.

Without giving him a second glance, Elisif turned and galloped past the startled courtiers towards the gates of Whiterun. Turning his mount to follow, Balgruuf remained hard-faced. Staring down Ulfric, as he brought their horses to meet side by side, though Ulfric was by far the taller of the two. “By Ysmir, I hope this was worth it to you, Ulfric.” The man spat, as they rode together towards Dragonsreach and what was sure to be a victorious feast. Laid out for his upcoming nuptials.

Married. He was getting married.

The thought was a gaping hole in his heart. Making it easy to remain stern, as men and women wearing the Stormcloak colors flooded the roads behind him. Cheering and toasting him and Elisif both, as the news spread like wildfire.
Soon, all of Skyrim would know it. Would know that the war was finally over. Though it was curious—he felt no relief, and little joy.

Only a deep, abiding loss. “I hope so, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Gaelic Dictionary:

Lamh-laidir - Strong Hand

Slán leat - Health to you, a formal greeting

Notes: The elf maid’s name ‘Felandaris’ is a nod to Dragon Age, where there is a herb by the same name. I always thought it was pretty. The description of Arhuid’s ‘knife-ears’ is a similar homage to Bioware.

Some of Galmar’s speech has been directly lifted from the game itself. I say this so no one comes after me with pitchforks for plagiarism. Everything else is mine. MINE I tell you. Bear you wonderful, honorable bastard. You. Are. MINE.

We'll see what happens to Nemain, in the next installment. Stay tuned, and as always...please write a review if you feel so inclined. I will always answer your questions. Within reason.
Heyyy everyone! Hope you all had a marvelous holiday season! Peanut Brittes and her clan baked, cooked, and partied like animals. I have three sons, and I tell you: boy, they can eat. Add to that all the male relatives of my large and extended family, and yours truly was kept very busy in the kitchen. The Grinch in me is SUPER happy that Christmas is over and everyone can get over the constant and annoying holiday music that is done to death. So very done. Yay for normal radio music. Yaaay.

*spoilers*

Also, I watched The Last Jedi...and really, Disney? REALLY? Aside from all the reductive character development and mismatched plot arcs, you finally did it. You made a worse movie than Phantom Menace and The Force Awakens combined. Jesus Rey who can do no wrong and Flying Space Leia and the STUPIDEST forced love interest that I have ever seen (AHEM Rose and Finn, WHAAAAT)

Argh. I hope you're happy, Mickey Mouse. Don't waste your dollars, peeps. Just saying.

Now. Back to our scheduled programming, in which Nemain is in mortal peril...

Chapter Music:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyWUd5Whh9w&list=RDc6MczzFi67M&index=12 "Umai" by Shireen

A giant howled, smashing through bodies like a fox in a chicken coop. So eager to evade Alduin that he ended up killing countless Forsworn, whose lights winked out like fireflies even as she watched.

At least, Nemain thought it might have been a giant. It was difficult to tell...what with being bloody gobbering blind and all.

The seething rage that had pulled her out from Melka’s geas had the added bonus of bringing a sort of untroubled serenity to the Dragonborn. Uncaring of whom she might strike, she flung spells towards anything that moved to approach her. Casting Detect Life when she remembered to; casting Detect Undead when a body more bone than flesh bumped into her in its haste to reach a panicking warrior. The Alteration spells did what her eyes could not; she could ‘see’ after a fashion.

Though as pebbles slipped and clattered beneath her bare feet, she knew it was a poor replacement. She could observe nothing of the rocks, the trees or the land. Only life and unlife was known to her,
Lost to the bloodwrath, Nemain screamed again in challenge. Raising her hands to the night, she reached out and laid hold upon the scaly forelimb of the World Eater. The jagged edges bit into her hands, but she held on grimly. Triumphant. *At last!*

Larger than any of the other flickering souls that hovered around her, Alduin had dug his claws into the rock promontory. After Shouting something that filled the air with a downpour of brimstone and falling rocks, he seemed to be entirely occupied in eating the men and women currently fleeing. Cut adrift from the stone altar - or any other landmarks that might have given her a bearing - Nemain crouched low, attached to his forelimb. Shooting off spell after spell into the great belly above, laughing as Alduin roared and shook.

She was just about to Shout Dragonrend, to end it, when a cloud of moist and foul vapor engulfed her. Nemain was stuck mid-inhale, choking...razor teeth grazing her feet as she was lifted bodily, writhing and coughing in her defiance. Throwing out her hands almost as a reflex, her palms met with wet slippery skin. *No. Nonono!*

An image of Siv from her first dragon fight flashed through her mind: that last weak kick as the woman disappeared down the dragon’s gullet, struggling- and though Nemain fought with panic-fueled strength to hold onto anything, everything that could haul her out of the World Eater’s mouth...it was not enough.

The empty space around Nemain dwindled, and she panicked - clawing for purchase against the hot walls of flesh that engulfed her. Closing, tightening in rhythmic swallows as strange magicks skittered along her skin with every press of Alduin’s esophagus. Flaying her with waves of pain.

With a sudden, final spike of agony (*acid! It burned! Oh gods! Mother!* ) all that pain ceased. Nemain’s mind went suddenly, blessedly still.

And all was dark and she knew no more.

***************
The Moot was an absolute shitstorm.

It had lasted a full day late into the night, and now the Moot had entered its second day of debate. Yet as Ulfric sat, hands folded beneath his chin, he thought privately that they were no closer to an accord than they were the day before. Lifting his drinking horn, he took a sip as the elderly Jarl of Hjaalmarth brought up the topic of the Thalmor’s hasty evacuation and its consequences for the Nords. Again.

Drinking dulled boredom and passed the time, at least. He drank every time ‘Thalmor’, ‘Elves’, or ‘Cyrodiil’ was mentioned. He was considering the addition of the word ‘cannot’ to his personal drinking game since it was mentioned so damn often, but he was becoming drowsy and overwam as it was.

And it wasn’t even midday.

He repressed a sigh as Maven Black-Briar cleared her throat for attention, interrupting a lively discussion between some Thanes about the Pale Pass. “I was informed by reliable sources that you are a competent Jarl, Ulfric Stormcloak. I presume Skyrim’s assets are then at the forefront of your mind.”

“Faith is an asset, madam Black-Briar. Developing such virtue would do you credit, in the long run.” Gods, this day. He yearned to pinch his nose or roll his eyes at the obvious non sequitur of a wealthy Black-Briar introducing trade business in a political meeting. Who gave this woman a seat in the Moot?

"Faith?!" The Nord matriarch nearly hissed. “I don’t have faith in anyone. All I care about is cause and effect. There is no gray area, and no room for preposterous faith in the aftermath of this conflict. If this war is truly over, then provisions must be made for our various livelihoods to continue on as usual.”

"Skyrim was a proud land once. Self sustaining and free...I plan on returning our motherland back to that glorious state. You ask what is do be done concerning trade, well...I am not so ignorant of your plight as you may think. We will rebuild our economy by funding Nord owned businesses. Wines and other imports from Cyrodiil and our other border countries will be taxed...and those taxes -as well as what funds we save from no longer being under the Empire’s thumb- shall be used to rebuild our roads, man the fortresses and patrol the highways. For who would choose to travel when the roads are rife with bandits and thieves?”

Many Thanes and Jarls nodded at this, some taking on a veiled look of surprise. As if I would stifle industry, Ulfric laughed to himself. This was hardly his first term as chieftain of some tiny farflung Hold.

He would inspire loyalty by bringing back the age old ideals of thrift, sufficiency and excellence. And for those who would not love him for the changes he brought, well. That’s what an army is for.
“Huh. Seems like a waste of coin if you don’t mind my saying so,” a Thane of Haafingar spoke up. Ulfric thought his name was Eric, or Erikur. Whatever his name was, his jewel embroidered apparel likely cost more than what a small farm in Eastmarch made in a year. “Why not leave the roads as they are and put those septims to better use? I can think of several ways to utilize such a boon.”

*I’ll bet you could,* thought Ulfric with some disdain. Out loud, he replied “Repairing the roads does not only benefit the common folk, Thane. Think of our tourism industry, fledgling as it is. Many foreigners flock to see the Gildergreen, to hike our mountains. I’ve heard that many southerners make pilgrimages to bathe in the hot springs of the Rift for the health benefits alone. If the roads are made safe and recobbled to prevent slippage from mud and snow, then more of your merchant caravans will make their deliveries in a timely and industrious manner. By fixing the roads, we improve our nation’s ability to move goods as well as people.” He clicked his tongue. “Mark me well. It will increase the welfare for us all, rather than for a select few. But I am open to suggestions on any other fronts that you are willing to impart advice upon.”

*There.* Hopefully that compliment would mollify the Thane, who looked as though he would very much like to speak further. His mouth shut with a snap after Elisif gave him a sharp look.

“Not,” Ulfric added, “That we will be allying ourselves with the Empire anytime soon. But I do plan on reinstating the flux of commerce, Madam Black-Briar and Thane Erikur. I simply plan to do it on my own terms. Renegotiating the treaties in Skyrim’s favor, to suit our people’s needs, for has it not been centuries since we have been able to do so?”

Maven frowned. “My meadery needs a thriving trade with Cyrodiil to profit, Lord Ulfric. Frankly, its success depends upon open borders...I have invested much to ensure a good relationship with the East Empire Trading Company. Will you close up their offices as efficiently as you did the Thalmor?”

Ulfric took another sip, then studied the metallic engravings that capped the end of his drinking horn.

“I have left the East Empire Company to its own devices. For now. You may not have needed faith whilst snatching scraps from the Emperor's table, but be warned: the time for profiteering from Titus Mede’s bribery is over. We must forge new alliances in this brave new world...creating new and lasting relationships with High Rock, Morrowind and Hammerfell. The latter in particular has made overtures to us already. They are willing to trade their fresh produce; their rare and fine ores in exchange for Skyrim’s lumber and fish. We are fortunate to be bordering a desert country that is decidedly lacking in what we export in surplus. Give us two, maybe three years, and I believe we will see wealth return to our lands in such a way that this Moot will no longer miss the small pittance the Empire granted, for taxes and compliance to the White-Gold Concordat.”

More nodding and some smiles. He was getting to them, at last. “Have faith in me, and faith in yourselves. You have been successful, Maven, and with your clever head for a bargain I think whatever losses you suffered from this war will be recouped in no time. Talos grant you that it will only add to your efforts and that of our own, making the plans we have seeded here in this Moot bear fruit in the coming years.”

“Aaagh! Aye, I agree!” Jarl Skald the Elder banged his horn on the table as the Black-Briar matron appeared to reflect on his statements in silence. “Results matter. But don’t hide behind your fancy talk of honor and faith! I’ve been loyal, Ulfric, and I’ve sent plenty of my own to glorious death. But ploughing valor sours the words of my mouth while that traitor Tullius yet lives. I’ll be damned if
that milk drinking Imperial draws breath while I sup under your roof!”

“Now, now, Skald. Tullius is in prison and isn’t going anywhere.” said Jarl Laila of Riften with a warm smile.

Too inviting, Ulfric speculated. Perhaps Elisif was not the only one who desired to be Queen. He was suddenly glad that the location of his quarters was not common knowledge...he would not put it past the woman to compromise herself; to gain Elisif’s place at his side. His dead friend Korir of Winterhold had been wedded in such a fashion.

He spared a moment of sorrow for Korir. For the dead Nords of Winterhold at large, and he made a mental note to send another courier with gifts to establish some sort of bond with the new Archmage. Ancano was puckered tighter than an horker’s arsehole, but he had been in Nemain’s good graces.

It could only help to get on his good side, if only in order to regain the enchanting services of the College. And, Ulfric pondered, he was curious to see how exactly the Mer had managed to distance himself from his Thalmor ties so damn efficiently.

Perhaps the Archmage knew where Nemain had taken herself. Perhaps he knew if the woman was even alive...or, like Galmar insisted, had taken herself to gods only knew where.

A surge of jealous rage flared up in his breast at the thought of her running to Ancano...to that lightweight of an elf, for succor and companionship. What he would not give to break the fucker’s nose again if that were the case!

It mattered little. Winterhold was far removed from his current troubles, and Laila had shown up too late to have a stake in his impending nuptials. He had no plans to share his bed until matrimony forced him to do so. Nothing short of a goddamn miracle could stop the wedding now.

The inevitability of it was like a fist to his gut. “Tullius was a fool. And he will suffer a fool’s cowardly death, Skald. I would have allowed him to retrench with his men back to Cyrodiil. But he chose instead to launch that foolhardy last stand at Castle Dour. Much good it did him.” Ulfric grinned at the memory of that last, bloody battle. It must have been some grin, because several of the Jarls sitting nearby shrank away from him almost involuntarily.

“Results speak volumes over words, and you’ve proved your worth, King Ulfric.” Jarl Laila spoke soothingly as Skald thumped the table. “Time and time again. The insurrection has been put down, and now we must needs give the people of Haafingar their government back. I am sure they will be more relieved than distraught, come the end of this Moot. They will see that we Stormcloaks have only their best interests at heart.”

He toyed with the drinking horn, reluctant to refill it. Gods, his head was pounding with the excess. If only he could escape this stifling chamber and check in on his troops...by Oblivion, even a jaunt on one of the dragonships would be welcome at this point. He was not accustomed to sitting still for so long. “It will be my pleasure to introduce Tullius’ neck to the headman’s axe, Skald. Soon. I shall be glad to do the honors myself.”

It would bring a touch of ironic balance, he mused as the rest of the nobles responded with dampened arguments and loud whispers. The thought of beheading the Imperial brought him a warm burn of unexpected pleasure.
Ulfric had once been destined for the chopping block. Now it was Tullius’ turn.

Though he would not gloat in an unseemly manner, as Tullius had when their positions had been reversed. It would be enough to do it: to mount his head on a pike and display to the world exactly what would happen to those who did not bend the knee and pay homage. A worthy warning to any sympathetic to the Empire who would dare act on their delusions, to regain what had been lost to them forever.

He blinked at the dark turn his thoughts had taken. *No. I should probably send the man’s remains back to Cyrodiil along with the remainder of his forces, head included. This is not how we - how I make war. Shor’s beard...this is Nemain’s Forsworn influence, surely.*

As he looked across the crowded room he spied Galmar speaking quietly with a courier. Raising his eyebrows in query, he received a curt shake of his general’s head in return.

His good spirits plummeted. *No news of her. No such luck.* But this was not the time nor the place to show any grief. “Galmar. Are they still rioting in the streets? Or have the people calmed down at last?”

“The bonfires are still lit,” Galmar said gruffly, “but I have high hopes that they will be more merry than wroth. I had my men bring up the supplies from the ships and they are handing out victuals even now, to break their long fast.”

“Good work. Feasting may deaden their desire to fight us as we take control,” Ulfric mused. Only a few of the Jarls and Thanes were paying attention to him now. Most were almost offensively occupied in choosing between salmon or steak for supper.

*Nobles.* It seemed the penalty of power was that he had to play nice with the rich. Puffed up pones, the lot of them. He would not count himself among their number. “Then again, mead makes fools of us all. Double the guard, Galmar. Work with Captain Aldis and make haste. We must move quickly to prevent any further violence, to curb any rash impulses the good citizens of Solitude may have by instating a watchful and alert guard presence.” He made a lazy gesture. “Go.”

“Yes, my King.”

Jarl Balgruuf had said nearly nothing these past few days. Hardly more than a sentence or two in the week of travel it had taken them to ride up to Solitude. He surprised Ulfric by speaking now. “What of Markarth, Jarl Ulfric?”

It amused him that Balgruuf made such a point of calling him Jarl. Almost as though it were some scurrilous curse, and not the title he had worn for several decades. Perhaps the man hoped that his Jarlship, like his impending coronation, would be temporary. *Small chance of that. Unless Balgruuf has a sizeable force I am not yet aware of.*

But Ulfric figured that Balgruuf would be forced to address him as High King soon enough. He could afford to be tolerant. “What of it?”
The Jarl of Whiterun moved slowly, with telltale signs of exhaustion. New lines had cropped up on his face, and with some shock Ulfric realized that the man’s beard had gone completely gray. *When had that happened?*

None of us are getting any younger. He listened attentively as the other Jarl spoke. “My scouts report that Madanach is maintaining his closed border policy. What are your intentions for Markarth Hold, Ulfric?”

“Yes,” piped up a Thane from Dawnstar. “When do we strike, to take it back for Skyrim?”

A chorus of cheers and rousing applause greeted his words. Ulfric kept his voice intentionally bland. “As of now I have no plans to invade Markarth.”

Holding up a hand to quell the immediate shouts that his statement had caused, he looked around the room. He held their full attention now. It seemed the menu did not hold as much allure as the thought of the Reach silver and blossoming exchange rates did.

Typical. Fat cock-sucking merchants. All of them. Clearing his throat, Ulfric thought for the briefest moment on how exactly to respond. “I’m not saying that I will never mount an assault on the Reach. You know me; you know that I have had some success in this endeavor before. I choose to wait for reasons that are sound.”

Lifting his hand, he ticked off each reason. Finger by finger. “One: the Reach is an inhospitable place, and we are stretched in patrolling our lands as is. Winter is coming, and all our foodstuffs must be readied for the hardships yet to come...not hoarded in preparation for a lengthy and arduous siege, which is the likeliest outcome if we attack them now.”

“I choose to place our men where they will do the most good. And for now, that place is not the Reach.”

He lifted his second finger. “Two. What reports I have received say that Madanach is kept busy maintaining control by dint of his influence. The Reach is overrun by civil war. They fight amongst themselves.” He shrugged. “I gather each of us knows just how effective a distraction *that* can be. Let them fight. Let them kill their own men off. Makes it that much easier for the Stormcloaks to pick up the pieces later on, aye?”

Reluctant laughter filled the chamber. Ulfric smiled wryly, and lifted one last finger. “And last but not least, there is the matter of rescuing what folk are sympathetic to our cause within the Reach, such as carefully placed spies and scouts.” He paused. “And there is the...dilemma of Jarl Igmund’s remains.”

“I heard that Madanach would not entertain any talk of bartering Igmund.” Balgruuf said wearily. “Says Igmund’s head is his favorite ornament to the throne. I lost one of my best agents gathering this news.”

There was a period of silence as all attending the Moot reflected upon the fate of the Jarl of Markarth. *There but for the grace of the gods go I,* thought Ulfric as he gauged the ambiance of the room. Not a week had passed when he would have willingly slaughtered half of the warriors assembled in these walls to bring to pass justice.

But common goals made strange bedfellows. As Balgruuf had once pointedly remarked, in what felt
like an age long since passed. “That’s enough for now, I think. We should adjourn for the nooning meal.”

There was a rumble of sound as the Thanes and Jarls stood from their seats, many making their way to the dining halls with obvious zeal. Balgruuf leaned over to refill Skald’s horn, topping off Elisif’s drink as she smothered a yawn. Ulfric turned his horn over, showing that he was done drinking when Balgruuf silently offered him mead.

It was hot enough in this palace without being drunk. He didn’t like it; almost Ulfric could see the white-capped glaciers of his home. He sighed, barely a huff of breath. Solitude bordered the sea, but it was too warm here. Too bright with sunshine.

Gods. He missed Windhelm already.

Skald toasted Balgruuf, laughing a bit too loud for sobriety. “Ahh, thank you young ‘un. All this talk of worth and results...pah! Damned waste of time. When’s the ceremony to be done, eh King Ulfric? I’ll bet you are eager to take up your rightful crown after all this nonsense? Mmm?”

Ulfric shared a look with Elisif...their eyes lingering in unspoken difficulty.

She looked away first. “I am not King. Not yet.” It was becoming almost rote, denying the crown, but it was a foregone conclusion.

“We were thinking sometime during Midwinter. To give foreign dignitaries enough time to travel. The priestesses of Kynareth say it will be a mild winter with light snows. Hopefully the passes will stay clear until the next Morning Star.”

“Hmm. Let’s hope so, for our ambassador’s sakes.” Jarl Laila raised her horn in a toast. “To our new King and Queen! Skål! May they rule without fear and live without care!”

“May they bear a generous heart an’ a miser’s fortune!” Chortling to himself, Skald drained his entire horn of mead in a single swallow. “Arrgh! More! I don’t want to see the bottom of this cup today! Skål!” Turning up Ulfric’s cup, Skald poured him another hornful and made a swaying gesture that he took to be a command. "Drink up!"

“Skål.” Elisif and Ulfric drank their toasts in silence. Each bearing the weight of personal and private thoughts on the matter, as several Thanes came forward to congratulate them both and the noon meal was served.

Neither of them able to change a goddamn thing.

*So much for being royalty.* He swallowed his mead until his stomach burned.
She found him walking the ramparts later that day, enjoying the brisk fresh air as the sun turned the Sea of Ghosts wine red.

“Must you kill Tullius?”

Ulfric turned from contemplating the horizon to look at Elisif. She was wearing a filmy cloth-of-gold gown tonight that left little to the imagination, though it bore a thin trimming of fox fur.

Perhaps she wore it for his benefit. *More likely she wore it to please herself,* Ulfric thought as he shifted uncomfortably in his boots. The woman certainly knew how to dress herself...the fabric practically glowed in the deepening light, teasing strands of copper from the coiled braids that fell loose from her crown.

He could never become used to the gaudy fashions of the capitol, no matter how he tried. Every suit of fine clothing became pouches of septims in his eyes; truly, it was all he could do to not reach out and strangle the nearest dandy who wore a festival’s worth of food on his back.

One of his many faults, he reasoned, prickling at the look Elisif was directing at his clothes. Just because his doublet was slightly worn...

Quickly looking down at his chest, he noted a blown seam that was currently gaping wide. Revealing a freckled expanse of shoulder that shouldn’t have bothered him. That wouldn’t have bothered him on any day other than this day. *Huh. Didn’t feel that break open. Damn.*

Ignoring her bold scrutiny, Ulfric rasped his reply. “Yes, I must. Tullius could have left peacefully at your behest. He chose not to, disregarding a direct command. Which you must acknowledge leaves me with little recourse. Tullius must die.”

She stepped forward to stand next to him, squinting her eyes against the light. “The people will not favor such cruelty.”

*Shows what she knows.* “The people love a good execution. They’ll line up for it and sell sweet rolls and wine. The local children will buy dollies that decapitate with a simple pull of string. See if they don’t.”

The woman shuddered, her blue eyes glass-bright. “Ugh. Horrible.”

“Mmph.”

They stood in silence for some time, watching the sun sink into the northern seas.

Ulfric was leaning against the cool stone of the rampart porch, indulging himself in the memory of his last night with Nemain. Until his future wife coughed softly, breaking the peace. “I...I thought you were going to kill me.”

Wrenching himself from fantasy, Ulfric looked down at Elisif. “We made an agreement.”

“Yes. At the very least neither of us have any illusions about what will be prompting this sham of a
marriage. You could have had me killed at any point between Whiterun and Solitude, Ulfric. So why didn’t you?”

*Odd, that her mind had taken such a turn.* He faced her more fully. “You are popular, Elisif. The war is over, and Shor knows that Skyrim needs a reason to celebrate that after so much death. A wedding would be the perfect union. A sign of hope, for times to come.” He would spare her feelings and not mention what was commonly bandied about: that she was a mere puppet for Tullius’ ambitions. He’d rid her of that anchor soon enough.

“It feels like a prison sentence.”

“Wasn’t this affair your idea?”

“Yes.” She did not look happy. “Yes, it was.”

“Well, then. Look at that. You came up with an original concept, free of Falk or Erikur’s influence. And you even defied Tullius in your haste to carry out your plans. Our children will not lack for bravery, at least.”

“You say that so convincingly.” Elisif sighed. "I suppose keeping me alive shows your compassion in victory. You have spared your fallen enemy's widow. Falk is quite impressed by you, you know.”

"Is he.” Ulfric rather liked Falk Firebeard. He was a damned efficient servant, and if Elisif made no other plans he would probably retain his services for himself. The man had been nothing short of a miracle worker in the chaos of the last few days. "Good. I like him. I can see why you relied so heavily upon his counsel.”

She glared at him for that. "He told me that you are wise to see that our marriage brings stability. He believes it will increase opportunities for employment and bring strategic value to our city.”

"More than it already had, to be sure." Ulfric agreed readily enough. Solitude had already been of tactical importance. Their port was one of the deepest and most protected by natural bulwarks that he had ever seen.

Clearly, this had not occurred to his soon-to-be wife. “So. What do you bring to the table, Elisif?” Ulfric asked courteously. “You are not a warrior, nor are you a rogue. Nor a mage, so far as I can tell.”

She stood up with pride, chin held high. “I am a diplomat, Ulfric. Who do you think arranged the various balls and dinners Torygg hosted? I was the one who picked out the gifts and set the menu. I can transform you. Turn you into a true king.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. “And what’s wrong with what I look like now?” He would ignore the chill of night air stealing into the hole of his garment.

Elisif sniffed, reaching out a finger to pull at the flap of cloth as he stepped backwards. Away from her touch, as she smiled up at him. “You look like a blacksmith. And a particularly ill-tailored blacksmith, at that.”

He balked at that smile. “Oh, not to worry! Don’t give me that look. I’m sure that after a few hours in Faralda’s capable hands, we’ll have you looking more presentable. Radiant Raiment is expensive, but if this is any indication of what your wardrobe looks like then I would pay them double if I were you. Huh. With your attitude, good clothes can only go so far, but they’ll help.”
Ulfric would be damned if he had to spend more than a minute in the presence of an elf. Particularly one armed with needles and scissors. “One of your advisors that I dismissed was a vampire, Elisif. Forgive me if I do not trust your judgement.”

“Hmph. It’s your loss, not mine.” Elisif reached out to touch his shoulder again, causing him to back up nearly to the edge of the stone wall. He did not like to be touched.

She smiled that not-smile again, as he mentally vowed to better conceal just how unnerving this entire situation was. “Something troubling you? Husband?”

The sincerity in her voice was sheer as her gown. But he found himself slowly answering, nonetheless. “I...lost someone recently. Someone who was dear to me.”

He slumped, feeling the square stones of the wall press into his palms. “And no matter how hard I look, I doubt I shall ever find them again.”

Looking up just in time, he watched as Elisif’s face contorted. A flash of softness -so brief, he barely noticed- that hardened into cold dislike. “Good.”

Her breathing was ragged as she stepped up to jab him in the chest. Causing him to lay hold of her arm, using her weight to keep him from falling backwards, as her hand fisted itself in his doublet and shook him.

Shook him hard. “Good! I hope you suffer, you bastard. Now let me go!”

He let her go. Elisif flounced away...leaving him alone in the dark, as stars silently winked into sight. Exhaling with a trace of Thu’um, Ulfric realized just how close he had come to falling from the roof. Just one good push from her, and he would have fallen. It was a very long way down...

Elisif’s voice echoed in his thoughts. **Bastard.**

Perhaps he deserved that.

And unwillingly he recalled just how distraught she had looked some two years past. When she had discovered him standing over Torygg’s still form, his sword dripping red as the court of the Blue Palace whispered in fear. How violently she had struggled against the well intentioned efforts of her Thanes; to hold her back. To keep her from taking vengeance on the man who had slain her husband.

**Damn you, Torygg!** He would have given much to rewrite history. If only Torygg and his forebears had been wiser; if their ancestors had been more farsighted! So many lives could have been saved, had there been less greed and more good.

He stared blindly at the night sky. Seeing nothing; not stars nor the emptiness between, as his vision filled with the forms and the dying cries of the dead. **So much death.** He hoped - prayed that it would be worth it. That he wouldn’t royally fuck up anymore than he already had.

The moons Masser and Secunda were rising, and in Secunda’s face he glimpsed a shadow that was more like a shade…
-Nemain. Laughing. Kissing him back during that midnight snack. Paralyzing him with her powers in Winterhold. Her lively face, smirking as she teased him on their trip to High Hrothgar. That sound she had made, when her head hit the headboard of their bed back in Whiterun, her sweat hot and sweet as he lapped at her neck-

Stop that.

Suddenly the night was cold, and he trembled. Gathering his wits about him, he shielded the inner knotwork of his heart. Cloaking that tenderness with a numb calm he wished would spread to include not only his fingers and toes, but his chest as well. Wherever she is, Talos grant that she’s warm and happy. Shit, let her be alive. I need for her to be alive. Shor, hear my prayer. Let the Dragonborn live through whatever trials she faces. Bless her, Father Shor and Mother Kyne. Watch over her, wherever she walks.

He squeezed his eyes shut and ended his prayer with a fervent request. And bless us too. Give me the wisdom to succeed, in this vast undertaking that I fear has only just begun.

Ralof was due back from his survey of Falkreath in roughly two weeks. He could wait that long for news of his beloved. A rúnsearc, her accented voice whispered.

Bear. Ulfric. A rúnsearc.

Even imagining her voice made him shiver again. Made him hard.

Useless, to dwell overmuch on the past. Arngeir was right about that, at least. Useless. And painful. As he turned away from the wall to walk shakily away, his shoulder seam gave up the fight with a loud rip. He stared in bemusement as the sleeve parted from his doublet, fluttering like a flag as it fell down to rest at his wrist.

Perhaps he deserved that, too.

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

When she woke up, Nemain was certain something had gone terribly wrong.
Or...right? She could see. She could feel silty ground scrunch beneath her toes. And she was clothed after a fashion - the nondescript robe she was wearing rippled in light airy folds as she stood up to take in her new surroundings. Pushing back the deep-seated certainty that she had horribly banjaxed that last bit of...whatever had happened, Nemain slowly spun in place. Looking around at nothingness.

Purple. The most obvious tell that things had gone tits up was that everything was purple. Vibrant, violet purple.

And beneath the oppressive purple sky was a sea of dense, glowing rocks. Bone-white dust carpeted the rift-cracked ground, and massive crystal spires grew like prismatic trees in a forest of unlife...for nothing she saw could possibly be alive. Floating beings made of bones and wisps of spirit walked, crawled and slithered in the great beyond.

Nemain had little desire to approach any of them, for the malevolence wafting off of the crystals themselves was enough to shift her feet; to take a mere breath (was this breathing? Her chest moved, but she felt little relief) and come to the obvious conclusion.

She was in some realm of Oblivion. Which meant that she was, indeed, dead.

“Glaikit...clarty...fucking bampots!”

Nemain fisted handfuls of her hair (further evidence that she really was the worst hero Skyrim had ever seen, blinded, beaten and gods...dead by consumption) and kicked at a nearby crystal. Her luminous foot swept through the surrounding rocks but managed to smack the geode, which then emitted a resounding chiiiing.

She forced herself to think clearly. Rationally, about what exactly had just happened. Alduin had eaten her, one of the spells gone haywire during the attack must have struck her, and she was now soul trapped. Well and truly caught, in a place she had only read of in the most arcane of necromantic texts. A place that by all rights should not even exist.

But it did. And somehow, she had ended up here...in Oblivion’s version of a used storage shed.

Ballocks! She kicked the crystal again, and then sobbed in despair...kicking it once more just because she bloody felt like it. Chiiiiing! Chiiing!

"I would not do that if I were you. Dovahkiin fen kos dinok .”

Powering up her wards until the air shivered with magic, Nemain turned...relieved that at least she still held sway over her magic, if not her corporeal form. Seeing that the owner of the rumbling, hollow voice was a dovah, she did not attack...but kept her hands lit up with an aura of incumbent spellcasting.

Just in case.
“Your presence has been noted. And is expected. Dovahkiin. Come.”

Nothing, she reflected, could surprise her more than actually being in the Soul Cairn of legend. But the presence of the dragon made a pretty sharp stab at it. The beast was clearly undead -weathered and decayed. Twin pits of violet fire burned in the sockets of that curved skull, and bits of scale fluttered as it moved.

“A dragon...in the Soul Cairn. That be, um...a wee bit odd. Wouldn’t y’say?”

“A Dovahkiin as student of Alok Dilon ; of necromancy. Also unusual.” The dragon retorted. “And fortunate- for you.”

Nemain stiffened as she received the full impact of the Dovah’s Su’um: raw hunger and cunning flowing over her tongue. She reinforced her wards, aware of just how vulnerable she was.

But if this being was planning something, he was awfully polite about it. “Dii faan los Durnehviir. Fos los hin faan?”

Introductions. Grand. “Nice tae meet ye, Durnehviir. I be called Nemain. Now that formalities be o’er, I still havenae the slightest desire tae go with ye. What d’ye make of that?” Mentally readying her right hand for a mighty gout of flame, Nemain’s hands trembled with the effort of keeping her shields strong. She was not going to be eaten again. “Want tae dance?”

Durnehviir laughed. "My claws have rended the flesh of innumerable foes, but I have never once been felled on the field of battle. It would be...exciting, to test my Thu’um against yours, joore, but my Masters compel me to stay my claw. Faraan niif voknau hi . Fortune smiles upon you, Dragonborn...the Powers of this place request your presence.”

Bony wings shifted and stretched. The deep voice changed; shifting from light hearted greeting to a darkness that brooked no disobedience.

“Now. Follow.”

She followed. What choice did she have? She half expected the dovah to fly away, but to her surprise he kept a slow, shuffling pace as she half-jogged next to him.

The barren landscape passed them by as they wandered on. Steam hissed from fissured vents in the white ground. The creatures she had spied kept their distance; nothing but the roiling purple skies and the black monoliths of mountains to see.

Mountains that became monuments. A castle. Or something akin to it, anyway. Nemain sucked in a deep breath even though she didn’t exactly need it, passing beneath a monstrous drawbridge that was crumbling near the edges into a courtyard of forbidding black stone.

And with every step, that malevolent force she had felt upon arriving pulsed. Stronger, the nearer they drew to it. Every sense screamed for her to run, yet she didn’t. She couldn’t... wouldnae make it
“So.” She would make light talk, even if her voice had all the starch of day old gruel. “Who be these, err, ‘Powers’ yer takin me t’see?”

“They are known as the Ideal Masters. Beware. They do not give their assistance freely, little Mey.”

Who was he, to call her Mey? Takes a fool t’know a fool, Nemain mentally grumbled. She could not dicker about any longer with this dragon...she had to get out, to find some way of leaving. To return to Mundus. To her body, if Alduin had not torn it apart in his haste to swallow her whole.

The thought firmed her resolve. She was not conquered yet! “...huh. I suppose that be how you gained yer post here as errand-boy, aye? Trafficking with the Undead Bastards?”

The pit of fire dancing in the nearest eye socket flared almost blue. “Almost, I wish to see your flippant tongue be burned off, Mey. Perhaps I will yet have that pleasure. But to answer you - Geh. Yes. They assured me that my powers would be unmatched, that I could raise legions of the undead. Krosis. In return, I was to serve them for what I assumed would be a finite length of time.” Durnehviir shook his head, the long spikes clattering like sticks.

The sand beneath their feet was growing harder, disappearing entirely in places as the dust was replaced with dull, black rock. Matching the castle until everything was onyx black, reflecting the bluish-violet sky. “Assumptions do be unwise, particularly here. So. What happened?”

"I discovered too late that the Ideal Masters favor deception over honor, and had no intention of releasing me from my binding.” The dragon chuffed, warily. “They had control of my mind, but fortunately they could not possess my soul. And so...here I stay.”

Almost, she could pity him. Nemain’s hands tightened into fists. “Ah. I could ha’ guessed that souls would be the currency o’ the Soul Cairn.”

“Vahzen. Truth, Dovahkiin. Hold fast to your own. It is the only currency the Ideal Masters care to bargain for. Pruzah, if you care to barter your immortal soul at all ensure that it costs them. Dearly.”

The dragon halted before an open stretch of rock. “There. They await.”

Nemain floated to a standstill, her diaphanous robes swirling about her as she took in the scene with a lump of foreboding. Surely this was some sort of trick...there was nothing here but a semicircle of tall, sharply planed crystals.

Turning to ask Durnehviir one last question, she discovered that the dragon had already taken flight. She watched him flap away, bothered at how eager the loyal servant seemed to be, to escape his Masters. Creepy, how fast that blighter be. Never thought a dragon could be interested in the dark arts. Shows what I know.

She knew nothing. She was nothing, and as a long loop of hair floated in front of her face she looked at it in stark disbelief. No. No, this wasn’t real - she distinctly remembered her head being shaved clean - no.
Not real at all!

Real. Fighting panic, her mind fixated upon the irony of dragonflight in what could be (for all she knew) an airless realm, and all the while a small voice shrieked in the back of her head. Sending all her thoughts into a tangle rife with static fear.

Dead! Yer dead and trapped, trapped and dead! With nought but a bunch o’ rocks to talk to, och aye, ye be right screwed now ‘Dovahkiin’, what’s tae do now, idiot, what’s tae do…

Focus! Taking a deep breath, Nemain refused to entertain the thought that breathing as a ghost was entirely unnecessary. Breathing was familiar, and calming. It was a sign of life. If Nemain could breathe, then perhaps she was not entirely dead. She took in deep, ragged gasps, one after another until she felt some semblance of calm return.

Her spirit - or aura, or whatever passed for the ectoplasm of her soul here - glowed a bit more brightly. She looked around herself...noticing that of the seven crystal spires, only one broke rank from the pale and purple color scheme.

Six of the spires were that off-white, cloudy tint that matched all the other geodes she had seen thus far. Albeit much, much bigger.

But the largest and most distant to her was black. Black as the void.

“Hello?” She offered, looking around the semicircle of crystals for someone to step out and greet her. “Be there someone hiding behind these rocks? Some Ideal Masters having th’ hooey with me? Oy! Hallooo?”

She took a step forward. Immediately all seven rocks chimed a sonorous, ringing **bong**.

If she were mortal, then her throat would have been dry as dust. She settled for an aggrieved clearing of her throat instead. **Gotta get out o’ here!**

“H-Hello?”

Walking forward felt unnatural and wrong. There was something insidious about this entire setup, and despite the irritation she felt at being taken to the wrong place (drat that Durnehviir, she just knew he had played her false!) Nemain recast her wards.

Bathing herself in protective light, she approached the stones. To touch them, perhaps ring them again. Perhaps that was how the Ideal Masters were contacted.

The nearer she drew to the stones, the queerer she felt. Lightheaded almost, though that would have been silly, since she was-
Nemain’s mind froze. She felt a pulling tug, a leaching of self...if she looked out of the corner of her eye she could see it happen, gods this was a trap! A trap, for six distinct wisps -like fishing line- were spooling out from her soul, being wound in by those damned rocks.

-And every awful thing; every memory she had felt was now front and center in her mind. Filling her thoughts with horror, as she stood there stock still in the cavernous and black hall.

The attack on Markarth. Discovering dead Fiona’s half-eaten remains in the snow...Galan’s death and rebirth, throwing the bones over and over until she could have screamed with it. Memories tumbled like river rocks in tumbling rapids. Ulfric! Astrid! Babette and Balgruuf and Ancano, the Companions and her dead children’s faces, swirling into a torrent of misery.

And all the while, she was being drained unto death by the unseen and viciously hungry powers she could feel but not see.

The Masters. The rocks. The Masters were the crystal spired rocks!

I willnae die twice this day! She had suffered enough indignity...having her soul licked by some stupid follsy stones was the last damn straw!

Giving those nightmarish visions the cut direct, Neman gathered her willpower and pushed. Pushing, flinging away those slavering barbs until the only drain she felt was that of her own fears. “Begone! Speak if you must, but dinnae taunt me...ye inert clods. Piles o’ panky pebbles! Shove...off!”

The only stone that had not send forth a tendril to taste her was the black stone. Grimly she ran for it, somehow certain -absolutely convinced that if she touched any of the other stones that her spirit would die in truth- but somehow she was unafraid of the black crystal. It gave off no light, no: not a single reflection along that multi-planed massiveness gleamed.

It was black, unreflective and somehow soft, for stone. She had the smallest moment upon touching it to be astonished at how icy cold it was, before her mind rolled over and Neman was taken someplace else.

Again.
As purple as the Soul Cairn had been, this world was black.

Cracking her eyes open the slightest bit, Nemain could see a night sky that was curiously starless. A single moon was hung in the vast expanse, its umbra blurred by clouds pregnant with rain. She could hear the dry whispering of tree branches. That, and the thunder rolling in the distance interrupted her dozy contemplation of where she was. Where? Where was...

_Gods, It was so dark._ Lifting her hand in front of her face, she could barely make out the contours of her fingers. But somehow she was not frightened; for it was the darkness of the womb. Close and comforting. Nemain was cradled in it, drugged as if just awakening from a deep sleep.

Something caressed her arm. Almost tickling her, as she swatted at it and buried her face in the warmth. Hopefully that nightmare she had been dreaming of would shove off, and good dreams would replace it. “Ungh. Go ‘way.”

A male chuckle vibrated through her, as she clutched at whoever held her even more tightly. “You want me to go? But you’ve only just arrived.”

That tickling was driving her bloody mad. “Lay off, or I’ll Shout ye intae the next dimension, troublemaker.”

Her tormentor laughed merrily. “Alas, I thought it would take much longer for you to discover my true identity. But I won’t let you spoil all of my fun. Why don’t you sit up, Nemain.”

The hand tracing patterns on her arm pulled her forward, and she nearly fell upon what looked to be a nice, muscular chest.

...her fingers scrabbling against beadwork and leather, as she stared. Aghast, into the void-black gaze of someone who was pretending to look like Galan.

Abruptly she realized that it was all a farce. It had to be. The trees...one tree. Silhouetted against the moon. _Tis the Ole Man of the Reach. The old juniper Galan and I used to meet beneath._ Her feet dug into the hard, tough grass that felt like Reachgrass, yet couldn’t be. Could it? She was dead, and Galan was gone. _What-

“Tell me who you be, and I’ll let ya live. Talk!”

Not-Galan smiled a slaughterfish smile: toothy and self assured. “You already named me. Partly, at

His hand cupped her cheek, and he leaned closer...those inky eyes lacking any circle of iris. No deviance of shade either: they were pure, jet black. She knew, because she was looking for a sign, any telltale sign that this was illusion. Not real.

She was drowning in those eyes.

“Fox. Thistle.” His voice deepened playfully, one of his hands brushing the side of her breast. “A rúnsearc?”

She pushed at him, ineffectually. Her voice was but a breath of a whisper. “Let me go.”

“Hmm. It seems you do not know who I am after all. How odd.” The man cocked his head, and for a moment something vast and monstrous boiled behind that black gaze. “Let me give you a hint. I like new things. New ideas, change. It’s all so exciting, don’t you agree? The serendipitous arrival of life, so creative. So strange.”

"But birth can only happen once death has had its due. I realize that many associate me with unrestrained nihilism, but trust me.” His voice changed...mimicking her own so clearly she was not quite sure that it wasn’t her voice that spoke.

“I like this world. I dinnae want it tae end.”

“I suppose that’s why I like you.” The being continued, nuzzling at her neck. She could feel his lips move. “After all...everything you touch dies, Dragonborn. Everyone you love.”

"Oh, yes. I like you very much.”

Nemain heard something rattle, and vaguely realized it was her teeth. Chattering. She had felt so safe...so secure upon awakening that this abrupt change felt almost like a betrayal.

And now, with his hands gripping her, like manacles around her arms, Nemain held stock still. She dare not move. Not even to blink. For she was certain that if she interrupted this man...this thing...It would be the last thing she ever did.

“Still no guesses. Ah. Very well.” Shadows blurred before her face, and before she knew it they were both standing upright. He still had her contained, his long fingers encasing her arms as she stared at him, wide-eyed.

Not that she had any chance to break free from him. Wherever they were, the ground sloped off into blackness that her weak eyes could not penetrate. She didn’t dare to try for an escape. Where would
she go?

As her thoughts whirred, the Not-Galan had already begun talking. “In the beginning,” he intoned ceremoniously, “There was nothing and everything; a primordial age of chaos. Anu. You’re rather intelligent, for a mortal. Surely this part is somewhat familiar.”

“Now, Anu was a static formless force. It had no consciousness or personality. It lacked intent; self awareness. I changed that. I created everything you know. It’s too bad I don’t get the credit, but ahh. That’s life, isn’t it?”

His giggling breath was cold against her skin, causing her to jerk away from him. Making him smile even wider. “I sundered the Eternal Anu, Nemain, to create new beings. Gods; Aedra and Daedra that in turn gave birth to their own progeny. Mortalkind, Mer and Man among them. Care to make a wager as to who I am now?”

She remained frozen, staring at this thing who smiled with her dead lover’s eyes. Not-Galan’s lips pouted.

“You are no fun. Hmm. I suppose I can give you a few more hints.”

“Right, then. Afterwards, Anu was split into two opposing forces. Namely, myself and Anui-El. Don’t gawk at me in such surprise, Dragonborn! I was the will in the immutable. I can divide myself if I so choose…”

Nemain’s lips were sealed. She couldn’t speak, even if she wanted to. He looked at her, for one long moment that seemed to stretch eternally.

And then he shrugged.

“My name is Discord. Doom. Chaos. The Void.” His fingers played with her hair, bringing her even closer to him. “I’m no more human than you appear to be, little thing. Fleshy shells and masks, made of dirt and starlight. Ai! Ed’ i’ear ar’ elenea! How far we have fallen from grace!”

And what had previously felt as warm as hearthfire had turned; become a burning. Like frostbite, Nemain thought numbly as Not-Galan bent his head and nibbled at her lips.

His voice was a soughing rush. Deeper than oceans. Colder than space. The undertone, the timbre of it hurt her ears.

“You know me.” The icicles of his Su’um caressed her. She writhed; entrapped. Unable to break free.

“So tell me. Who am I?”

An expression of wicked cheer spread over Not-Galan’s face.

“Yes. And yes!” He crowed in triumph, his voice sounding decidedly odd with that pitch-dark resonance.

Then, Galan-Sithis’ lips pressed oh so softly against hers, pushing...their plush touch radiating a strange sort of heat, heat that was as sharp a pain as that cold had been, what -

-And all her struggling didn’t make any difference at all. It seemed to take forever, this kiss, and the panic was so extreme that it was painful. Like needles or shivs, burying themselves deep into her skin.

She was screaming, but the sound couldn’t get out. Her lungs ached, then hurt, then shrieked for air. Gods, it hurt.

It hurt so damn badly.


“Someone has prayed to my Son for your soul, Dragonborn.” Tendrils of nothingness looped around her spine and squeezed. “To Lorkhan. Shor - God of the Nords. Trickster, deceiver. My stalwart and noble steward of mankind.”

The Voice -she thought vapidly of it in caps, now, it deserved the honor by the grace of the unholy terror it heaped upon her- chuckled as if amused. “And I am inclined to listen. Just this once."

"I could …” She screamed as Not-Galan did something awful that bent her nearly in half, “- keep you here. With Me.”

“Yet I think not. There is much Change you may effect yet in the world, Dragonborn. And though I am served by Death, Al-Du-In remains its God. What chaos will you bring, if I send you back? How it would amuse me to see you unmake him!”

His terrible laughter shattered her mind like glass. Then it all started to go softly gray at the edges, and the edges pushed in, and in, until it was all a hazy mist, and she couldn’t remember why she was fighting so hard, and it was all pain. All of it.

She would take Galan’s smashing of her feet over this, a thousand times. She would take it gladly. The pain from that was like feathers brushing softly over her skin. Nothing -nothing compared to this, this feeling of being prised apart and remade.

Reborn.

Sithis expanded as she screamed - the yawning chasm of his presence filling her. Polluting her awareness until there was nothing else, and she gave into him. Gave up.

There was nothing but the Void.
Hint hint...

His eyes burning dark fire, he opened his toothless maw,
Vomiting darkness with each exhalation of his breath,
All sucking in the fetid air felt the icy touch of death.
In the skies above the mountain, darkness overcame pale,
Then Mannimarco Worm King felt his dismal powers fail:
The artifacts of death pulled from his putrid skeletal claw.

-Mannimarco, King of Worms

Note: Ai! Ed' i'ear ar' elenea is actually Tolkien's elvish, but I figured the super-weird wordage of Elder Scroll's pantheism allowed for quasi-elven slang. Durrn.

I bet Tolkien would love the Elder Scrolls, if he were alive. He'd totally slay as a Necromancer Altmer. Seriously...read the Silmarillion. Dude wrote the archetypal fantasy tropes.
The Torture

Chapter Notes

A stupid little fluff piece I cranked out while gearing up for the oncoming chapters.

Ulfric Stormcloak was being tortured.

Tormented. He would rather have endured hot irons and the rack than be at the mercy of an elf ever again, and yet here he was. Biting his lip as the malfeasant Altmer pricked him once more, but he was determined to bear it stoically. To show not a trace of fear.

No! He was a Nord. And true Nords never backed down.

...Not even if the trial he had been called upon to bear looked like the very jaws of Oblivion itself.

“I am not wearing that.”

Faralda peered up at him and removed three of the pins she held tightly in her mouth. Tucking part of the tunic she had measured more tightly around his hips. “The coloring suits you, Lord Ulfric. Don’t you agree, my lady?”

“Oh yes.” Jarl Elisif of Haafingar cooed. Cruel to the bone. “Of course you’ll wear it, darling. We’ll take one in woad blue. And another, in that gorgeous bronze broadcloth. That one with the bone buttons, yes. Oh look Ulfric! Do you see the cunning embroidery on these gloves? They’ve been worked with quicksilver runes on the cuffs! You must have them. Faralda, have your sister write me a receipt would you please?”

The woman flicked a piece of thread from her gown and grinned victoriously at Ulfric. Stripped naked save for his smalls, he could do nothing but stare incredulously as the two women left him there. Covered in samples of bright silks and wool, for all the world like some doddering Khajiit peddlarcat.

Ambushed by stealth. He had to hand it to her...she was good. He had made up his mind to be as polite as possible to the bitch, after last night’s fiasco. And this morning she had called him on it...sweetly requesting his presence as she pursued...just a small errand. Really, Ulfric! Nothing to worry about! You can hold the boxes!

“And the trousers, too. Several pair in various hues. Do you have anything made up for today?”
“Hmph. An auspicious event. It’s not every Tirdas that an Imperial general goes to the chopping block escorted by the King. One moment...let me check my shelves for backstocked goods. I might have just the thing to have him looking his best.”

At least someone is having a good time, Ulfric thought rebelliously as the Altmer left. Elisif’s smile had appeared the moment he had been blackmailed into Radiant Raiment, and had only grown wider with every muffled complaint and gaudy garment held up to be pinned against his form.

He wasn’t sure if it was his obvious discomfort that made her smile so sweetly at him. More likely it was the strangling cost of each item that she held up for his perusal, for she made sure that he saw every price tag. Every last damn one. The worst had been the last; Ulfric had physically recoiled from the cost of that bronze worked tunic, which had made Elisif throw back her head and laugh.

The woman had a beautiful, tinkling giggle. Like wind chimes or bells. But shit, that goddamned tunic cost more than an enchanted axe hot and fresh from the Skyforge. I could buy seedcorn for all of Belyn Hlaalu’s fields for the cost of that poncy top. That many septims could tutor a child for an entire season. It could purchase three silver ingots...with change left over for dinner and a drink. He could have sworn that her laughter had turned dark, watching him as he watched her plunk that shirt down on the purchase pile of Radiant Raiment’s countertop.

Elisif enjoyed his misery, it seemed. Well, two could play at this game. She wanted him to dress like a fop, well. She had no control over what he did once dressed. That woman will rue the day she employed such underhanded tactics to herd me in here.

They reappeared. Ulfric stopped picking at the itchy wool that had been liberally wrapped around his crotch and stood tall. Dryly ignoring this dismantling of masculinity he had been forced to be subjected to, he clenched his fists. And let fly a volley of silent curses, his favorite method for regaining control. It worked in the more annoying incidences of court procedure back in Windhelm, and it worked its charms for him now.

Nemain would be so proud. “I have the white tunic with silver thread overlay available in his size,” Faralda said doubtfully, “but it’s by far the most dear in terms of cost. Are you sure you don’t want something more...traditional? One of our staple linen shirts, the blue one perhaps? This is a beheading after all, not a court fete. I can tailor it to fit his shoulders in a mere minute.”

Elisif glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “Yes. We wouldn’t want those seams to sag, would we. I will take the white tunic and deerskin trousers for him today, Faralda. And if you would be so kind, measure him for your basic tunic.”

She fluttered her eyelashes, but beneath all her posturing her eyes were ruthless. He glared right back at her. “It wouldn’t do for the future High King of Skyrim to muck about in clothes more befitting of a Forsworn, hmm? I think I’ll order three tunics. Just to round out the order.”

“I’ll go and fetch my measuring tape.” The Altmer woman dropped the bundle of cloth she had been carrying and flew out of sight, probably counting the septims from his purse already.

They were alone. Elisif’s cloudy blue eyes flickered over his bare chest, taking in his scars. And for a
moment, they plunged downwards...regaining altitude as her cheeks took on the faintest of blushes. He allowed a slight smirk to tug at his lips. *Such a bald-faced flirt.* He did not believe her naivete to be authentic for an instant. But he could ignore her obvious reaction to his nakedness in lieu of how much gold he was about to be robbed of. “How much is this going to cost me, exactly?”

Elisif tilted her head. Decidedly admiring the blue waterproofed wool, and not him. “You can afford it.”

“Wrong.” He responded flatly. “I cannot afford this nonsense and I will not be party to it. Pay the elf for her labors if you must, but cancel this order Elisif. You have far exceeded what you term to be your diplomatic duty today.”

“It may be nonsense to you,” Elisif said fiercely. “But I told you my reasons for doing such and you - you simply rode over them roughshod, because you think that anything you do is acceptable.”

He gaped at her, her words sinking in.

“Don’t you?!” she demanded. “In your narrow, arrogant little world, you can disregard my particular and well meaning advice...simply because you want to! You raise taxes on brandy and wine, no doubt because it suits me ill as I favor wine over mead -which you’d know if you ever paid the slightest attention to anyone other than yourself- and you kill anyone you please and likely father children on serving girls and-”

“For Talos’s sake,” Ulfric groaned. “How did we get from clothing advice to serving girls and brandy?”

“It’s all about you,” she said. Practically growling at him.

He looked down at her in grim forbearance. “Which outfit would you like for me to wear today?”

“What? After all that? Surely you jest.”

“I’m not kidding. I’ll wear what you want - for today’s activities only. We will see if your taste reaps any choice rewards amongst the court. We’ll compare notes together, later.”

Ulfric watched as the woman thought about it. Eventually she must have worked out the obvious benefits of his acquiescence, because her smile of acceptance nearly stunned him flat.

“I agree. Wear the white tunic with silver threads, if you please.”

“Right.”

Struggling with the strips of fabric that were binding him in place, he cast a weary look of longsuffering towards Elisif. “Would you mind...”

Her mouth puckered into a sly moue. “Certainly.”
It wasn't enough that her fingers were ice cold. No - she seemed to take delight in ripping the strips of cloth away from him. Pressing every goddamned pin into his flesh. Right down to the bone.

“...Gaah! Enough! You are pricking me on purpose! Where is that blasted elf...Faraaaldaaa?!”

“I am not stabbing you intentionally. Gods, stop squirming -you're more skittish than an Argonian drunk waking up in a Dark Elf bar. Now -ugh, you beastly man. Hold still!”

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

The blood from Rikke’s body had little chance to cool on the stone block before her corpse was dragged away.

Roped and gagged, Tullius was ushered to the recently evacuated spot. After which a Stormcloak unceremoniously booted the backs of his knees; causing him to collapse downwards with a stifled moan.

“Any last words?” Ulfric inquired as he held his greataxe poised. Delicately hovering over Tullius’ neck, as a guard worked the gag out of the man’s mouth and stepped respectfully back.

The Imperial took his time, grunting and spitting before he made his answer. “You realize this is exactly what they wanted.” Clear sweat was dripping down his tanned neck. Catching the light, shining like miniature diamonds as Ulfric took a firmer grip on the axe handle.

It was all that exposure to silks and laces, undoubtedly. Sweat like diamonds, indeed. Bunching his shoulders, Ulfric sneered. Shit, old man. You're going soft. “What who wanted?”

“The Thalmor.” Tullius cleared his throat roughly. “Why would I play you false? From one career soldier to another, take this truth. If you’ve learned nothing else: They’re the ones who stirred up trouble here. Forcing the Empire to divert needed resources away, and sending good soldiers off to die in order to quell your jumped up rebellion.”

Ulfric Stormcloak shaded his eyes with one hand and perused the shouting, jeering crowd. There was quite the good turnout today. Most of the people wore his colors now; the shops and trading posts had nearly sold out of woad blue and grey from what he had heard.

The sight of his heraldric colors made the weight of the axe a bit easier to bear. He lifted it in both hands. Readying himself to deal death, once again. “It’s a little more than a rebellion now. Don’t you think?”
The man allowed his forehead to rest against the block. “Enough talk. Make it fast - strike with one single blow.”

“I will. May Talos have mercy on your soul.”

Raising the waraxe head high, he sharply inhaled. Then brought the weapon down... neatly splitting the once-great general’s body into two with a great meaty thhhunk!

The crowds erupted into a cacophony of shouts and cheers. Blood spattered his elaborate white tunic: gushing from the raw, open wound of the still-jerking body. Jetting in freeflow spurts that he could not avoid, as they marked new trails across the stains he had already gained from finishing off Rikke.

...Not that he had tried very hard to avoid being marked. By the time he managed to wade through the well-wishers and reach Elisif the blood had already begun to dry into a dull brown.

There the woman sat, white faced. Gripping the armrests of her carved chair that her Thanes had thoughtfully placed upon the hastily erected wooden dais, front and center: with the best view of the execution.

Not that the Jarl seemed to appreciate it. She was the only one not clapping or crying out in celebration. He wondered idly if she was truly nauseated by the sight of blood or merely disgusted with him personally.

He wouldn’t mind either outcome. He could work with both.

“Congratulate me, dear.” Ulfric grinned winningly. “I’ve just beheaded the milk drinker who dared to countermand your direct orders. I think that deserves a public wave if not a full-bodied embrace, don’t you think?”

“What have you done. You’ve ruined your clothes beyond repair.” Elisif spoke between tightly clenched teeth, forcing a smile as the Thanes and nobles of Haafingar gathered around their elevated seats, to scream aloud their joy.

“I have redecorated them.” Ulfric waved back. He could feel the tacky texture of blood rub against the hairs on his chest. It must have stuck skin-tight in spots; melding to the musculature of his torso, because he was fairly certain he could hear Elisif grinding her teeth.

“I am beginning to like this mode of fashion you call tailored wear. Truly. It does make quite a political statement.”

“A Shor-damned vicious one. Will you never learn ??” She never broke her mask, smiling brightly as he escorted her by the arm down the steps. The milling crowds parted for them, some reaching out to clasp his shoulders and shout praises. He returned their embrace when he could, nodding and shaking hands when they were proffered. There were far too many people to greet personally, but he’d be damned if he didn’t try.
It was a good day.

“Don’t stifle my creativity, future wife. The Edda bids womenfolk to be loving and just towards their men. Would you trounce age-old traditions?” He turned his head ever-so-slightly, watching as the Hold guards gingerly picked up the severed head and dragged away the body. Children threw moldy cabbages and apples at it; hooting and hollering as the guards bore the abuse good naturedly.

He had been right. There were the wine sellers and pastry makers out in force, doing a briskly lucrative trade. Applying a mild amount of pressure to Elisif’s arm, he nudged her attention to the left and was gratified to see the Nord’s eyes widen almost comically at the sight of wooden toys being sold.

Toys and dolls whose heads popped off...their creator demonstrating their use with an elaborate flourish, as children and their parents both oohed and aahed. The dolls sold out faster than even the sweetrolls.

He bought one of the pastries before they were gone and bit into the treat with relish. He noticed Elisif staring at him in horror and wiped his mouth; smiling when his fingers came up covered in gooey red syrup.

*Mmm. Snowberries.* “Think you that Faralda can whip up another white tunic for me to redesign? I find I have a natural talent for such things.”

“You savage.” She flicked away the crumbs that were falling upon her shoulder. He lifted the sweetroll invitingly. She declined with a withering glance. “There aren’t enough needles and pins in Nirn to deflate your pride. Pig.”

“Mmm. I don’t see a problem. You know, I think I shall pay Faralda a visit myself. Trolls blood, I haven’t felt this good in weeks.” Ulfric smiled happily. “I could order something for you, if you like. Make it up for you, all special and shit. That is, unless you think wearing outfits designed to match will be a problem, considering our propitious alliance thus far.”

“*You have made this my problem!* You have no concept of how difficult this will be, cleaning up the mess you’ve made of your reputation!” she spoke in hushed tones. Glaring daggers at him.

“I expect that everyone will get over it quite soon. Oh look! There is an effigy of Tullius they are making ready to be burned! Ah. How sentimental...they are roasting apples over his strawbound remains. Did you know that they call apples *balla’s* in the Alik’r Desert of our neighboring Hammerfell?”

He prodded her to respond, dangling his last bit of sweetroll in front of her face when the woman set her jaw and stared resolutely over his shoulder.

Ignoring him.

But this was old news to Ulfric. He had survived Nemain’s idea of friendship, after all was said and done. Elisif was merely practice. “Oh right...I think Falk mentioned something -oh yes! Isn’t that your favorite festival food that they are cooking over there, Elisif?”
Ulfric leaned over and waggled his eyebrows, leering suggestively. “Roasted balls?”

She was ominously silent for the rest of that long and tiresome day.

It was bliss.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah. I took some of the dialogue from the game and worked it in. DEAL WITH IT.
Something was lying on her face.

Nemain tried to reach out and move the thing away, as she tried to wriggle free of the weight holding her down. Yet she felt...paralyzed. Cold to the bone. And oddly disconnected, as if she weren’t quite inside her own body. *Body?*

Then, with a harsh electric snap, she was back. And everything woke up.

Nemain’s body arched, and a scream raked its way up from her innards; searing out through her throat. Bursting from her mouth with so much force that she felt something tear inside of her. It didn’t even sound human, that scream: certainly nothing she could imagine coming out of her own body. Not a word of power nor a Thu’um.

It was an unstoppable torrent of sound. Agony and horror and fear. It was the piteous wail of a newborn caged in a woman’s voice. Her voice.
And then the pain drowned her in a thick, stinging wave, and she knew why she was screaming. She was in Alduin’s belly, and the limp mass covering her head was a dead body.

There were bodies all around her, muffling her movements. Pressing, dragging her downwards into the thick of them. Acidic juices stung her legs, and she screamed again...this time in fear-fueled rage. The stench was overwhelming with the dry-ash smell of dragon and decay, and she felt instantly claustrophobic. For there was not an armspan of empty air in any direction that her hand could feel.

This was a graveyard. She had to get out of here. Had to get out! Lifting her free arm, Nemain punched the body away from her head. Gulping in the fetid humidity, she promptly choked...gagging more on the heavy reek than the quality of the air. Every second she lingered brought more agony -already, her skin was burning. Scraping against the bile-coated armor and weapons of the dead that huddled around her.

And all was absolutely silent, save for her terrified panting. A sonorous, rumbling gurgle and a steady pounding, of which she took to be the World Eater’s heartbeat.

Must break free, gotta get out, must getout! As she tentatively reached her other hand in the opposite direction, Nemain forced herself to think of nothing. Not the strangely vivid skooma dream she had just endured, nor the position she had somehow found herself in.

Something was different. She had lost something in her primordial transition from death to life. Her mind was dull...weary and throbbing with a pain that wasn’t entirely physical, and it took more effort than she possessed to will her sluggish thoughts back into efficacy. But she could overcome. She had to rise above this, for this...this could not be her final end!

Breathe. Wait-dinnae breathe. Hold fast and punch through. There must be a way out! There must!

Her arms slid through gelatinous muck, and she bit back a softer, almost whimpering shriek...that shriek tapering into a moan as her tongue prodded her dry, dessicated lips. Just how long had she been dead, travelling the realms of Oblivion?

Focus. Escape, then attack. As she shoved aside the bodies trying to find the outer edge of her prison, practically swimming through the corpses -some were still warm, and wasn’t that just a dandy treat- Nemain became slowly aware of something.

Hunger.

It had hovered in the periphery of her thoughts while she had awakened, yet now she was nearly consumed by it. Somehow, despite all the uncertainty...not knowing exactly how she had returned to her crushed and injured body, desperately trying to repress all of the horrors she had just endured -she knew.

If she could just eat something, all her problems would float away.

Movement happened. The cavernous stomach rippled - turning on its side, as she kept her mouth tightly shut against the corrosive juices swilling around her; desperately fighting the urge to howl as any space she had won was promptly filled by her silent neighbors. One of them toppled...effectively pinning her down, but gods was that breathing?

Nemain worked a hand free and gently placed her finger upon the body’s pulse point. Feeling the
unshaven throat scratch against her skin as his jaw worked.

Yes. His heart tepidly pattered an irregular drumbeat. This poor bastard was still alive.

Just like her.

Well. Not quite. Her inner voice giggled inanely, for something had certainly gone off. The torches had been lit, but no one was home. Not that she could put a finger on what exactly bothered her at the moment, for her head seemed mired in a deep fog.

Every thought was a strenuous burden.

“Cabhrú!” The man’s voice was a shadowed whisper. “Cabhair liom…”

A Forsworn, then. One of her own People, speaking the tongue of her childhood as he blindly begged for aid. Her mind processed this knowledge, accepted and then summarily discarded it.

He was an it. And ‘it’ was over an hundred pound of pure raw meat drenched in blood. Alduin had already cooked it for her; there was a sharp tang of charcoal that made the scent absolutely mouthwatering.

“…cabhrú…”

She grabbed the meat in front of her, held it in both hands, and bit into it. The meat made a startled sound and weakly pulled away, but that hardly registered at all, because Nemain gnawed at it until it shut up.

There was some sort of thick outer coating, a peel guarding it from consumption. She ripped it away and resumed her feast.

Tearing at it, she chewed and swallowed without even noting the taste except as blood and salt and flesh, and Nemain did not pause until she’d teether the last threads of gristle from the bone. Then she broke the bones open with her hands and sucked out the marrow. Licking her fingers when her stomach bulged and could hold no more.

It wasn’t quite enough...not really. It wasn’t until she released the tight, almost unconscious hold upon her magic that something deep inside of her eased, as that dark abyss within welled up with the creamy ectoplasmic filling. The dregs of this man’s life force.

She felt his energy seep into her, invisible. More delicious and fulsome than even her gory repast had been. More...satisfying.

And in a rapid flash, it became a he, and the meat turned against her like knives in her belly.

Oh gods. Oh Et’Ada...Ehinofey, Y’ffre... gods!!

She was going to hurl.
She managed to bend her head away from herself and be sick, hacking up as much as she could manage until her throat was sorely raw with the effort. Trembling, she wiped her mouth and blinked her eyes, hoping against hope that her vision would return. For if this was some sort of longwinded nightmare, wouldn’t she be able to control at least some aspect of it?

But all she saw in the quiet was the dark.

With a stab of disappointment Nemain realized that she was still blind. But other than that, she felt...damn. She felt good!

Better than good. Nemain flexed her hands experimentally, straightening her legs as her feet curled in fully rotating function upon the joints of her ankles. Her entire body was in perfect working order. Different, but ready for anything. She felt bloody amazing.

What in Hircine’s name be happening tae me? Sithis, what...what did ye do?

Licking her lips again, she ignored the vile taste. Wondering at how plump and fleshy they had somehow become.

-And quick as a flash, she was flung across the jumbled darkness, as her ears rang with what could only be Alduin’s roar. Stunned, she reflected that it sounded somehow louder inside the dovah than without, and she managed to crack a grin at this new and fascinating knowledge.

Utterly useless, at the moment. But the sword she had slit her forearm against was luckily anything but.

Gripping the hilt of it carefully so that it would not slip in her grimy palm, Nemain painstakingly worked it out from the morass of dead things and lifted it free. Her other hand patted carefully around, eventually touching-

-Hard wet flesh. Stretched with a slick wetness in ribbed ridges and valleys, stinging her hands. Rib bones. The sword slipped from her grasp more than once as she tried to assume some sort of position that would afford her traction, to made a hole and stab her way out, and there was a particularly bad moment where Alduin must have rolled upside down because she nearly lost her hold upon the damn thing.

Which would have been highly unfortunate. Concentrate!

Grabbing tightly to the more securely wedged corpses, Nemain released a hiss of frustration. Her exposed skin itched, and she could feel the soles of her feet chafe and burn the longer they remained in contact with the bilious, more digested bits down below. Having no illusions of grandeur, she realized her chances were shite with anything heftier than a dagger. Blades were not anywhere near her field of expertise.

Yet using fire could ignite the gases clogging what air remained. Electricity and frost would sap her
strength and have little to show for the effort. *Probably give the scaly duffer an ulcer, nothing more.*

But she had to try. She’d take her chances with the sword.

Nemain stabbed out. Hitting something soft and squishy, as she worked it free. Drew the blade back and struck once again.

This time, it bit through. Alduin’s innards shook; blasting her eardrums with sound, but she was ready for him now...somehow she managed to lift the weapon, striking out again and again, more in desperation than finesse. Cold air blasted her face, and Nemain clambered over the hills and valleys of the dead...scrabbling through the thick flap of skin, fat and gristle to reach the freedom of the world beyond.

Her hand that did not hold the sword was the first part of her to escape. It found purchase somehow holding onto Alduin’s scales, her other hand following; digging in securely with the sword as Nemain heaved herself from the slimy hole that had been her prison. Keeping her anchored as she gulped in heaps of icy, thin air.

“**Niid! Dovahkiin I have already eaten you once! Beyn! Nust wo ni qiilaan fen kos duaan!**”

But Nemain had learned her lesson. She would not delay attacking on the offense.

Never again. “**Joor Zah Fruuuul!**”

Alduin lurched to the side, nearly tossing her off as he screamed in what she hoped was pain. Dibe damn him, he was flying...that was why she had been tossed like a dumpling plopped into a boiling stew every which way inside! Every pump and thrust of his wings nearly dislodged her with the blowback of his passage.

She clamped onto his spine with her thighs...praying he would not try any fancy acrobatics as he wheeled and staggered down, down, ever down.

Twice, Alduin nearly threw her off, but Nemain held on grimly. Plunging her sword deep into the dragon’s back and maintaining her grip with every plodding drop of his descent, periodically re-Shouting Dragonrend. Forcing him to land.

Her legs dangled behind her as the dovah dipped nearly vertical, and her hands bore the full brunt of her weight, *scrivvens n’ jibs*, he was trying to climb into the skies again!

And as she crawled her way up his neck, battered by wind, the Dragonborn realized that this strange bottomless strength that enabled her to scale a flying dovah’s back was nothing she could have claimed before her dreaming.

She should not be able to do this. Not any of it.

*I doon fuckin’ care.* Nemain thought savagely. *I cannae care right now! Focus on killin’ him, you hirplin mook!*
Reality was an acquired taste, she was coming to find. And for a blind woman stuck on a swooping and angry dragon, questioning what was real when spinning blind in space was to take a walloping risk.

“Dovahkiin! Ziil gro dovah ulse!”

“Why doon ye stoppa down there on th’ ground and...and say that tae me face! Joor Zah Fruuul! ” Shrieked Nemain, as she clung with both arms to Alduin’s neck. They must still be high in the sky, and she...she was still naked. Bloody gobbering naked, with no weapon to wield save her wits and one rusty sword.

Somehow this made her laugh; high in equal parts exhilaration and profound terror. She must be going utterly insane.

Clouds brushed by her skin, flowing past her like water parting a rock, and Nemain welcomed the cold for once. Aye, reality was a chance, but she’d take the odds and run with them. Even if it was freezing - it was far better to be outside the dragon than in.

Below her, the dragon veered down and to the right. She quickly cast Detect Life as the glowing outline of the dovah appeared beneath her...just in time for Alduin to crash and slide with an earthshattering bellow. Launching her into the air as up became down.

Twisting her back, she somersaulted and landed somehow on her feet...ducking away as the dragon’s spiked tail crashed down where she had stood just seconds before.

"Dovahkiin, you should not have come here.” Alduin’s voice shook her guts like jelly. “Nu hin sil dii!”

He made good on his threat with a full-throated Thu’um. A gale-force blizzard blasted past Nemain’s left side, killing an elk whose nebulous form stiffened and fell even as she dodged, watching.

...Waiting for her opening. She peevishly translated his Dovahzul as she readied her most damaging Destruction spells. Your soul is mine, eh. Get in line. What be with these immortal beings an’ their cravings fer souls? Perhaps they havenae tried sweetrolls or a good stiff drink?

Right. Enough stalling. She had a job to do.

“Wishful thinking, wyrm! I’ve come back from th’ dead tae take you down!”

"Zu'u ni faas gaaffesejul. I do not fear mortal ghosts.” He spoke scornfully, then laughed.

And there it was. That awful laughter she remembered from the Throat of the World...cutting her to the bone, as she ran beneath the vast black being’s belly. Evading that dagger tipped maw by a hairsbreadth, as the dovah chuffed another laugh at her expense.

Ochone, his laughter be nearly as bad as...her mind stopped. Stuttering, it refused to contemplate any resemblance that might dredge up that dream that was no dream.
Sithis had nearly broken her mind. If even the thought of Him could evoke such a frisson of terror, what nightmares could bolder, more unflattering comparisons bring?

But Alduin’s scorn was close enough to hurt. Riding that razor edge of pain and pleasure, as hot breath blew past her in a cloud of charnel rot and smoke, nearly catching her skin with heat as she ran.

He was aiming for the kill.

"You are persistent, Dovahkiin. Pruzah ol aar. A fine slave you would have made." "

“You really dinnae ken me at all, dragon, if ye think I’d make ye a decent slave. Ah’m balls with direct orders, ‘specially from homicidal tyrants.”

Nemain managed to fully charge a chained lightning spell. It zapped her hands as she held it, and her fingers worked. Pulling at the linked electricity like strands of taffy until it formed a compact ball of humming voltage.

"Dovahkiin, hin kah fen kos bonaar. Your pride will be humbled-"

She lobbed the spell; sending it into a sizzling arc straight into the white-edged borders of the World Eater’s open and mocking mouth. Yes!

Ozone mixed with the smoke-rust stench of blood, and he screamed. Shrieking in a rage so red she could almost taste it. His pain was like a fine wine...but to her surprise he did not flop over and die. That stomach wound she had dealt him from breaking free must have hurt like a bitch, but the dragon hardly slowed...pushing through her spell like parchment paper.

That chained lightning had taken down a Dwemer Centurion with a single shot, once. She had hoped it would do more than enrage the World Eater, but she was down and out of luck, now.

As his snarling head pursued her, stumbling and stupid with blindness and dysphoria, Nemain numbly thought that this was a dance that could last for all eternity.

The World Eater was not truly part of this world, after all. Perhaps Arngeir was right.

Perhaps he could not be killed.

No! I will not, cannae believe it! Not after all this...no! Taking a wildly erratic running leap, she zigzagged over unseen ground. Tripping over stones and roots to reach Alduin’s chest, to which she clung. Feeling his great heart drum like a hammer amidst the bellows of his lungs.

Think, witch! Al Du In. Destroyer-Devour-Master. What be his weakness??

All the copying of Dovahzul that she had done begrudgingly a lifetime ago came flooding back, and Nemain whispered Feim... working her incorporeal nails a bit more deeply into the flesh beneath his
scales. Buying her a few more precious seconds to think...to search for a Word beyond Dragonrend that could finish off an immortal dragon.

She had tried this once...tried to crush his heart with her bare hands, and it had ended rather poorly. But whatever Nemain was now, it wasn’t frail.

She was strong enough to do this, to take out this hurricane of power. To this end had she been reborn. For this cause would she push through the gloaming despair: this panic that something in her had been altered. That something had been lost...irreparably beyond salvation.

*Unmake him,* Sithis had said. *How did one unmake a god?*

Bits of tales bounced around her head. Stories of Lorkhan’s heart and Magnus’ eye, merging into an avalanche of lore that threatened to overwhelm her, as she hurriedly propelled her thoughts through the thick of it all.

*Nords. Dragon cult sacrifices and priests. Rag-Na-Rok and the end times. Think!* In the pantheon of gods, Alduin was the wellspring. The Beginning and the End. Coasting the ages of Nirn in a way that felt inconceivably abstract to her, bound to the stability of linear mortal life as she was (or had been.) And, she remembered: Dremora had claimed in the arcane texts that dragons simply ‘were, and are’...eternal, immortal, unchanging, and unyielding.


But Alduin wasn’t. *Not e’en a Shout could truly make Alduin mortal or capable of being kilt.* He transcended time itself.

*You’re thinkin’ aboot it all wrong,* she thought with a sudden streak of epiphany. *You don’t need tae kill Alduin for forever.* It wasn’t the end of the world.

Not yet.

She had dug through the scale-sharp flesh deep enough by now to embrace his heart. She felt it beat wildly; vulnerable. Yet still so strong. Still pulsing by her mercy alone. *Ye just came back from the underworld as a spirit. Back to your body. The body be mortal. Prone to frailty, disease. Death and wrath and ruin. Nobody lives forever. No body. BODY!*

Her mind blazed with the speed of light, her breath speeding into a rapid pant as she gasped with joy. *Destroy the body and Alduin’s spirit will scatter...formless and powerless!*

Preparing for one last ditch shot at victory, she stabbed her nails into Alduin’s heart—and spent a good chunk of her remaining magicka casting Detect Life and Detect Undead. Together as one...magic chiming as the spells conjoined to create a vision that was entirely new.

The Dragonborn wasn’t quite sure what she had expected. Certainly not this. Her mortal eyes were
still blank and dark, but her inner vision saw...

The spirit and the body were the soul. And she saw his laid out before her, shining. She had to sever it. She must.

Alduin’s soul was a monstrous spangle of threads. Darkness and light, woven into a glimmering meshed pattern more fine and pure than the naked eye could discern. It was beautiful, his spirit: looping in concentric circles that spiraled into eternity. Harnessed into this; the primal leader of the Nedic animal pantheon.

He was fire, smoke and shadow. 

*Just like me.*

It took every ounce of courage she possessed, but Nemain noted similar spangles of light and dark when she looked upon herself in the clear, unrelenting honesty afforded by magickal sight.

The body housed the spirit, and their spirits were the same.

She felt a strange heady sense of calm. A serenity upon confirming this. Something she had always known, in her heart of hearts, to be true. Nemain leaned her forehead against Alduin’s scaly breast. Caught up in the brevity of it; of this cage mortality had fashioned that her inner spirit railed against. Beating like wings against bars. *We be the same, you and I.*

And yet, it changed nothing.

“*Al-Du-In.*” Nemain croaked, puncturing the slippery meat of his heart with her fingers. She was lodged deep within him, elbow deep, and so was unaffected by his rough attempts to remove her.

“I...Unmake you. I End you. *Joor Zah Frul, Alduin! JOOR ZAH FRUUUL!*”

“*Niüd! Daar Lein los díi! Fen du hin sille ko Sovngarde!*” The World Eater writhed above her, trying in vain to get away.

It was Nemain’s turn to laugh, albeit in more despair than scorn. She gripped him like a lover. “I’m nae bound fer Sovngarde. No, nae valorous feasting or fighting afterlife for the likes of us. But I pray that ye’ll end up in a far kinder place than what I had tae traverse tae get here. Say hallo to Father Akatosh fer me. Put in a good word, aye? Likely I’ll be joining ye soon...wherever ye be bound tae go.”

She would be kinder than the Void. She would not trap him as the Old Tongues had chosen to do, flinging Alduin upon the currents of chaos to pop up on some unsuspecting and unready generation. He served a purpose, just as she did. Both of them - nothing more than weapons breathed into life.

And for the briefest moment, Nemain felt a searing hatred for the Gods and their lackadaisical carelessness for both her and Alduin: their broken and botched playthings.
Broken toys could not always be mended.

Releasing her necromancy like a cold wind, Nemain cast it out away from her and sent it seeking. Finding him, it latched onto the lattice of spirit that Alduin’s dragon form housed. Working thin, rootlike tendrils into the cracks between the threads of Alduin’s soul, as she carefully but calmly severed him from this body, in this dimension. Sending his soul to fly. To fly free...as she, piteous joore on fledgling and earthbound stalks, never could.

She envied him. “Tahrodiis Dovahkiin! Zu'u unslaad! Zu'u nis oblaan!”

“Everyone dies someday, Alduin.” She was nearly done when one great sweep of his foreleg sent her soaring. Airborne, for what felt like an incredibly long space of time until she hit something that might have been a rock.

She hit so hard she bit her tongue nearly in half. Unable to stop herself, Nemain slid down -boneless as a ragdoll. Unable to move.

She could fight no more. Her legs would not obey her, and her hands were limp and unresponsive. But her voice; aye, her finest of weapons was still hot and sharp, albeit slurred. “Be not! Ye Are Not, nae any longer! I Unmake you, I curse ye, Alduin, that yer days be over upon Mundus and yer soul lost tae the Aetherium!”

...and a Word of Power that she could have sworn she had never heard before whispered itself into her ear. Alien. Bold. Presenting itself like a gift, as some thing briefly pecked at her lips and ran spidery fingers over her shaved scalp.

Snow. Early snow and th’ wind, nothing more. She latched onto the word in desperation, for she could hear the World Eater stomping and snorting as he hurried towards her. Wind pulled upon the gooseflesh of her skin, sucking back into his mouth as Alduin inhaled. Intent on delivering her a second death that would ultimately be final.

Helpless and alone, Nemain fed all her anguish and fear and strength into the making of that one, final word. Drawing a breath that stabbed her with short, sharp aches, Nemain Shouted.

“.....Krentaaaaaan!.....”

Beams of light seared her ether vision as the billowing form of Alduin roared. Screamed incomprehensible Dovahzul, then dissolved. Passing from her spell sight with a boom of supersonic power that shook the world.

She watched dazedly as the spangled dust and stars of him blew away. Recasting with the dregs of her magic, Nemain struggled to keep him in her sights...just so she could see the glowing bits dissipate into thin air. Free.

And as she lay there, listlessly sucking up the pops of power that were drifting about like black snowflakes, peace filled her soul.
She had done it.

How long she lay there, she had no way of knowing. Snow was coming down in fat clumps of cold, and she spent a lazy length of time trying to figure out which month it was, to warrant such a snowfall. At one point her back straightened with a crunchy twig-tight snap, and she could move a tad more...could straighten her nerve-deadened hands and arms from the pins and needles they had suffered under, laying all sprawled upon the ground like that.

She was attempting to lever herself up to a standing position when a rustle of undergrowth announced a crashing, clashing being.

Nemain attempted to summon a look that was both unconcerned and fierce. Likely falling short of the mark. For the only animal that walked through the woods like they owned the very earth was man.

*Shor’s hairy ballsack. I be easy pickings at this point for e’en the most rustic rube of a hunter.*

“Pssst.”

A rough deep voice harshly whispered again, causing her to jump and crane her head towards whoever was causing such a noisome commotion. Couldn’t a Dragonborn die in peace?

“*Pssst! Astrid. I’ve found her!*”

“...what? What did you find?” A woman’s hushed voice responded in obvious irritation. “This is what used to be Helgen, not Riverwood! We have a day or two at least before we reach Orphan Rock, so throw back whatever bone you’ve picked up. We must keep moving!”

“Nah, I mean it. Get over here now, before that dragon comes back. She’s hurt bad...might not make it.”

Someone solid who smelt like blood and metal -couldn’t place who he was, but that growling voice was familiar (and the name Astrid was ringing all sorts of bells) - stepped closer and leaned over Nemain.

-Sending an all-too-familiar flood of hunger to wet her throat. Cor...Nemain was wild with it. She could hardly think straight, for the yawning emptiness of the craving, the gut churning want...
“Hey. Dragonborn. You alright?”

Summoning a strength she didn’t know she still had, Nemain shot up from the ground and launched herself in the direction of the man...seeking. Soaking up the vast pool of life that fairly radiated from him...until he threw her away from him with a harsh oath.

This time, her ass hit the rock hard enough to crack the tailbone, and she let out a plaintive squeal. Clarity rushing back, as she reflected that perhaps eating her rescuer was not the brightest move.

“What the -Talos’s furry asschaps, what was that??”

“Er. So sorry. Look.” She despised how wiffly her voice was being, but considering the events of the day she felt lucky to have retained a voice at all. Her throat burned, as though she had been gargling nails. “I...I need help, y’ken. Something be broken inside me and I cannae move to walk. But you should probably stay away an’ fetch more help, so that I dinnae be tempted to...to try whatever I did. Again.”

“Tempted.” The Nord’s voice had gone flat. “Is that what the mages are calling it these days.”

Silence. A whinge of leather. A jingling of mail sounded, and Nemain cranked her head in vain to follow where the man must have stepped. “Uh. You do know you’re ass naked. Right?”

What did that tae do with anything? What was his name? “Aye.”

His boots thumped into the tamped down earth of her battlefield. “So I guess you also know that half your skin’s been boiled away. And maybe you can explain to me why there’s no blood for all those teethmarks you’ve got on ya. Some big bastard bit you clean through.”

He sniffed. “Huh. Heart’s not beating either. So explain to me how a dead woman’s talking to me now. You don’t smell like a vampire. You smell worse.”

What? “I...” her teeth were practically grating themselves into dust, but she would force the words out. “Ugh! Cor, this be ridiculous. I’m...well. O’ course I’m alive! I wouldnae be breathin’ and talkin’ if I were dead. Would I?”

Silence again, heavy this time. Her Detect Life spell was on its last legs, and the glowing outline of him flickered. Almost dying, but she did not dare to reinvigorate it.

“I need yer help.” Nemain tried again.

“Yeah,” The man said, “you damn sure do.”

And with a whir of displaced air, he drew his weapon and swung it down. Cleaving straight through her head. Nemain felt the rush of the swing but she never heard the sound; it was far too late.

The world blacked out.
Waking up the second time was both easier and worse.

Easier because Nemain was becoming numb to all the pain and horror of *feeling* her mind switch on again; worse because she didn’t know where she was.

Consciousness was a thick, scarlet rush of pain—a cascading furnace that swept through her mind and out through every part of her body. Bringing with it twists of agony that curled through her like whip-cracks; hot bright spots of pain.

She was aware she was convulsing—and then it was over, and she sucked in a dank breath of air and tried to sit up. She failed, but only because someone or something was holding her down. There was a smell of fresh linen bandages and old, decayed tombs.

And violence. The air was ripe with it. And above and around her, voices were arguing. Loudly.

“-let the bitch die, by Sithis, Astrid...why didn’t you let her stay dead? I thought we weren’t gonna have any lies between us. You went behind my back, and you did this. How am I gonna trust you now?”

“Trust *me*, husband. I said I had plans for her that did not include cremation. And if you hadn’t caved her face in, I would not have been forced to take such drastic measures.”

“Horkershit! You got rid of me so you could do what you want! You ignored my warnings! That...that thing, whatever she is, it’s fast! I *saw* her when she attacked, Astrid - it was pure reflex! And you brought her here. You coulda died!”

“I sent you out on that job because I knew you’d object, love. But saving her wasn’t your decision to make. I’m sorry the Dragonborn gave you a fright, but we need her...if only to silence that jester and his fool talk of the old ways. You know our situation, dearest, probably better than most. Jobs are drying up. And good couriers are getting harder to find.”

A sudden, emphasized clearing of throat followed.

“Hey! I’m sorry, alright?” The little girl’s voice was cross. “I won’t do it again. Even though Imperials are oh-so tasty. All that wine -I think it must tenderize their livers. Yum.”

“Babette. Couriers bring missives. Missives bring in work. And work pays for your precious alchemy reagents, your books and tools. I want to hear you say it.”

“Mmmm…”

“Babette!”
“Fine! I won’t eat the couriers anymore! I promise!”

“Hssst!” The dry croak of the old man’s interjection made them all pause. “She’s coming out of it!”

Wrinkly hands began touching her face, perfunctorily pinching her skin. Testing. Touching...slipping beneath her robes with casual and invasive intent.

“Uhrgh. No,” Nemain slurred. Managing to break one of her restraints, her hand rebounded into the air -popping whoever was directly atop her with a surprised grunt.

More hands groped her, and she fought them, baring her teeth at the hands trying to hold her down. “Ungh! Nooo! Stoppit!”

“Festus! Restrain her!”

Nemain twisted like a sabrecat, stilling only when a paralysis spell stiffened her into compliance. “Back off, you idiots. I need to observe the patient, so kindly shut up and let me work.”

“Nemain.” Astrid’s voice was careful. Soothing. “Calm down. You are among friends...in the Sanctuary of the Dark Brotherhood. I have-”

A shrill laugh interrupted Astrid with a whooshing of cloth and a thump. “She’s awake! Awake and revived! Haha hahaha-ee-ha, Festus Krex you wonderful genius!”

“Ah, well, it was nothing.” The old man grumbled, his oily tones unctuous with pride. Nemain lay frozen as those hands finished travelling all over her form, poking and prodding...lifting only when he seemed satisfied that all was in order. “Thank the Dread Father that I happened to have my text on the intricacies of Necromantic Healing nearby. Can’t seem to do anything for those unsightly scars on her neck, though. Bah.”

The paralysis spell must have been a short lived one...her fingers fairly vibrated with the urge to flay them all apart. Nemain wanted nothing more than to be given space. To have the luxury of losing herself in dark, melancholic contemplations.

But she had kept it together so far. She could wait until she was finally alone to fracture. *Just a wee bit longer...* tightness lifted, and suddenly she was freed as the bonds holding her ankles and the other wrist down were cut.

*Finally.* Twisting her head towards the giggler, she asked. “Who...who be you?”

“The thorn in all our sides. The fly in the ointment, the-”

“You’re not helping, Nazir. He’s the Keeper -an Imperial jester, Listener. He brought the Night Mother up from her old crypt in Bravil, and we are...blessed to bask in the joviality of his presence.”

“Yeah. He’s a snack, if he keeps waking me up at night with that ploughing racket.”

“Oh-hoho, Arnbjorn, you wouldn’t eat little ole me! Naughty dog! You wouldn’t break the Tenets, hmm? Raise a finger to harm your brother, ho no! Not to poor, weak Cicero!?”
That grating voice came closer, and Nemain was overwhelmed by the sudden reek of his breath. Carrots and garlic and...sweet rolls? *Odd combination.*

“Mhmhm...Cicero is the Night Mother’s keeper! And you...you spoke the words! Yes! Hahah! You are the Listener, you are the Listener, teehee ha haha haahh!”

Soft scraping footfalls echoed in an odd pattern. “Cicero is at your service, oh great and powerful Listener! Mistress of Death! Lady of Unlife! Countess of Killing! Haha, hahhee, hoohoo!”

*Astrid. Arnbjorn. Babette.* Slowly the pieces of her memory replaced themselves in a puzzle that finally made sense.

“Astrid.” She tried clearing her throat. Trying to ignore the creepy whistling coming from the weird stranger. “I was...dead, in truth. Aye? What happened?”

“Cicero helped wash up the Listener while she slept! So helpful! Cleaning all the hard to reach places! Tra la la, tra la lee, da da dum dum, dee dee...”

“Don’t worry.” A callused yet delicate hand took up Nemain’s fingers and squeezed tightly. Twice. “I watched him bathe you when you arrived, since he insisted. He was respectful.”

She should probably be grateful to have been dead to the world during *that* experience. Zapping the Keeper would be an inauspicious way to enter Sithis’ hearth and home. Tasting the air, Nemain realized that the Nord woman was holding something back. Being overly careful...oh-so-cautious with her words.

*Huh.* It wasn’t as though she were made of feathers and faff. Whatever it was, she could take it. “Ye didnae answer my question.”

“Well, I...”

“Oooh, Cicero is an expert! Cicero knows...” He interrupted, tittering gaily as the others in the room stopped whispering and became silent. “You, wisest and most hairless Listener, are still dead! You are unliving, just like our Lady of Shades. Hee hee...like the song. And I said to the baker, 'You're not dead! You're a faker!' Ahahah hah hah!”

Turning on a pinpoint, the jester’s voice shifted. Becoming sinister. “But if that's your wish, I'll oblige.”

Ignoring the queer little man, Nemain shook her head. She didn’t understand. She didn’t want to understand. But she could feel the cold, the texture of the stone beneath her hands. She could feel everything.

She was thirsty, for Dibe’s sake. No. She *had* to be alive. "That be impossible."

"Oh no no no, dearest Listener, I'm afraid it's quite true! You are a lich...or at least partly a lich. Festus Krex said it himself - he has never seen anything quite like yooouuu before!"

“Nope.” Festus tried to conceal a belch, and failed. “Treated you like a revenant, at first, thanks to
Ambjorn’s bitching and moaning. But the usual tests resulted in some spectacular differences—the colloidal silver in particular blistered instantly upon contact. I think flames might have combusted had I tried a solid ingot, haha. Ah, and the way you healed that blow to your skull… last week I had all but given up and was about to dissect your cerebellum, wiping the edges in preparation… when to my delight, you opened your eyes and spoke. She spoke!”

A male voice heavy with Redguard accents snorted. “Yeah. She told you to fuck off.”

The wizard merely sighed. “I don’t expect you to understand, Nazir. Redguards are so very backwards when it comes to the study of the arcane arts! Think of the academic progress I could have made, compiling a tome on the modus operandi of undead sentience! The differing lobes of the mysterious cranial cortex! Listener, if you wouldn’t be averse to having a few more tests done, well, hehe. Hmm…?”

“Thank you, Festus, that will be all.” Astrid said pointedly as Nemain’s breathing tripped up in a frenzy of indignation. Someone hae been digging ’round in her bodging brains?!

That was it. She’d kill them. She felt battered and raw and vulnerable in a way she never had before, but she’d do it: she would find a way to kill them all, sod the Brotherhood and bloody sodding Sithis. After the interminable day she’d just endured, each new revelation felt like sandpaper scraping over bare skin.

Bare, naked, pissed-off nerves.

And this Cicero character was hardly helping. As his voice lifted into an almost falsetto register, the Dragonborn flinched away.

“Ooooh, yes, you are unique! But then, oh ho! Of course you are, aren’t you? A dragon and a draugr-priest and Listener, all in one! Surprise! Ta-daaaa!”

She shivered and ran her hands over her arms. Unsettled by all of this, which really was too much. Too new...she couldn’t see anything, not one goddamned thing, and cor, she was through. Thoroughly done with all this nonsense.

And though men and women were hovering over her, she knew she was alone; as she never had been alone before—

“Yes. Unique.” Astrid gave a low cough. “Everyone, please leave. I appreciate your hard work over the past few weeks, but now the Listener and I need to speak alone. You’ll have your chance to ask questions later.”

“Thank you,” Nemain murmured, wishing her voice didn’t sound quite so weak. Subdued. Her anger had drained away, and she was so tired. So worn down that she felt like a spirit in truth - the next breath could send her drifting; like coils of smoke on a breeze.

Footsteps pattered and stamped away, with the whispering gossip starting up again full bore as the door thunked shut.
Nemain sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the stone plinth as she tried to stand. Her knees nearly gave out, and strong arms grabbed her before she could smack into the invisible wall straight ahead. She lifted her hands to her face, choking on the sob that she refused to let herself release.

“So...I’m dead.”

“Yes, but apart from that one thing you’re in the best shape you’ll ever be in.”

Nemain sniffled and tried to pull back, mortified at being caught in such a moment of weakness, but Astrid just tightened her grip and slowly - inexorably - reeled her close. She slid one toned arm around the Forsworn’s waist, the other tightening across her shoulders, and Nemain fought the embrace for a shaky second before just...crumbling forward. Accepting it for what it was with a hitched breath.

Comfort.

“Just think. No sickness, no aging.” She smelt like blade oil and leather, and something else. Wildflowers, perhaps. “And aside from some spectacularly dramatic displays of magic that a couple of nearby hunters spied you performing, you also seem to have an incredible tolerance for pain and physical injury.”

“Except fer being a revenant zombie, y’mean.”

Nemain pressed her face into the warm curve of Astrid’s neck, feeling the fine trembling she had not even been aware of ease, as she allowed herself to be drawn close and soothed. Gradually, tension unspooling low in her chest, Nemain began to relax. Her feelings of panic waned.

“Yes, well. I’m no expert on the subject, but your particular brand of revival seems like it would have its uses.” Astrid spoke quietly, as she swiped a hand up and down the knobs of Nemain’s spine. “There. I am glad the others were not here to see you lose your composure. We may be family, but I wouldn’t put it past certain members to...take advantage of open wounds. Be always on your guard, sister. Even here.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, the Dragonborn felt again a white-hot slash of pain; as if she’d been caught again in the World Eater’s jaws. She balled one hand into a fist and dragged the other through Astrid’s hair, hating that she was jealous of it. Fighting against the well of tears, fighting the tremble of her limbs and that damnable weakness that the Nord had so easily sensed.

Did she know all of it? Had the old mage cut open her belly and found the remains of her macabre meal, reading everything she had hidden like a scroll, unfurled and undone?

Void take her, she hoped not. Understanding as the Brotherhood had been thus far (that werewolf’s axe had bloody well hurt) Nemain did not care to imagine what their reaction would be upon finding out just how...how out of control her hunger could be.

They’d bury her alive. Dry her out and wrap her up somewhere next to the Night Mother, to do her duty in the most convenient manner and with the least amount of fuss for the other members of this bloodthirsty little cult. She could feel Her presence, now, solidifying - ever more aware, as darkness pressed against the solipsism of her senses. Twin to Him. Husband and Wife.
Sithis and the Night Mother. It wasn’t every day supplicants were granted wishes by their gods. Much good it had done her.

You could be more grateful. You could hae been left to molder, deep, deep down with all the other warriors in Alduin’s belly. Digested. Dissolved, ’til nought remained-

Lowering her head, Nemain took in a deep breath. Held it, then exhaled. Despite it all, she couldn’t help but entertain thoughts of giving in to the hate: of approaching Arnbjorn and taunting him until he finished what he had started. Asking Babette to fix her a draught of something noxious. Walking until dropped off some canyon or crevasse, swallowed deep in an unknown cave...in which none but the adventurous or foolhardly would ever chance to find her despoiled remains ever again...

“Now that Festus Krex has healed you, you appear...well. You look entirely normal.”

Nemain pushed back from Astrid, dragging her hand over her face with a choked laugh. Nearly dissolving into another helpless sob, because since when had her life ever been normal?

She was sure she had not imagined the mummified flesh of her lips back upon awakening in Alduin’s stomach. “Oh, harr harr. Except fer the shaved head, y’mean. And the eyes.”

“It’s an...interesting fashion statement, I’ll grant you that.”

Nemain chuckled, then sighed as Astrid patted her hand and released her to stand. All on her own, for the first time in what felt like forever.

It almost hurt, to smile. It stretched muscles that had not been used in a fair long while. “Nae my first choice either. None of this has been. Ugh.” Lifting up her hand to pat her head, she was surprised to feel a prickling fuzz upon her scalp. “Just...how long was I gone onna that table?”

“Two, perhaps three weeks.” There was a small shift of movement that Nemain thought might have been a shrug. “Hard to say. Though I wouldn’t go near Arnbjorn for a while if I were you. The corpse he led me to was almost unrecognizable.”

Gloved fingers tapped stone, her voice suddenly becoming brisk and businesslike. “Bringing you back was costly, you know. Two of my best murderers were out of commission for weeks, attempting to heal you. But fortunately for you, Cicero insisted that it could be done. And he was right.”

Guess girl-bonding time be o’er. “I be in your debt. And his as well.”

“Yes. We will worry about that later.”

Now, that sounded ominous. The soft cloth of her robe caught on the creases of her hands as she twisted it fitfully. “Astrid. Tell it tae me straight. How can this be? How be I alive?”

The woman clicked her tongue. “According to my wizard you won’t age or change, because the act of draining the life from the living returns you to a template of what you were at the end of life, and holds you there. Unless...” Astrid’s voice trailed off.
Nemain kept her shoulders tight; with a sinking sort of weight dousing the pit of her stomach as she connected the layers of what had been left unsaid. “Unless I choose not tae kill, y’mean.”

“Plenty of vampires feed without killing their blood host. I am certain that if you are similarly inclined that you will also find a way.” Leather creaked as Astrid walked, footsteps echoing. “Though to reap the full benefits I’d suggest taking a life at regular intervals. Just so that you are in control of your...er, unique urges. Don’t worry. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to do so. Soon.”

Touching the altar that she was lying upon, Nemain could detect no difference in temperature between her skin and the stone. Well. That explains why my sight couldnae be healed. T’was lost afore I was kilt.

“ But I’m dying. I be dead.”

“Hmm. You are dying less than the rest of us,” Astrid hummed thoughtfully. “You’re...on hold would be a good description. Don’t overthink it. And there are positives, believe me.”

“Positives!” Nemain couldn’t control the bitter, shaky laugh that burst out of her, and put her hand to her mouth to muffle it. “...Cor, save me from the boon of any further mercies.”

"Yes, well. I can think of countless scenarios in which having a..." an unpleasant pause, "...self-regenerating assassin would be nothing short of a godsend."

Godsend. Miracle! Well, she had bloody met the gods, or some of them, and not only had they tried to bodging eat her, but Sithis... Sithis, you lying bastard! No, you cannae do this to me! You son of a bitch, you cannae just let me rot!

He had literally given her the exact thing that she had needed the most. To be alive and back in her own body, gifted with the power to end Alduin for good. A gift that many, if not all necromancers would take with gratitude.

All but her. She had seen what happened to those who sold their humanity for power; who slaked their thirst for advantage with the souls of innocents.

And Oblivion take her...she’d become one of them.

That made her laugh again, but it wasn’t a laugh she recognized. It sounded wild and ugly: not like her at all, as Astrid slowly took a few steps back.

Of course, she wasn’t Nemain anymore, was she? The woman from before, that lass had her whole life ahead of her. Friends, love, a family - those were the only things she’d ever wanted.

And now, all that was simply...lost.

She felt alive, and thanks to Festus Krex she now looked alive, but the truth she now realized had stripped all that away. She was animunculi- an animated, breathing mimicry of life.

Death would have been preferable. And perhaps, it wasn't too late. Someone else more willing could
be the Listener.

All she had to do was wait. And wait...feel herself decay, skin slipping from spoiling flesh as her mind slowly went grey and wandering. *Until they were forced to kill her...aye...*

“It’s not wholly unfortunate, Dragonborn. You’ve been restored and you are safe among friends. And now that you’re here, surely our organization will only grow stronger. I have such plans as to—”

Nemain said nothing, because there didn’t seem to be much point. She could force back all the questions and fears and protests still rattling around in her skull, but she doubted closure would be incoming anytime soon. Astrid was still talking, but the woman’s soft dulcet words were mush.

Defeated, Nemain sank back upon the stone plinth and allowed her thoughts to chase one another in hopeless dejection.

So it began - a beginning after an end. Here she would remain, the undead Dragonborn; talking to the Night Mother and feeding from...from-

Well. Nemain decided right then and there that she would rather sit here and putrefy than pursue any sort of vampiric lifestyle akin to what she had seen her mother undertake. Literally. She did want to live, but not at any cost. She imagined that slowly rotting, even as a lich, was going to hurt. Hurt quite a lot.

The Dragonborn shivered.

“Nemain. Listener? You seem to be taking this very well.”

“What. Apologies. Me mind was elsewhere.”

Astrid cleared her throat chidingly. “The Civil War is over. We’ve gained a good deal of business from the conflict, but perhaps the rebuilding of Skyrim’s government will create new opportunities to obtain contracts. I told you what brought this about: that Elisif and Ulfric are to be wed come Midwinter’s Eve, and yet you said nothing. I thought that news would at least garner some reaction. Are you well?”

“Aye.” Oh, she was not well. Not well at all.

In fact, she was fairly sure she was going to vomit. If she even had anything inside to hork up, it was certainly making a bold stab at it. “Be you certain ye heard that correct? News does get misspoken. And...with summat of this import, it can get overblown from time tae time.”

More shifting, and then Astrid’s warm hand took her own again in a comforting grip.

She allowed it, letting her fingers lay limp as the Nord stroked her fingers. “I realize this must all be quite a shock. Yes, the blockade of Solitude has been lifted and the Moot’s vote unanimous. Ulfric will be High King of the newly emancipated Skyrim. And Jarl Elisif of Haafingar will be raised to be his Queen.”
Astrid continued patting her hand, as if she couldn’t sense the endless gulf of apathy that had swamped Nemain’s soul. “All across the Holds, people have been celebrating what they’re calling the dawn of a new age, patriotic idiots -Nemain? Are you ill?”

“Sorry. I be here. I’m listening,” Nemain said detachedly. She didn’t want to, but she couldn’t seem to block Astrid's voice. Her own sounded remote and odd, disconnected from the rest of her, but it didn’t reassure the woman currently prying her cold undead heart apart.

“Gods.” Astrid huffed an exhausted sigh. “Look at you. You look as though I’ve just informed you that your prized puppy has been drowned. Shor’s bones -let’s just take this one step at a time, all right? I’m doing what I can for you.”

“Look. Being a part of the Dark Brotherhood -it can help you get back on your feet. Reintroduce you to the world, maybe let you live a normal life on top of your connections here. Er. As normal as an unlife can possibly be.”

“So...talk to the Night Mother. It will be a...a great help, as so far you are the only one who, well. Who hears her.”

The hand holding her own suddenly contracted.

Tight enough to break bones. “-I will not force you, but you should be aware of something that is a...hmm, a conflict of interest for me. The Listener is the de facto Head of the Family. In time, you will be expected to assume this mantle.”

“Not that I don’t have the utmost faith in you, Nemain. But, there is so very much for you to learn. In the meantime, why don’t you pass on any new contracts the Night Mother sees fit to grace us with and...and I promise that I will try to find ways of keeping your new life with us smooth and comfortable, while we work this new situation out to suit us both. Do we have a deal?”

Nemain chose not to answer. She cocked her head in the direction of Astrid mutely, feeling as if parts of her were just… shutting down. Falling away. Important parts of her, already lost. Hope, for one. A sense of who she was, what she hoped to be.

All gone now.

“All right,” she said softly. “Deal. On one condition.”

The assassin hesitated, drawing out her answer until Nemain twitched irritably. “What condition?”

Giving back as good as she had gotten, Nemain squeezed Astrid’s fingers until the fine-edged bones shifted and popped. Holding her tightly, pulling her close as the Nord struggled to get away.

She smiled, feeling her lips curl up at the corners. It was not a nice smile.

"Ulfric must never know I be alive. Never. I must be dead tae the world...in all ways. Promise me this, and I shall cede leadership of the Dark Brotherhood to remain with ye, Astrid. I have nae desire to take your place.”
“But-”

“No!” The Dragonborn quieted her Thu’um after the reverb of her cry echoed...her own voice crying back to her in triplicate. No-no-no.

“Just...leave me be. Let me stew upon this. Alone.”

Astrid pulled her hands free, her voice going distant and inscrutable as Nemain wrapped her arms around herself. “Very well. Here.” Something hard and glassine was thrust into her lap.

She gripped the gift before it could roll off of her legs, hearing the slosh of something liquid as she experimentally shook the bottle. “Nord mead?”

“Stros M’kai rum. The best I had left in the larder. Look, I’m sorry that you had to hear about Ulfric’s nuptials from me, Nemain.”

Feeling a grateful twist at the woman’s charity, her good feelings were spoiled as Astrid added, “I told you -he doesn’t belong to either of us. Perhaps it will be better, this way. In the long run.”

“Aye.” Nemain blinked her useless eyes at nothing as Astrid silently left the room. Easing the door closed until she was finally, fully, alone in the turbid and cold silence. “Better.”

Married. Bear was getting married.

Once she had cast Detect Life and Detect Undead to be certain that she was not being spied upon, Nemain pried the cork from the bottle and took a long, desperate drink. Sharp spices filled her nostrils, and she sipped it a bit more sparingly afterwards...feeling her shoulders heave as tears sliced down the angles of her cheeks.

It was expected. She had know this day would come...and yet. And yet she felt as if her skin had been stretched across the fragile frame of her body, as if she were tight as a drum and echoing with waves of mounting despair. It wasn’t fair to be given everything she wanted, only to have it snatched from her so suddenly, with little chance at recompense. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t right, it wasn’t-

Life wasn’t fair. You ken that. Ye’ve learnt that. Cease puling like a spoilt child and take your medicine.

Get to it. Drink ‘til the pain fades.

Such success she had had; killing off Alduin and living to tell the tale, yet all she could feel was bitter loss. What had it all been for? What was she t’do now?

Nemain took a fiery swig and, straightening her legs like a plank, she lay down upon the stone altar and crossed her arms like a corpse. Like a draugr, she was bound. Eternally bound to Alduin, whom she had unmade.

And to Ulfric. Ulfric Stormcloak, the Bear of Markarth...who had unmade her.
Unmade. Undone, and wrecked.

She would never love again.

Was this the new normal Astrid had spoken of? Was this what she had to look forward to, day in and day out every time she spoke to another, to hear further news - remembering his mouth on her flushed skin, his capable hands spanning her body, his rich velvet voice as it spoke. Vowing eternal devotion?

The infatuation, t’will end, she assured herself as stilted flickers of shame poured through her. She had to be honest, if only to herself. What she felt had not been anything so shallow. Not even close.

Ugh. He had succeeded at his task, just as she had. And he had already moved on, by the sound of it. And so quickly!

Biting her inner cheek, she knew -she should have known. Should have anticipated the sting of subtle rejection in finding out about his engagement. His marriage. Doubtless his future wife was as beautiful as the sun, sweet tempered and gentle. They would make beautiful bairns-

With a sudden, wrenching grief, Nemain laid a hand on her lower belly, where her dormant and dusty womb lay. Unused and unfulfilled. Merciful Dibe, she had always wanted to carry a bairn. The adoptions she had pursued had been wonderful, but...she had often dreamt of tiny sticky hands, clutching her finger. Dreaming of her belly growing round and taut, stretched with new life...leading to sore breasts and gurgling laughter. Tears, soothed by Reach lullabies and smiles.

Bright, lake blue eyes in a small fox face, the very picture of her own, of-

Should hae kept expectations low. Men like him did not fall in love with women like her and stay in love. Grow up.

“Unhgh!” Nemain snarled as the last droplets of rum disappeared, like golden sunshine upon her tongue. Why was the rum gone? She had so much to drink for, to celebrate!

Fiercely, she licked the rim of the bottle and threw it. Threw it hard. Huzzah for them. Huzzah for them both, for they were done, they had won, and what she had to look forward to now as her reward was a cold bed and a long, empty span of years. Glass shattered, magnificently loud and messy.

The noise brought a tentative tap knocking at her door, until she yelled at whoever it was to piss off. Emotion, bubbling hard and hot inside her breast made it too damned hard to breathe. So much had been taken from her, in all her life.

She had quietly accepted banishment. Had let Markarth drain her dry...Nepos, and Galan, the Greybeards, Windhelm...even Bear had pared apart his own piece of her for himself. Nemain had
been devout; had allowed the Gods themselves to take and take and take, and it wasn’t fair, she hadn’t asked to fall in love and now, now she was breaking to pieces like that damn rum bottle, and-

Giving a wordless cry, Nemain bundled herself up into a tight little ball. Tucking her head as far as it would go into the cave of her arms and belly, as she lost herself to the grief. Wishing she could reach back in time. Wishing she could unravel the threads binding them...weaving her and Ulfric together.

*Gods.* How much simpler would her life be if she hadn’t known she could feel this way? How much easier, brighter -less full?

Empty.

A soothing voice pierced her misery. Blanketing her more violent thoughts of self-harm.

*Dear Listener...sweet and sad Listener. So dawns a new day, as you join our family. Well done.*

*The first day of the rest of yer so-called life.* That almost made her smile. Almost.

*Grieve no more. I welcome you home, Daughter. Beloved of Sithis.*

“If only He had loved me less, Night Mother,” Nemain whispered. A tear trickled into her mouth, and she tasted blood. *Figures. Of course I cannae e’en cry like a normal person.*

*Shall I take away your pains for a time, beloved one? Wrap you in the Dread Father's presence?*

She contemplated that, and whispered back...though in retrospect, the Unholy Matron could probably hear her thoughts unbidden and unshared. “Will it hurt?”

*It is the peace of the grave, Listener. The null cavity of infinite, insensate nothingness.*

“That...that doesnae sound so bad right now.”

*Close your eyes, Listener. And surrender yourself to the emptiness. To Father Sithis’ love, as He eases the burden of sentiment from your shoulders.*

*Embrace it.*

She did as the Night Mother bid her and closed her eyes. As numbness enveloped Nemain, she let out a long, final sigh.

...And embraced the Void.

Chapter End Notes
Dovahzul Dictionary:

Ziil gro dovah ulse - Your soul is bound to me for eternity
Nust wo ni qiilaan fen kos duaan - Those who do not bow will be devoured.
Nu hin sil dii - Now your soul is mine
Pruzah ol aar - A fine slave you would have made
Niid! Daar Lein los dii! Fen du hin sille ko Sovngarde! - No! Your Soul is mine! I will devour your soul in Sovngarde!
Tahrodiis Dovahkiin! Zu'u unslaad! Zu'u nis oblaan! - Treacherous Dragonborn! I am eternal! I cannot end!
Krentaan - Sunder
Dovahkiin, hin kah fen kos bonaar - Dragonborn, your pride will be humbled

There. I think that's the last Dovahzul heavy chapter we will have in this story, whew. I hate sticking foreign languages real or made up in my dialogue and not translating it in story, it just feels jarring.

And with that, one of the darkest arcs of this story is over. Not that there won't be more conflict coming up, but I'm definitely relieved to be through plunging the depths of my angsty goth teens for these last few chapters.

Expect more humor, awkwardness, war, reunions and romance coming up! This story is definitely not over! I always hated it when fairy tales end at some pivotal moment, say, when the characters marry, or someone gets tossed into prison. Well, what happens next? It feels unduly premature.

But then again, this is dark fantasy. So it won't be quite all 'Red Wedding' or anything, but probably more like that than, say...Sleeping Beauty.

Read and review, por favor!

*Edit* Here's some additional lore I pulled on concerning the Lich in Elder Scrolls games.

"In Skyrim, it is mentioned that the process of becoming a Lich involves draining the life force of someone and transferring it back to the Lich's body. The Dragon Priests of Skyrim managed to do this by making their servants give their energy to them. However, this is not always the case, as the Dragon Priest Hevnoraak managed to get some of his life force back by transferring blood into his body.

In Elder Scrolls Online it is said that to become a Lich, one must force their body into death and beyond. The next part of becoming a Lich is having great necromantic knowledge in the dark arts. Then the soon to be Lich must steal souls from their vessels as painfully as possible, as the higher measure of pain and torment from the sacrifices the purer the ascent to Lichdom. Finally a powerful relic either evil or good that can be perverted, has to be used as a focus point for casting the spell used to take souls from their owners. the more powerful the relic, the more powerful the soul rending."

In Nemain's case, it was her own soul that was ripped away and replaced in agony. She had a high knowledge of necromancy, she was forced into the afterlife and beyond. And technically, she's a dragon. Soooo.... *cough cough*
In which our Dragonborn swills bad booze, hangs out with oldies but besties, and makes a new and exciting friend.

“Did you know that Fort Greymoor once housed Queen Barenziah as a child?”

“Really.” The Dragonborn plucked at her lute, tuning that last stubborn string that always seemed to fall flat, as the bedlam of Dead Man’s Drink swallowed what sounds her instrument made. Dull as it was to play for a bumbotched crowd containing only bandits, sellswords and the desperate...it was a far better cover for assassin work than playing the beggar.

She’d lasted roughly three hours wailing for alms on the street...until some urchin had thrown a cowpat at her head. Which in turn had made her hex the farmwife who had sneered at her scars within earshot.

That had earned her several rotten cabbages pelting her bony rump, as the good villagers of Rorikstead ran her off. Probably waving pitchforks and torches, though she hadn’t lingered to find out. That job had been a bloody bust, and Astrid had been highly displeased to say the least.

Bawbags. If only the woman’s death had not been quite so public. With all those lubber-necked observers. She had been bound and determined to finish the contract, all by herself for once, but her perseverance had earned her scant praise. Merely a manure smeared tunic and several, agonizing Nord souvenirs -arrows that Arnbjorn had clearly enjoyed yanking out from her arse and shoulders. She had only just stopped limping about like a fusty troll thanks to his tender ministrations. Lavvy headed wankstain.

Next time, Nemain vowed, she would find a way to lure her marks away from the open road into a barn or some bushes. Killing them in a place far less grandiose than the main thoroughfare of the very exposed village green...a fool gesture she would scrupulously avoid in the future.

Though for certain, she could count herself amongst the fools tonight. Astrid had sent her to New Falkreath’s watering hole with a new contract and a stern warning to behave...and she’d prepared herself to encounter any number of possible scenarios. The most unexpected being the presence of her two Altmer friends.

Not that she was complaining. Much.

“Do tell, Nelacar...I only saw the fort from a distance once, but it looked fair crumbled intae heaps.”

“It’s the truth!” Somewhere to her right, the mage flicked through the pages of his book with a dry
The rustling of paper, his voice bright with discovery. “General Symmachus discovered her after Tiber Septim razed Mournhold. Symmachus, himself a Dunmer, did not wish to kill the young child. And so he left her to be raised by Sven Advensen, who had been granted the township of Darkmoor upon which rested Castle Greymoor. Recompense for his actions in war, I’d wager. Imagine! That old pile housed one of history’s most notorious names! Will wonders never cease?”

To her left, Ancano said nothing. She could hear him sip wine, as Nelacar no longer pretended to pause and happily continued on; detailing the formative years of Barenziah’s life with the fervor of a true believer.

“-though it seemed all was not well, for the stable boy she had befriended told her of a plot. A conspiracy, to sell the young princess as a concubine to the King of Rihad! Under the cover of night, the princess and stableboy managed to escape Greymoor, fleeing to the nearby city of Whiterun. Ah...botheration. Now I wish I had lingered at Dragonsreach. Surely the Nords kept further accounts of their intrigues, locked away from prying eyes! We must return anon to investigate!”

“Fascinating. Truly, that is useful information.” drawled Ancano. Nemain turned from tuning her lute to search with questing fingers for a drink to wet her windpipe. There was a heavy scraping sound along the wooden table, and Nemain felt the Mer’s hands close around hers as he ensured that her grip on the alto wine bottle was secure.

She nudged his leg with her foot in playful thanks as Ancano groused on. “Next, I suppose you will grace us with the content of Tiber Septim’s nappies. The texture and consistency of his stools.”

“Do you think they kept records of such things?” A harsh uptake of breath. “That could reveal so much! What did the Dragon of the North eat at infancy? Was his diet carnivorous, or was it rather more Nedic? Does one’s inner constitution determine the strength of the windflow of vocal Thu’um, and are the bowels linked to the breath? Don’t sneer, Ancano, these things could matter!”

She took a drink and winced. Ugh. Bitter. Alto wine was rank swill compared to Surilie’s vintages. “You be sitting next tae a dragon right here, Nel. And I can tell ye -there be nought special about me diet. Or me leavings, either a’top or bottom.”

Testing her strings once again, Nemain nodded in satisfaction and began strumming the beginning arpeggio to a popular Cyrodiilic tune for those who weren’t too far in their cups to listen. “You’re safe from pursuing that line o’ inquiry. Aye, we’re all safe.”

“Thank the Divines.” muttered Ancano, as he took another drink.

“Go back tae talking more of Barenziah.” Nemain tugged her sleeves around her elbows, easing into the melody as someone nearby started to sing a bleary rendition of Ragnar the Red. She plucked more vigorously. Drowning out the flat caterwauling with chord progressions and heated strumming, as the singer gave up the battle (with a distinct grumble and fart).

“Heh. I like her -she’s got spunk, and she didnae take guff from nobody and no one. What else happened?”

“Well…” more rustling and flipping of pages. “According to this account -and this is a first edition, mind, very rare and hard to procure- Barenziah stayed in Whiterun only a short time before traveling to Riften, where she learned the arts of thievery and stealth.”

Listening, Nemain played the entire song through twice as Nelacar waxed on about the Dunmer
Queen’s lugubrious and legendary life. The night was winding down, and many of the other tavern patrons had retired (or become so plonkered they had at last fallen more or less silent). Maybe it was the last few weeks of enforced rest, having nought to do but practice, but her fingers did not stumble once...her thumbs pricking the strings at the perfect angle, the music calibrated to make the listener’s heart sing.

At the end of the second repetition, she heard Ancano take a deep breath. And found that she had begun the opening chords to ‘Laddie Lie Near Me,’ humming mindlessly until she paused in sudden embarrassment. For Nelacar was no longer speaking.

She could feel the Altmer men looking at her, so with some effort she stopped playing. “What? Do I have somethin’ on me face?”

“Nothing like that.” Nelacar seemed to struggle for words. “It is just... gyfaill. You have changed.”

“Can’t be that much of a surprise, Nel.” At the beginning of their surprise visit Nemain had fully debriefed them both (after hugging them so damn hard she could hear their ribs creak) on the sordid details of her undeath. Cautioning them of all the risks they would take in bearing her company.

Leaving out only the name of the group that had taken her under their wing...though it seemed that Ancano already knew the clandestine identity of Nemain’s caretakers. How he had known that, she itched to ask him. Later, when Nelacar was not as attentive. Or thoughtful. Or quite so kind.

She wished they had taken her warnings more seriously. The more genuine sympathy the Dragonborn came into contact with, the more isolated she felt. “Considering everything that’s happened it could hae been far worse. Tis just me blindness, throwing ye off.”

“No. You are harder. Colder. A spark has gone out of you that was brightly lit, before.”

She snorted. “The spark o’ life, perhaps? Tis you who should hae yer eyes checked.”

“But you-”

“Leave her alone, Nelacar.” Robes whispered as Ancano leaned over and tapped the fretboard of her lute. At his silent encouragement she began to play once more, working the strings into a mellow ballad. “Let sleeping dragons lie.”

“But you see her, do you not, Ancano? She is so...so...”

“Stubborn? Irritating? Refuses to listen to anyone? Yes, I have become familiar with the type.”

“You have an overdeveloped sense of sarcasm my young friend. But you must admit...our dearest gyfaill has been altered. She has hardly spoken at all; not one limerick or rude jest...and the night, why, it is nearly done and-”

“Nae done yet,” Nemain interrupted, lifting her chin as she heard several pairs of boots tread through snow towards the tavern door. “And if ye wish a limerick, I’ll oblige ye. But it must be later. Ancano, be my eyes. How many come?”

“Five. You have a while yet. From the looks of it they are ordering dinner, so we have some time.” Ancano took another drink. “Play something else. Something less dour, if you please.”

Striking up a cheerful Valenwood air, Nemain concentrated on the quick fingering that jumped from
note to note, and struggled to ignore the current subject of conversation.

“-difficult. Never saw you as the fatherly type, my friend. Always so invested in your spywork or pursuing some line of inquiry for the Dominion. But it certainly seems that you have risen to the task. How do the young ones fare at Winterhold?”

“The children? They...are adjusting.” It was subtle, but there: the warmth Ancano clearly felt while speaking of his wards grew clearer with every word.

“Their physical well-being has improved, but I fear that captivity may have left deeper, more unseen wounds. Time will tell. The other mages span the gamut between tolerance and enthusiasm, but the presence of the girls should matter little, if at all, to the execution of their daily tasks. I have arranged for tutors in comportment and languages, and a very earnest Nord maiden from Dawnstar has been contracted to keep watch of them when I must needs attend to my experiments.”

“Ahh, your work! Yes, I do believe you mentioned something to that effect. Regarding wards and the transpontine circumpenetration of ephemeral wisp matter?”

“Indeed.” Ancano’s voice was thoughtful. “If I could enchant a quasi-crystalline sigil stone, concocted from wisp dust and void salts, then it just might be possible to fine tune the boundary of wisps that abet Winterhold. The wisps have proved a mighty boon so far, but they have their inconveniences. For I must personally open and close the barrier to allow each and every courier, merchant and college applicant to enter without being set upon by mindless anomalies.”

“How tiresome.”

“Yes, it would be far easier to consolidate the perimeter into a ward that may be raised and lowered at will from a distance. This task has occupied much of my mind, of late.”

“I’d imagine so. A quickened remnant of such an entity as a wisp might prove troublesome, however, if you do not contain the instantaneous retromission in some sort of ether medium. Ectoplasm diluted with some other arcane solvent, for example.”

“I hadn’t thought of that, Nelacar. Allow me ask for the context of what retromission would invite, in this instance. What if-”

Their banter quickly sailed out of Nemain’s working vocabulary range, but she continued to listen. Their voices were soothing, and puzzling out some of the more esoteric words that the Altmer used distracted her from her prior musings upon children. It kept her from brooding over the three girls that had been spared the fate of what had likely befallen Aventus.

And Sofie -Sofie’s loss was an aching hole in her chest. An emptiness that would not heal.

Not for the first time, Nemain wished for a companion. Someone to accompany her, one worthy of trust; to search with eyes that could see the things she could not. She longed for closure...for the certainty of knowing her son’s fate.

Even if that fate was scattered upon Orphan Rock as the chewed bones of a corpse.

Barring that unpleasant discovery -she was not picky. Tracks, torn clothing...any sign that the pip was alive would be welcome news. More than welcome.

Equally pleasant would be a confirmation that Melka (she would not think of the hagraven as
Máthair, not any longer) was as dead as she feared her foster son to be. Nemain scowled, jarring the happy tune she was creating with a jabby twaaang.

It wasn’t as though she could take off on her own and look all on her lonesome. Not in her current condition. She had already attempted one solo expedition -and it had landed her in a ravine, with a broken hip and shattered jaw, helpless.

Hopeless.

The lute recoiled from her ire with a metallic screech as her fingers snapped two of its strings.

Elven surprise was a subdued thing. As the final discordant thrum floated in the air, Ancano cleared his throat. “Nemain?”

It was useless to pretend that all was well. Placing the lute behind her on the table, Nemain grabbed her wine and drained a good third of the bottle. Spilling an equal portion on her robes in the process, as she choked and coughed on what should have been labeled as vinegar, masquerading as the fruit of the vine.

Someone drunkenly laughed, and she braced herself: stiffly unhappy, as Nelacar took the wine bottle away and patted her face dry with his sleeve.

Like a helpless child. She pushed him away.

"I am only trying to help."

"I know, Nel. I be sorry. It's just..." she sighed, exhausted from all the handholding and watchfulness. "Tis just that I sorely miss being able to -to fend for meself. It's a blow to me pride, nothing more."

"Hmhm." Nelacar wrapped an arm around her shoulder, replacing it when she shoved it away with a chuckle. "I could assist you in this endeavor of yours, to be independent once again."

"Really?" She could hardly believe it. "What of yer studies, Nel? Would ya really fancy following me 'round the woods for a time? Tae search for me son. Cor! That would be bloody ideal!"

She heard him cough. Awkwardly. "Actually, I was referring to my plans to investigate the nature of your, er, rather remarkable impediment."

Had she heard him correctly? "What? What impediment?"

Another cough. "I believe he is referring to your status as an undead lich, Nemain," Ancano said with deplorable tact.

Ooh. Ouch.

Of course. O' course Nel wouldnae wish tae follow a blind woman around fer kicks n’ giggles. She wrapped the wine-stained folds of her hood further over her face and hid in the cave it made, head on the table. This wasn’t her room at the Sanctuary, where she could hide in the bed and at least try to take care of herself. But hiding like this was the only way she was going to get away from her elven guests.
And by guests, she did mean jailors.

“Being petulant will not excuse you from this discussion, Nemain. Disregarding your terrifically rude dismissal of Nelacar's offer, I have something I found from my last visit to Orphan Rock. I believe this belongs to you.”


“Nothing like that.” The Mer’s voice was brusque as ever, yet she thought she could hear a trace of sadness. “I found nothing concerning the whereabouts of your foster son. I did, however, find these.”

A small linen pouch was placed into her waiting hand, followed by a larger and heavier purse. Ignoring the large purse -obviously, it was filled with jingling septims and rough cut gems- she slid it down into the opening of her boot. For she was far more interested in the smaller pouch.

Nemain opened the drawstring and stirred its dainty contents with one finger.  “I dinnae want them.”

“No?”

“No.” Reaching out, she accidentally brushed Ancano’s nose in pursuit of his arm and then finally, his hand...folding his fingers around the pouch. “Take ‘em back. Give them to...to him. When next ye see him.” Nemain swallowed. “Y’are seein the man soon, aye?”

“I am.” The Mer sounded troubled.

“Good. Tell him...faugh, sod this shit. Tell him that they meant everything tae me. Once.”

Ancano sighed. “I realize you have gone through much, these last few weeks, but to be so duplicitous...”

“Stow it, Cano. I’ll boondoggle the public fer as long as I can.” She knew she sounded harsh, but she could not help it. “In all respects, I be dead tae the world. Permanently. Dinnae try tae change me mind. You won’t.”

Ancano’s measured, slow breathing was her only response.

“Did ye happen tae find me amulet, by chance? Greenish black, eight sided? With a wee skull carved upon the pendant?”

He took his dear sweet time in answering her. Long enough that she could feel her robes grow tacky as they dried. “No...I found nothing of that ilk. I fear anything of value was stolen long ago by scavengers. Your parcel was fortunate enough to fall into a crevice, which chanced to trip me. So if you are entirely sure that you wish for me to give it away, considering all you have said about its particular meaning-”

“Aye. I do.”

A sigh. “Very well. Then I will do as you bid, come Midwinter’s Eve.”

Loud boasts and stomping boots clumped across the floorboards. She wrinkled her nose - someone had just spilled some rotgut mead. It wasn’t doing the mildewed aroma of the tavern any favors. But, if this wine was any indication, the new owners of Dead Man’s Drink were fortunate to have spirits
in any condition to serve guests.

She’d have been safer lapping up the ditchwater than this rancid slop.

“There. That be my cue -time tae be off.” Nemain carefully stowed away her lute atop their table and stood. “Hold on t’this lute fer me, if ye please. This errand willnae take long.”

“It had better not, or I will be forced to fetch you.” Helping her stand, the Archmage wrapped her hood tightly around her neck and straightened her robes, fussing until she pushed him off with a reluctant smile for his efforts.

He truly was a decent sort. For a maundering, numpty ponce of a Thalmor spy. They both were.

“Be careful.”

“Always am. ‘Sides, tis not as though I’ll be getting outta this alive, aye? Right?”

“Nemain...”

“Fine, fine. Keep yer smallclothes on. Ya get wrinkles atween the eyes when ye frown so, Ancano.”

“I don’t-” Another sigh. Longer this time. “Really. That is rather childish. And if you could observe my features, you would know how tiresome your attempts at wit can be.”

“Gotcha. Bet ya do have wrinkles, though. ‘Specially now that ye have those wee lasses tae care for. Ye ken that ye be my hero, aye?” Lacing her fingers into his longer, slender hands she gave him a tight squeeze. Palm to palm.

“And I thank ye. For everything.”

“We need not speak of it.” His voice was barely more than a whisper. “That you are alive to say such things means a great deal to me, gyfaill.”

A sudden blast of wind betrayed the open door. Releasing Ancano, who had merely squeezed back one last time before letting go, she readied herself for what was sure to be a quick and dirty fight. The bandit group was leaving, and she was bound to follow.

“Later, then?”

A shuffling of robes revealed that Nelacar was stumbling behind them out of the tavern and into the cold. “How much later, Nemain?” She heard him blow into his hands, rubbing them together with a brisk hush of friction. “It is...gods, look at the moons! It is very late indeed! Do you not sleep as we lesser mortals do?”

If anyone could puzzle out the rules of her existence, she thought it would probably be him. Not that she bore hope, or anything even close to it.

She knew what she was, and why. “Mmhmm, but hardly fer long. Three, four hours at a stretch be good rest fer such as I.” Less, if the nightmares took hold. “I always be doon fer a nightcap, though. Alcohol soaks thraw me like water.”

“It is wasted on you, then.”

A brief tug of her hand deposited Nemain firmly on solid ground, and she waved in the general
direction of the elves as the glowing bodies of the bandits made their way into the woods.

“Hardly. ‘Spect I appreciate spirits more than you two, seeing as I can h’actually taste the last swallow as freshly as the first. Be ye stayin’ in the tavern, then? So I know as where tae find ye tomorrow?”

She could feel the puff of their combined breaths misting the air around her face. “Yes. Come and find us. Your erm, ‘friend’, that Astrid...she deigned to inform us that she will collect you around noon at the firepit.”

Ignoring Nelacar’s whispered query concerning who Astrid was, Nemain recast Detect Life. Really, she needed an enchanted ring for this damn nuisance of a spell.

Soon she’d be able to cast it in her sleep. “Grand. At noon, then. I’ll follow the ripe perfume o’ unwashed socks an’ grotty parchment. Doon look sae concerned, Nel. I’m only goin’ about fer a brisk walk. For me health, y’understand.”

“You know, that stunt is successively less humorous each and every time.”

“Och, well. Sorry I dinnae see that. Have ye heard the jest aboot the blind woman who walked intae a bar? And a stool? And a chair—”

Twin groans urged her to quit while she was ahead with one final wave. “Rest well now, me sleepin’ knife-eared beauties. I hear the bedbugs do bite. And that they be buggerin’ tetchy.”

She stomped off, tentatively sweeping her boot ahead in a circular pattern to check for branches that might trip her. “Cheers.”

“Goodbye!” She heard Nelacar whoop, right before the door shut tight. Cutting off his farewell halfway through.

Shaking her head at the irrepressible nature of Old Nel and smiling despite herself, she trailed the bandits as they squelched through manure-soiled straw. Stepping into the patterns their boots had made, repeating hills and valleys that dented the cold, dense snow.

And, as the orc chief and his cronies laughed about the farmholds they had razed; the women they were going to have and the women that they’d done in, Nemain followed in her shroud of illusion. Wearing spells that muffled her footsteps and cast her into invisibility...making her a wraith in truth, as she strained her magical sight to avoid the dim outlines of trees and undergrowth. Seeking the sounds of the thug’s creaking armor and careless talk, as saliva pooled beneath her tongue; forcing her to swallow. To scent them -finding her prey with what senses yet remained to her.

A prayer had been made, and a contract begun. Bound in blood. Shrouded by fate.

These hunters had now become the hunted.

***********

Despite the solemn promises she had made in the quick of that first, harrowing night in the sanctuary, Nemain had not managed her self-righteous suicide.
She had tried. Refusing the food and drink which was placed before her, Nemain eventually was left to enjoy the taste of decomposing blood in her stone chambered cell. Musty-sour and salty, the scum of it lingered until that too vanished as her mouth dried out. Sitting or lying down, she whiled away the hours in quiet lethargy. Thinking of everything and nothing; avoiding thought itself when it pricked too close for comfort.

And when she finally succumbed to boredom, the Listener fumbled her way through the warren of narrow cave passages...searching. Wobbling on trembling legs until she reached a stretch of open space that called to her, that smelt strongly of candlewax and sickly sweet oils. Of crepe-soft flesh wrapped carefully in linens, well tended and loved.

Down, down...down she went, until a warm and maternal voice greeted her with spectral delight.


Nemain had reached the chapel that held the Night Mother’s coffin and earthly remains. And it was there that she chose to stay. Listening. Meditating...plucking the lute that had somehow ended up by her side one morning, as she passively reached out and bumped the instrument by accident. Her fingers grew all the more nimble as her interest in the outside world began to fade. More melodic...pulling what sweetness that was left inside her to float out into Kynareth’s realm, note by note.

There, she existed; breath by breath. Feeling a lessening occur every hour that passed by...caring even less, as it became abundantly clear that no one in the Sanctuary truly noticed what befell her, beyond the odd sniff of disgust or bald interest in passing at the proof of her morbidity.

No one cared. And it was better - far better this way. The Night Mother made it so. Her Blessing worked for the worst moments, when feeling roiled into the blank spaces carved out by inactivity; burning. Tugging at her, peeling her shields away until emotion turned toxic and all those jagged thoughts of her ineptitude, her weakness seared into her, soldering. Screaming...

But the Void was peaceful. It truly was the calm of the grave. The balm to soothe all wounds.

In the Void, she found serenity.

She was happily untroubled by the jester, who merely hummed and worked around her...replacing candles around the shrine when they burned low. Lighting the tapers with small sizzling flickers that stood out...small hisses in the silence. Audibly reverent. Consistent in his attentions, almost to a fault: she wished at times that he was not quite so cheerful. Even his restrained humming tainted the sombre ambiance of the chapel with obnoxious merriment.

*Look at the bright side, bitch.* His entrance broke the ennui of her hours. Enabling her to tell just how much time had passed from visit to visit, aside from Astrid’s daily attempts to get her to talk; for her mind was growing cobwebs that spread from the edges, steadily encroaching. Blurrier and more fogged the longer she refused to move from her spot.

Shading the lines between what was real and what was not.

*real/notreal?*
Sometimes, the Night Mother sat next to her...a dark and amorphous female presence. Shifting from a voice that was nearly Nedic to an accent that couldn’t be anything but Old Chimer, or Dunmeri...speaking with wistful reminiscence of past eras and days gone by. Artifacts gained and lost, daring feats of stealth; lovers and children and sacrifices. Cruel, unfeeling chance. A white stone and a black stone, pressed into eye sockets so hard that blood seeped out from beneath them both.

And Her very favorite tales were the myths of the Undying Ones: the clever, wicked machinations of daedra who made sport with mer and men alike as Aedra watched, uncaringly distant and cold. For Daedra created results, real and raw. Not always desirable results...but results that brought change, nonetheless.

Sometimes, Nemain answered the Night Mother. Even rarer, sometimes Nemain replied back in kind, to tell Her stories that she knew from her childhood. And the things she told the Night Mother were secrets she had told no one...no, not even Bear or Galan. To the Unholy Matron she opened up her dead heart and poured it all out; reassured in Her compassionate embrace that there could not possibly be anything else that hurt more than what she had already suffered.

In the darkness, she was safe. Complete.

There were far worse ways to die.

The Keeper brought in new bundles of nightshade and deathbell nearly every other day, carefully arranging the blooms in vases and urns until the heady aroma mingling with the candles made Nemain slightly queasy. This Cicero seemed to understand her craving for quiet, at least...and he was respectful in a way that raised him in her estimation, for he never touched her. Never giggled, when working in the crypt attending to the Night Mother’s wrappings and oils. She rather thought he approved of her constant presence there.

In the interim of her mullings, the Night Mother spoke. Whispering of griefstricken chefs and desperate gamblers; blasphemous priests and outlaws and housewives. All those who had prayed to the Night Mother for their darkest wishes to come true were enumerated in the still, soft tones of Her voice.

And the Listener - she listened.

She heard, and related each petitioner’s description to Astrid, who showed up promptly every morning at sunrise to write down what contracts the Night Mother had bequeathed them. They must have been lucrative jobs...the Nord woman seemed to strut with more sauce to her step each day that passed by. And Astrid seemed happiest when the contracts numbered in the double digits, but Nemain did not care - she never bothered to ask for the particulars.

She was where she was meant to be, fulfilling her purpose for however long her body would endure in this state. It was enough. Paying back her debt to Sithis, to the Night Mother for the second chance she had been granted was enough. Alduin was dead, and all she had to do now was wait. Wait for death to approach…the final edge, the ultimate end.

Nemain would have been content to forever sit and strum the lute, lost in the greyed-out imaginings of her past as she withered into dust. But the needs of the flesh were harder to ignore.

She got thirsty first, and then. Then, there was hunger. It wouldn’t be long now, she comforted
herself.

_Nae verrah long at all._

The silent assassin who delivered her meals never asked if she wanted more than the plated food that was provided and taken away uneaten, three times a day. Babette had offered herself as an escort to ‘dine out’ several times, but any mention of nourishment made Nemain turn her head and sit with passive inertia. Unresponsive. Ignoring Babette, until the tiny vampire left in a fit of temper. Telling her she had only herself to blame for what was to come.

Which was hardly news. She knew very well what was yet to occur. And she deserved it. Deserved it all.

Aye. She knew. But she gave in...only the once.

Hunger broke the welded wall of her apathy until she stalked and nearly attacked Cicero one day during his rounds. Prompting her to make a rare request of her meal provider beneath the Night Mother’s dead, knowing gaze: she asked for a raw, red steak.

As bloody as it could be, without the mooing cow still attached to it.

_That_, she had tasted. She had lingered over that meal, going so far as to lick the plate for the streaming juices...deliciously salty, with that iron tang she was beginning to long for in her dreams. Sucking on her fingers, one by one, until every trace of meat had evaporated and she was left smelling her hands.

Empty, though her belly was full. She remained unsatisfied.

_Time passed on._

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On the third day of her vigil, Nemain noticed that her skin was starting to get dry. It might have been the lack of humidity in the sanctuary, but she did not think so. The magic keeping her alive could not create water or fuel for her muscles; dehydration would render her helpless first.

The pruny, withered faces and stick-limbs of draugr were front and center in her mind after that. It wasn’t exactly the best look, but she comforted herself with the thought that her endurance had a finite limit. Soon, the hunger would overtake her, rendering discipline and denial unnecessary.

Despite the woman’s cool manners, she liked Astrid. She hoped the Nord would not be her first victim, when Nemain finally lost control. When she gave in to the gnawing, wailing _thing_ that had taken up residence inside her hollowed out self.
Would it be Arnbjorn’s axe that would cut into her as she attacked, or Festus Krex’s elemental wizardry? By dagger or destruction spell, they’d have to find some way of incapacitating her so as to burn her remains into ash.

She’d overheard the other assassins; talking quietly as she stalked them, invisible on the upper levels...wholly ignorant of her eavesdropping. She heard, and wondered. For the only way to permanently destroy a lich was by fire, and fire alone.

She wondered if burning alive hurt worse than having one’s head stoved in.

But what troubled her much, much more than the dryness and her cracked lips and parched mouth were the ominous bruises that formed under her skin. She came to after a restless nap on the fourth day and felt a pulpy softening on the side of her palm and arm, where it had been resting against the floor.

She rubbed at it, casting Restoration spells until the aching gradually faded; but when she unwrapped her robes to check the hip she’d been lying on, it also bore a bruise. Soft, like overripe fruit...mushy and tender to the touch.

Lividity.

She was literally rotting, piece by piece, the longer she abstained from drinking in someone else’s death. “Merciful Dibe.” She massaged the bruise away with trembling fingers, shuddering beneath the Night Mother’s watchful aura.

Let it be o’er and done soon. Please, Night Mother. Father Sithis. Show yer daughter mercy.

Let me pass on.

As Nemain followed the bandits, bored already with the ease of this task, she amused herself by trying to recall more of the sketchy snatches of memory that had been left to her. To remember the truth of what had transpired after she had finally snapped.

Attacking the Argonian. That Shadowscale...what be his name?

Veezara, who brought her daily meals and took them away, uneaten. Veezara of the oily, rich voice and kind bedside manner, he who had scrounged up a lute for his lonely softskinned sister to play.

And she had repaid that kindness by lunging for his throat.

There wasn’t much to reflect upon. By day five -as best she could count it- her muscles were starting to shake, and her skin wasn’t dry any longer. It was moist, but not in a good or healthful way.
And it hurt. Her nerves caught fire and burned, a low boil at first...yet it grew worse with every breath, every eternal moment.

Memory clouded into an inexplicable mystery after that. There were flashes of heat and cries for help. And then finally -finally- she remembered the silken caress of life flowing into her, like coming across a pool of clear cool water in a desert. A wretched sob and rattling gasp, as Babette and Astrid lifted the newly dead corpse of a sellsword from where she had drained the poor bastard.

She hadn’t eaten a thing. Not one shred of flesh passed her lips. She didn’t need to consume the flesh after all...skin to skin contact certainly helped, but the process…the horrid machination of draining a life was achievable by distance, gods, it was...it was-

That first real meal had been a true turning point.

She had failed in her vow to die through inaction, and she had hated it. Hated them, the Brotherhood, for forcing that choice upon her.

But most of all, she hated herself for enjoying it so damn much...for savoring the sharp sting of adrenaline and the bite of fear her prey felt when she moved in to capture them. Despite her self-loathing, Nemain savored their terror as they ran away. She existed for the thrill of the kill.

None of her principles from her previous life mattered. Nothing mattered anymore.

She was the Listener. She listened. She spoke; and death followed wherever Nemain went. She was cursed in life, and would remain so after death. Sithis was right, as Gods usually were.

Everything she touched, died.

Snow crunched as she crouched, preparing to spring upon the first of the bandits.

None of her kills ever quite managed to reinvigorate her heart, though she sparked it many times with electricity in pointless attempts to restart its rhythms. Instead, there was a sort of fizzing; a humming friction when she had drank life to the brim and the world painted itself in bright colors of sound, motion and scent. It was the closest she had come since awakening inside Alduin to feeling truly present. To being alive. And that fleetingly precious sensation only ever occurred when she killed.

Ironic, that.
Kchthuunk! The icicle she had been stealthily growing caromed through the air...pinning the bandit chief to the tree behind like an insect on a stick.

Mayhem ensued, as the surviving bandits screamed and drew their weapons. Sparing Nemain their pithy remarks in favor of full on assault.

-Which was fine and dandy by her. The faster they died the better.

Sightless, she watched it all transpire through the flashing strobe of a thunderstorm as her spells hit their marks...each hit cascading until elation ripped through her; a tingling electric rush as potent as she wished the booze earlier had been.

Flash.

Two bandits fell to chained lightning, their bodies jerking in macabre parody of a dance.

Flash.

Another one was caught skulking away, trying to knock an arrow to a bow. She set him aflame.

Flash.

Lost to the heady rush of victory, Nemain was startled to feel rather than sense the last bandit, who had somehow crept up behind her. Cold steel pierced her throat, slicing. Tearing at the thin membrane of her skin, as foul huffs from his gaping mouth clogged her nostrils...bringing back the claustrophobia, the rank hot wetness inside the World Eater’s belly, cor...she’d never get out, ne’er be free, never again nonono-

No! Not real!

Nemain fought her inner fears down and accepted it. Accepted all the fear and the pain, luring the arsewit in by obligingly standing still. A little scratch like that wouldn’t slow her down, but he could not know that.

Blood dripped down her sliced neck, and she felt flesh slowly knit back together as she slid against the man holding her tightly. One last caress, and his life was hers and hers alone. Licking her lips, she tilted her head back as the dagger skittered against her throat. Digging in deeper, it glanced off the hyoid bone which deflected the knife from her vocal cords. Giving her even more cause to drain him dry, even as she was grateful for his horrid aim.

Soft tissue, she had learned, was every bit as much of a pain-ridden bitch to heal as broken bones were. Though it tended to heal much faster.

Nemain felt it when the bandit realized that she was not, despite all appearances, dying from her wounds. He went rigidly on alert. “Well. Tha’s a shame.”
She frowned. *Huh?*

“I was s’posed tae have these dodgy grunts as me guard back t’the Redoubt. But lucky fer oi’, we got mair options fer an amicable journey together, you an’ me. Dragonborn.”

How this pustule of a person knew her identity was beyond her, though she was determined he would not live with the knowledge for long. Nemain twisted her neck and gave an experimental cough.

*Voice still works, at least.*

Feeling strange, she ignored the dampening magic flowing from the man’s hands and prepared to Shout him into the afterlife. “I’m no goin’ anywhere with ye ‘cept tae the dungheap, shitface. Try those Illusion spells again and I’ll send ye there in pieces. Still living.”

Despite her better efforts, Nemain was stuck still...standing like an idiot as the man swung around to face her front. His spell-shaded outline grinned, all teeth. “Nae, liddle lady, ye are definitely coming home wid me.”

And the oddest thing happened.

Nemain licked her lips and said, “Aye,” although that was hardly what she was thinking or feeling. ‘Aye?’ *What in Oblivion be that?*

“No,” she said, quickly. “Nae, I dinnae think so.”

“Well, which is it? Aye, or nay?”

“Nay. Ugh.” *What be wrong with me? He be right there! Kill ‘im an be done with it!*

“Let’s try this spell anew. Hagwimmen said it t’would work.” The man loomed over her, fixing Nemain with a stare she could not see, but could definitely feel. “Ye. Be coming. Home. Wid me.”

His hand made a subtle flourish, something that bespoke power, and...and...

And again, Nemain immediately and uncontrollably responded. “Aye, I’ll come with thee.”

This time, she began walking towards the Reach-voiced bandit. Her feet dragged forward with no connection whatsoever to her inner thoughts, which were snarled in shock at the temerity of this stranger.

*Nay*, she thought in utter disbelief. *I’m no doin’ this. I cannae be doing this. What the fuck?*

She forced herself to stop, and focused all her attentions upon the man with furious intensity. “Before I eat ye, nice and slow, I’ll ask ye t’tell it tae me straight. What be ye doin’ tae me?” she demanded.

The bandit harrumphed. “All right, enough ditherin’ aboot. Òrdaich na mairbh. Now say, ‘aye’.”

“Aye.”
“Good. Come along, and nae mair talk nor dawdling. Sharpish now.”

She obeyed immediately, and the man took her elbow and guided her through the trees... weaving through the bandit corpses as if they were rocks. Her body was behaving like an automaton, and her mind was shrieking, but there was nothing, absolutely nothing she could do to fight it. This was not at all like Melka's geas.

This was wrong.

They passed Dead Man’s Drink, where there were laughing people; drunken couples stumbling towards their homes, with men chatting and smoking their pipes over one last round, and gods, did she ever want to simply scream.

*Help me! Ancano! Nelacar! Please, please help...* but nothing came out.

Something or someone had poisoned her, she thought frantically. Her wine had hardly been left unattended, but a mere slip of oversight from Ancano could have allowed someone to tamper with it. But what sort of mind-raping potion did this? She did not feel drunk, or sick, or woozy.

She was simply out of control.

Cheerful voices hailing one another fell silent as she passed by, and she wondered what they saw in her face. A terrified, desperate woman? Someone who needed help? Or just another sad tryst?

*A transaction atwixt a lightskirt an’ a sellsword, more like.* She wasn’t sure what state her robes were in after that fight, but she doubted it was pretty.

Yet even a trull could gain sympathy from unwanted attentions by shouting her damn head off. Nemain did not even have that choice, and she dearly wished to trounce this man’s boldness as he put his hand at the small of her back. Steering her away from the merry-makers, from the torch-lit safety of New Falkreath, from anyone who would give a damn; from safety, and she rued her ill luck as her feet obediently made the steps.

Wandering into the wilds.

“Ye have nae idea what’s happened t’you, do ye?” The stranger asked, moving his hand up to stroke the blood-painted nape of her neck. Disgustingly intimate. “Och, sweetheart, ye’ve got sae much t’learn. Them elves didnae tell ya, did they? Didnae warn ye? Typical Thalmor skeevershits. Come on; walk faster. Dinnae speak.”

She couldn’t have, even if she’d wanted to. It was as if she’d become a puppet, completely under his control, and it made her want to Shout and break things. Something was going on far bigger than she could understand, but she clung to one, burning thought: *Typical Thalmor skeevershit.*

Ancano and Nelacar must have known about this possibility, whatever it was. And they hadn’t told her.
In the distance, she could hear the whickering of horses. Hooves stamped, impatiently churning the snow into the mud as she was pushed -manhandled to rest against one of the beast’s damp backs. There was a strong smell of untanned hides and sweat. “Now, ye are going tae get uppa on the horse and be a good little lass,” the man said. “Say ye understand.”

“I understand.”

“Och, grand. Oh, and afore I forget -give me th’ pouch o’ septims that elf handed over.”

Nemain’s fingers moved quickly and precisely to her boot, retrieved the money pouch, and handed it over. She heard him slide it into his armor and he must have gestured to whoever was riding alongside, for he grunted roughly. “Up.”

He wasn’t trying to sound charming anymore. He just sounded impatient. “Padraig, help ‘er. Doon want tae be all night aboot it. You. Woman -nae sudden movements, mind.”

“Yer sure...this be th’ one?” Padraig sounded skeptical. Nemain’s body, oblivious to the consequences that were bound to be coming, complied...and she began to haul herself into the stirrups of the horse with the other man’s help. Her Detect Life spell winked out, and soon she was left to the darkness.

Unable to even lift a hand to wipe away her angry tears.

“Aye, it be her. Th’ Auld one wants this ‘un. Bad. Though I cannae speak as t’why. Ugly as an orc-maid, she be. I’d no bed her, not e’en if it were Beltane and she be the last lass alone an’ left unploughed on th’ hill.”

The other man snickered. “Bet ‘er snatch be nice n’ tight, tho’. The ugly uns yoo’shully are.”

“After, Padraig, after! Cor, man, ye be mair lecherous than a sabrecat in heat!”

“Aye. Fine, Nuile, we be doin’ it yer way, loik allus.”

The horses began moving, and Nemain held on tight to the saddlehorn, still listening. Still seeking some sort of loophole in the commands this Nuile had given her, as Padraig sulked. “What aboot arter?”

“Auld ‘un said summat aboot prophecy. Gotta deliver ‘er intact. This un’s a lady.”

Nemain felt both of them looking at her. “She’s a lady, huh.”

Rough laughter followed, and Nemain managed to sit a hair straighter on the horse. Let ‘em laugh. It wouldn’t hurt her, but she would certainly pay them back for their laughter.

In spades.

“Bah, enough of one that th’ hagwimmen want her. All that clashmaclaverin’ aboot th’ future, an’
Madanach an’ shite. I weren’t really listenin’, buts we git all she comes wid an’ more, once she be safe and delivered.”

More wetness trailed down her cheek, stinging the wounds Nuile had made upon her neck. Some part of her body, at least, was still operating outside of his control -not that it would help her in the least.

Padraig’s hand suddenly appeared. Tightening over her shoulder, wandering down to cup her breast. “Aaugh, who cares ifn’ we deflow’r th’bitch? Bet she’s no lady. Arra, I’ll bet-”

As the men spurred their horses into a canter, she heard a sound.

It wasn’t loud, but it was distinct: a crisp, metallic snap, followed by a solid, meaty thud.

Her horse whickered. Whinnied, and finally it reared; throwing her with a whooshing thump that stole her breath, as she heard Nuile scream. Crying out a garble of slurred words, as the smell of sharp ozone heated the air.

Nemain had known that Nelacar was an veteran battlemage and therefore dangerous, but being presented with proof was...well. Altogether something different.

Her old and dotty friend had always been so scatterbrained, but now as the Dragonborn lay helpless on the ground she tasted something blazing in him. Something so full of rage that it scared her.

A sizzling crackle of energy lifted the hairs on her neck. “Dispel it, damn it, Ancano...dispel the command!”

“-I am attempting to do just that...wait. Stop that, you...Pacify !”

One of the elves must have held a club or some other weapon in their hand. That had been the metallic snap she’d heard -the steel chainlink binding the weapon to the bearer had been undone.

And the thud was fairly obvious, as the man who’d been abducting her yelled, “Ya horkerfuckers, yew broke moi ribs!”

Nelacar did not bother to say anything to that. Casting Detect Life -blast it, she really despised being blind- she watched as he stepped forward and swung the mace again, with precision, and laid the bandit out onto the ground. There was some groaning and twitching, but the fight was over; and as the bandit named Nuile slipped into unconsciousness and his blood trickled out to stain the snow, Nelacar moved around him to crouch down next to Nemain.

More muttering and yelping could be heard from where Padraig was being questioned by Ancano. But she couldn’t go over there and give the sick molly the beating he deserved: for she was still frozen in an approximation of what her legs would be like, sitting astride upon a saddle.

*Looking like a numpty featherheid, most likely. Braw Dovahkiin my skinny arse. Alduin’d right piss hiself laughin’ where he stood, could he see me now.*

*Graw, this day.*
“Nemain. Can you stand?”

She tried. Tried desperately. “No,” she whispered, and felt the tears overflow again. “No, I...I cannae move.”

The Mer didn’t seem surprised. “Void Command Undead,” he said, and she fell forward with a surprised cry, nearly smacking herself silly into the slick steps of the tavern. She’d been fighting so fiercely for control of her muscles that when she regained it, they tensed with a crippling force. Nemain sucked in deep, whooping breaths; shuddering. Gagging on the stale taste of bad wine, vomit and blood, until Nel’s strong arms reached down and helped her step out and over the fallen and dying bandit.

Nelacar was still holding the mace. When she looked at it, he nodded as if she had said something, and he snapped it back to a link upon his belt with an audible *chiink*.

“What in bloody...sodding...what?!” she managed to gasp out. Her whole body felt violated, even though she’d hardly been touched. She yanked free of Nelacar’s hand and stumbled away, putting as much empty space between them as she could.

Then, she reached for her power and flexed her fingers, raising as much elemental energy as she could until her hands fairly hissed with it. She had not bothered to Shout earlier at the bandits, the more fool she for underestimating them; but now the strength of the Thu’um in her throat felt like salvation.

She aimed her left hand first at the bandit bleeding out in the mud, but he wasn’t a threat...so she focused her hands squarely on Nelacar’s chest. Her pulse was pounding so hard it was giving her a scunnering headache, and she wanted to throw up. Shite, she wished she had something other than wine to hork up, just for the vindication of staining his boots - though her nausea was starting to subside with the clean, piney taste of the outside air.

“What the bodging *fuck*?!” This time, beyond her control again, it came out in a raw scream.

His outline blurred as Nelacar slowly put his hands up in a placating gesture.

“Easy, *gyfaill*. Ease down.”

“Fuck *easy*, ye condescending sonuvabitch! What just happened tae me? What did ye put in me wine?” She shot a burning glance at the dead bandit between them. “Be he one o’ yours, Ancano? One of yer Thalmor toadies? Gods damn ya, I trusted ye both!”

“No,” Ancano replied, all too calm. “And I did not put anything into your drink. Neither did he.”

“Then what the blazes just happened tae me? What?”

Shifting cloth brushed his legs as Nelacar took one step forward...and thought twice of it, as Nemain grew an icicle as thick as a spear and pointed the tip of it at him. “If one reads the tomes concerning necromancy and its various uses,” the Mer’s voice was a clipped, dark ember of its former self “-then
one would know all the many unsavory applications an unscrupled mage might find for the undead who are...compelled to be obedient.”

“Yes, yes...I too have read the reports salvaged from Yngol's barrow. As she has, back in Winterhold. If she would cease threatening us long enough to remember.” Ancano swiftly made a frustrated move, a move that caused Padraig to squeal.

“Nemain. I thought you knew. It is the only reason why I had not previously brought the subject to your attention.”

Órdaich na mairbh.

Command the Dead.

Those few words shivered down her spine, trying to force her eyes closed. To force her into obedience, as the full implications of what had almost been done hit her like a warhammer. Her hand slid along the length of her icicle spear, gripping tight enough to hurt as she considered Nelacar, Ancano, and the scruffy git who had been more than eager to defile her body once New Falkreath had disappeared from sight.

“Nemain.” Nelacar’s voice had softened again, with that thread of worry he had carried all night. “Are you quite well? You look ill.”

“I be f-”

“If you say that you are ‘fine’ again, I swear to the Divines, Nemain, even to your blasphemous Talos, that I will steal you from your bolthole in these wretched woods and chain you to my desk at Winterhold. And I will keep you there, until your sanity returns or your emotions. Either or both.”

Ancano didn’t mean it. At least, she didn’t think he meant it. “Go back to the inn and lay down in our room. Second door to the right. Do not open the door for anyone save us. Understand?”

The icicle was slowly freezing her fingers, making them numb, but she’d be damned if she let go until answers had been given. “What of him?”

The Thalmor spy’s voice was as haughty as she had ever heard it be. “I shall break him.”

“Augh, ya doon havetae be loik that mate! I'll answer ye! I will -gladly! Jus’ lemme -garrkkk-”

Padraig’s pleas choked off with a rasping gasp, as Nelacar hefted him by the throat and stalked off towards the woods. The man’s feet did not touch the ground, and she watched their glowing forms fade, then disappear entirely.

“Hmm. It appears Nelacar will be doing the honors himself.” Ancano sounded amused.

Nemain wobbled, releasing her icicle. Letting it break with a sharp crack, as she opened her hand and allowed the more slippery bolts of chained lightning to dissipate as well.

She was done. She was so done with men telling her what to do. “Fine. Tell me what he says once Nel be through, but make sure he dies...he knows what I be, an’ who.”
“Ugh. I be goin’ fer that nightcap, now.”

She heard Ancano call out something else, but she ignored him as she stumbled through the late night crowd, shoving aside the tall and smelly fear thuaidh blocking her way and managing -with effort- to sit upon the nearest of the ricketty bar stools.

“Gimme a pull. The strongest mead y’got.” Her head banged against the counter. “Doon make a woman beg.”

The barman’s voice was bored. “Gold or nothin’.”

Her bag of septims was somewhere out in the snow, likely marinating in bandit blood. “Put it on a tab. I came with the two elves...they be good fer it. Elves usually be.”

That first sip of mead sizzled along the miniscule cuts still healing inside her throat, but such small pains hardly inspired caution.

Two mugs later, she felt nearly as sober as when she had begun...with the unwelcome beginnings of a panic attack hazing her eyes with wetness as it tightened her chest. A heavy buzzing undulated in her ears, rising to mask everything else, as she trembled and struggled to stay outwardly in control.

This...this was just the final berry to top the pie. She couldn’t even get slobbering drunk to escape her problems. And now she had issues she had not even considered to be potential factors before the events of this evening, like the fact that she was undeniably susceptible to the Command Undead spell.

A spell she had used without thought, time and time again: never imagining the repercussions, for why would she waste valuable time, imagining how a thrall felt...visualizing what she’d be forced to do, to anyone, for anyone...

Ballocks.

“Hey, you.” A stranger dragged up one of the stools to sit alongside Nemain. “Yeah. You there, all wrapped up in robes lookin’ so lonely. If you’re lookin’ for a challenge, you’ve come to the right place.”

“Bite me fud, ye radge wee shite. Ye doon stand a chance drinkin’ against me.” She took another sip of mead, pulling a face. Did the strongest plonk in the joint have to be rotgut mead?

“Hah!” The stranger swayed, guffawing as she nearly spilled her mug and righted it just in time...shooting him an outraged glare. She hoped it was downright creepy, what with her blinded looks and all. She'd been told that her glares were right fearsome.

“We’ll see about that. What I have here is a special brew, very strong stuff.”

“Piss off.”

“Later, my sweet. Much later...after the drinking! I’m Sam, and you are…?”

“Don’t mind if I do. I’ll start round one. Down the hatch!” A slurping gurgle followed by a belch blew over the Dragonborn in a fermented cloud of fug. “Your turn, Miss Prickly Thistle...hahah, oh yeah! One down, my friend! One down!”

She was not entirely certain what this Sam person had concocted, but the vapors were going straight to her head...the mixture nearly all alcohol with no filler, and Nemain had little need for more than that. “Ughrrr...m’ gonna regret thishh. Aren’ I.”

“Come on. Live a little! Heh heh. And...lessee...yep. Another one for me.”

The first swallow had made her sputter; but the second went down smoother, and the third set a little curl of heat unfurling in her chest, emboldening and relaxing her all at once. Then suddenly her mug was nearer to empty again than full, which seemed a dangerous state for both her peace of mind and her sobriety; but before she could decide which she valued more, Sam cleared his throat.

Loudly. "Wow, look at you. I think I’ve hit my limit on these things. Tell you what, one more and you win the contest," the man drawled into her ear.

*When had her stool begun to spin like a top?* “Wun more?” She slurred.

“No problemsh.”

With the precision of a lifetime's practice, Sam poured more of that potent liquor into her mug. “You’re alot of fun, you know that? Hah hah...bottoms up!”

“Aye. Bottomshup.” She slopped the booze as she aimed for the mug handle and missed, soaking her sleeve as she tipped it near upside down in her efforts to drain it dry.

“Wow.” Sam sounded impressed. “You’ve really done it. The staff is yours.”

“Thash grape!”

Come to think of it, she could definitely use a staff to clonk wayward bandits and fend off all those bloody tree roots and cobblestones that delighted in tripping her whenever she ventured out of doors. Perhaps then she could take off on her own. How marvelous it would be, to rely on nobody and no one but herself again!

-And it was all thanks to this fellow who she was coming to believe might be the bestest friend in the world she’d ever had. “Gawww...I like you, Sam. Ye be decent... *hic* ...folk. Real nice, fer a man. Did I ever tell ye? Men...men be the pits.”

Holding in a burp unsuccessfully, Nemain laid her forehead down upon the counter where it was nice and cool. Everything was tilting oh-so-pleasantly. “They’re jussshh... *hic* ...jus’ the worst. Good fer one... *hic* ...bloody thing, an’ then...then they drop ya an’ leave. Like a shhtale oat- *hic* - oatcake. Blammo.”

“Yeah, blammo, or whatever that was! Preach sister! We’re the *worst* !”

“...An’ I loved ‘im, an’ I tol’ him so, an he’s wunnerful. Really, he ish. Too good fer me, aye, I
reckon that now. An’ now, bleurgh, he’ssh marryin’ another. Some - *hic* - rich bitch what has a heartbeat an’ everything I doon have ta - *hic* - give. Givin’ him alla that he deserveshh.”

“Whad’ll I dooo, Sam?” Her hiccups were slowly turning into sobs.

“Aaugh, don’t worry about that stuffed shirt. Let’s not let him ruin your night.” Sam began rubbing her shoulders, making her nearly purr as she arched against him. His hands were everywhere, cupping her waist and tracing her jawline...yet somehow, she didn’t mind.

“You know, you’re a fun person to drink with. I know this great little place where the wine flows like water. We should head there, and pick up someone else who I bet would cheer you right up. You’ll like him -you like dogs, yeah? Who doesn’t? We’ll grab him on the way. Just another lonely heart desperate for a good time, heh heh.”

Sam must have been stronger than he seemed, for it was only his grip hoisting her up by the smallclothes that kept her standing as they both staggered out the door. “Bring on...*hic*...the bloody bastards! *Hic*! I’ll face ‘em all, an’ tear off their heads an’ spit doon their -*hic*- goddamn necks! An’ then, I’ll kiss ‘em! C’mere, Sam, an’ I’ll -*hic*- do ya first! Aaaawrrrrgh!”

“Thanks for the offer, baby, but I’m gonna have to decline. That breath you got is something else. Heyy,” The ground toppled over, rushing to meet her face as she felt a lurch somewhere deep pull at the strings of her guts. A string of drool waggled from her lower lip, and she moaned.

Something hot ripped through the air, feathering her face with errant gusts of wind.

“Hey. Pretty lil’Thistle, come on. You don’t look so good...”

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

It was dark, and she was sublimely. Perfectly. Comfortable.

And warm...oh-so warm. She was curled up in a tight little ball, surrounded by musclebound arms that had pulled her up tight against a hairy padded chest. Embracing her so thoroughly, she almost didn’t notice the furs that had been draped over them like a cocoon. Sheltering them both from the dripdrip dripping that plopped down from above every so often, as other people talked and laughed quietly. Clinking their mugs and tableware somewhere off in the echoing distance, as water sluiced and gurgled in a drain down past her feet.

*Wait a tick.*
Opening her eyes, Nemain blinked. Then remembered, again, that she was blind. Cor, those mornings where she forgot and struggled to see were the absolute worst.

Someone grumbled behind her and spooned her more closely against -barking bells, yeah, that was definitely a him.

The pantsless trouser-snake nudging her lower back made her wince in sympathy for whatever poor thing had ever fallen prey to its seductions. And she spared a brief moment to thank Azura -and all her lucky stars- that she did not feel any of the soreness that surely would exist, had she been ploughed by that...that thing currently hard and happy, digging into the cleft of her arse.

That, and the heat pouring off of the man more than anything tipped her off that something was just...odd. Different. She was never warm, but now the heat was riding the edge of cozy straight into the territory of uncomfortable. Steam practically poured off of them, as she flipped open the pelts to their wee little hideout, to investigate.

Nasty. It smelt like sewer water and oily stone and- wherever this was, it was definitely not Falkreath. And her head... gods, her poor abused head was pounding like a string of Forsworn men had been line dancing upon it with steel-shod clogs all night long.

She wanted answers, and she wanted them now.

Cautiously poking the supremely well endowed man whose hair had flopped into her face, Nemain forced down her growing hunger pangs and struggled to focus as his arm tightened around her breasts. Her very bare, stark naked breasts; for she seemed to have lost her smalls along with her rapidly diminishing sense sometime that past night.

Yep. Something was definitely off.

And yet...the mouth breather cuddling her from behind felt terribly familiar. He mumbled something in broken Nedic, causing her to stiffen in shock.

“...Farkas?”

“Mmph. Five more minutes. Nggh.”

“Get up, ya big lug. Yer squishin’ me.” Ineffectually she pushed at the monstrous Nord. “Phew. That mornin’ breath o’ your’n be rank. Where…” she cleared her throat, wanting nothing more than to shrink back into the furs and ignore this cold, clear reality that was rearing its head. “Where be we? This...isnae Falkreath. Erm. What’re we doin’ here?”

“Falkreath?” Farkas sounded confused. “Umm, no. I’d say this is Riften, going by the smell alone. Sign over there says ‘The Ragged Flagon.’ Hey, you okay, Dragonborn? Something wrong with your eyes...hey! Where'd all your hair go?”

His own long locks spilled around her face, and she accidentally sucked strands of it into her mouth as she coughed and he moaned. “...whugggh. My head. Aww, shit.”

She hyperventilated. “Riften??”

“Yeah. Wild night, huh.” The huge fear thuaidh rolled off of her, lifting her up onto her jellied legs with a casual pat on the back. “Can’t remember much, though. Weird.”

“Seem to remember something blue and shiny. Like a portal.” Somewhere high above her, Farkas stretched with a rumbling yawn. “Can’t imagine how else we’d get all the way to the Rift from Hjaalmarch in one night.”

“A portal?” She wailed. Hjaalmarch?!

“Yeah, a portal thingy. That’s the term, aye? Wait...what do you remember?”

She was holding it all together by the skin of her teeth at that point. “I recall nothin’, past someone named Sam drinkin’ in some bodgy contest back at the tavern in...in Falkreath.”

He scratched his head. “Huh. Um...Nemain? You’ve got no clothes. You should put some on.”

“Thank ye for that, Stout. S’not as though I wasnae already aware.”


Whatever Farkas was working up the courage to say petered out as a high, thin voice imperiously raised a question.

“...Dragonborn? Did someone just call this naked wretch ‘the Dragonborn?’”

Shit. Footsteps approached them both, clicking against the paving stones, and she shrank back - nearly plastering herself along Farkas’ chest as she readied her best wards. shitshitfuckshit!

-Making the man grunt with surprise as she enveloped her protections around him as well.

“Who be you?”

“You are addressing Agent Sanyon of the Aldmeri Dominion. I am taking you in for interrogation, and by the Eight, you shall answer my questions openly and honestly.”

“Hmm. Nope. Sha’nt go with ye, Sanyon. Shove off, ‘afore ye get a monstrous icicle shoved up yer hooter. Scram!”

“I do not believe that my invitation was optional, Breton.”

Something sizzled off of her shields with a plop and a hiss. Nemain gritted her teeth; bolstering up her wards until her magical tethers screamed, as several of the elf’s minions timidly drew near. Causing the naked Companion guarding her back to growl.

“Yesss...” The elf sounded more satisfied now that Nemain had repelled his sneaky spellcasting. She supposed that now gave him the rights according to the sparse logic rolling inside his squishy yellow skull to do as he liked.

Right.

Nemain would not make it easy for the Thalmor to take her anywhere. She was hardly at her best and brightest, but Farkas’s bulk was a solid reminder of why losing this spitting match was
unacceptable. Cor, she had not a clue of where exactly the Ragged Flagon was, or what had just happened last night, or where in Riften she could escape to from here...but she knew.

She did know what the outcome of standing around like a pair of lummoxes would be. And Farkas didn’t deserve that, anymore than she could stomach this whifflebrained ponce’s aspirations even a smidge longer.

She had to protect him.

“You and that disgusting Nord beast will be coming with me.”

“Sir, shouldn’t we be investigating the Ratway as per our orders? This Esbern fellow seems a far more promising lead than this. Uh. Happy couple.”

“Thank you for that unnecessary reminder, Carwe. Now, bundle these two misfits into shackles and appropriate attire, and we will continue our investigation of the warrens at a later time. She matches the description, and...hmm. Yes. I find myself intrigued. That spell should have smashed her wards, yet they did not."

"So, then. Get on with it. Move!"

Nemain moved. Raising a subsonic boom of power that rattled the walls, she barely managed to keep the Shout of Unrelenting Force from springing free as Farkas yelled in surprise, holding on to her tightly. And though magic seeped from her hands, despite her better efforts to hold it all in, she was prepared to lay out a smackdown on all and sundry in this stinking armpit of a tavern.

They weren’t going to let them go free.

Not without a show. “Away an’ boil yer heads, ya jobby-flavored fart lozenges! Go off an’ bother some other blokes what have a death wish!”

“Words,” The Thalmor laughed derisively. “There was actual diction in that claptrap somewhere, I am sure. Or perhaps not. Bind the Nord! Take her down -gently! And clear the cistern of all bystanders! Now!”

The werewolf’s gravelly voice was rough with worry. “Damn. This isn’t looking good.”

“Run.” She’d cover him. For as long as her magickal reserves would hold out. But only if he got a good headstart now.

“Nemain, no-”

“Shaddup and run.” She bumped his hip with her rear, panting in the effort of containing the Thu’um.

"Run, Farkas... run now!"
Gyfaill - Welsh for friend
Debts Long Overdue

Chapter Notes

When I think of drunken revelry in Skyrim, I think of this song. Nord Mead, by Miracle of Sound.

Seriously, peeps. Check it out! If you're like me, you'll be singing it at the top of your lungs while vacuuming, until your husband passes by and gives you a serious crusty.

-then takes over the chorus for you. Woot woot! Chug another mead, chug-another-mug of mead lalalaah!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCHq0m67lq8

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Love isn't soft, like those poets say.

Love has teeth which bite, and the wounds never close."

-Stephen King

Farkas had no idea what to do about all...this.

It was Vilkas who was the smart one.

His brother was the one who answered questions. Always the shorter, the smarter of the Companion twins; the one who had grown up devouring Kodlak’s library by candlelight and somehow could recall every word. The twin who played draughts with the guards...counting well enough to cheat, yet seldom did. Farkas had long ago given up playing any sort of game that involved sleight of hand or ingenuity, but he didn’t begrudge his brother his victories.

Someone had to be in charge after all...it was just as well that Vilkas fell into the role like a natural. He had always thought Vilkas would be a shoo-in for the next Harbinger, were it not for his twin’s hair-strung temper and foul moods.

Vilkas was good with numbers and letters. Cold, hard facts.

But Farkas knew about people.

Farkas knew when a wife-beater was lying through his teeth and if a shy child was covering for a
parent out of fear, and not misplaced loyalty or love. He could tell if a babbling debtor was truly destitute or holding back, and he could anticipate the moment when a hostage (newly rescued) would turn tail and run out of sheer panic...giving him the chance to restrain them before more misfortune could occur. *Something about the smell*, he thought, if he ever bothered to think overlong upon it. Their flinches, smirks and unconscious tics were a dead giveaway.

Each sweat-stained breeze, twist of lip and flickering eye revealed to Farkas the truth of things. His mute understanding made most jobs short and quick. When casual talk and threats didn’t work, his fists pummeled the truth out of those who were determined to be denser than the general population deemed him to be.

And it was obvious, Farkas thought, steeping himself for battle as the Thalmor approached them, that the Dragonborn was scared shitless. He could smell the tension coming off of her like a fine mist, the tight lines of her naked body straining. Somehow managing to channel the flow of that vast aura of power that crackled and snapped, her hands flaring with a magic that set him on edge.

Making him wary. Uncomfortable.

Magic was unreliable at the best of times. You never knew where magic could come from, or where it would strike next. Farkas couldn’t predict what a mage might do, and that troubled him.

But their enemies were many and they were few. And this particular mage had never given him any reason to fear...fact was, she’d saved him. She had defended him from the Silver Hand months ago when it would have been safer, really, to cut and run. And she had done the same later on in Whiterun...staying behind to fight. Standing up for those unable to protect themselves.

He remembered the sting of the silver hooks and the dull, bloating rage of being brought down, being laid low...the pleasant kindling burn of her healing. The softness of her touch. Quiet words in that rolling accent that he enjoyed listening to; truth transparent in every word that dropped from her pouty little lips.

And she had even given him her food. Damn. He couldn’t resist a pretty woman who could cook. _Not_, he thought distractedly, _that she’s much of a looker anymore._

Someone had gouged out her eyes. Leaving them half-lidded and clouded over, the sclera of them milky.

Like egg whites.

Someone had chopped off all of that long, luscious hair. Which was a shame, because he had long fantasized about dragging his fingers through it...had wanted to feel all that silky length glide over and caress his naked skin. It had played a starring role in his night dreams more than once, and he felt a dark surge of anger for the fool who had dared. Who had somehow managed to restrain his tiny, chatty friend...to do such damage.

He blinked down at the Dragonborn, whose shoulder blades were rigid with fear -making the newest scars she had earned stand out like red petals on her pallid skin. No mistaking those marks. Some big bad beast had bitten deep; chewing her up and spitting her out judging by the curved and jagged wounds decorating the Dragonborn’s torso.
Farkas wrinkled his nose. Sifting through the effluvia of the cistern, vomit and mead from the tavern along with other undesirable and unimportant scents. What was that smell...

Later. He could pinpoint what really bothered him about all this later. When they were not being herded into a trap, for there would be no help from any other quarter. Farkas looked around the tavern, and curious eyes that had previously been taking his measure turned all-too-quickly to glance down into their mugs and plates.

They were alone.

One of the elves thought he was being sneaky. Farkas watched out of the corner of his eye as the Thalmor produced a thin, shimmering sort of wire shackle from the deep pockets of his robes and held it behind him...his wrists flexing in readiness. Preparing to pounce, as the Dragonborn’s voice raised in clear warning.

She was still talking to the Thalmor elf, but Farkas wasn’t listening anymore. Not after that last booming roar that had made him clutch her out of shock and stunned surprise (trollsblood, that big sound, from such a small woman, his head was throbbing from that perhaps more than the drinking...) Yeah. He had decided. Though the Dragonborn had been completely, utterly changed beyond recognition; even though his memories of the past night were murky and his heart still sore from the events at Jorrvaskr that had compelled him to hunt, to drink himself into a stupor...Farkas would be her shield.

He would question how and why they had woken up like that later, when shit made more sense and he had sufficient time to pick apart how he felt about it all.

No one was looking at him. So, he picked up a table with a mere growl of effort and tossed it at the nearest cluster of elves...knocking them over like skittling pins.

In the rush of screams and confusion afterwards, Farkas threw Nemain over his shoulder and took off for the entrance of the Ragged Flagon -dodging angry customers and the telltale sputter of spells aimed for them both. Praying to Shor, Talos and all the gods he could name off the top of his head that her spellwork would be enough. Would cover their escape.

Sizzling shears of electricity rebounded from stone walls and hazed the water of the cistern with a fizzling aurora. The Dragonborn’s cold little hands pressed against his shoulders and he heard her mutter an incantation.

Something cool and foreign slithered over his skin, making him want to itch it off. He resisted, choosing to pour all his energy into smelling the air: to discover the freshest drafts that would lead them out, crawling up and over obstacles and caved-in sewage shafts that stank and squelched.
Away to their freedom.

He was glad he had left well enough alone when more spells that would have hit them dead on bounced off. Ricocheting against the narrow passageways of dark stone.

Thanking Shor, Kyne and the Dragonborn mentally for the unexpected favor, Farkas ran faster. Bursting out of the Ratway and into Riften proper - the Thalmor following not as far off as he would have liked. He could hear their weak ass gasping echo in the tunnel behind them. Spurring him on and up, up the stairs and into the circular wheel of food stalls, vendors and salesmen. Into the dying light of the early evening sun.

She must have done something else. Something fabulous, because no one was looking at them...a naked Nord warrior carrying an equally naked, magic-casting Forsworn over his shoulder. Running pell mell for the city gates during the busiest time of day at market; and yet the only notice the townsfolk took in their passing was an occasional yell or cry of surprise as he bowled through and sometimes over people, baskets, boxes of vegetables. Upsetting crates of chickens with his bulk, accidentally trodding upon a beggar’s foot as the old man erupted into a wheezing fit of complaints. But Farkas was intent only upon his goal.

*There. Almost there!* As his lungs started to burn, he shifted his burden to the other shoulder and put on an extra burst of speed, slipping through a gap between a wagoncart and the gates that were slowly creaking shut.

A guard scratched his conical helmet. “Gjar, didja hear something?”

“Ugh, no, but I smell something. Been tending your hounds? You reek of wet dog!”

Farkas ran. He ran past copses of trees lifting spindly bare branches to the sky like bones, open snow-covered plains, boulder fields; all of it had to be traversed and it was a damned miracle they hadn’t been found, electrocuted, and imprisoned already.

His chest pounded with fear mixed with elation at their daring, and he found that his teeth had nearly dried in the wind, for he was smiling. Baring his teeth as he ran, the human man within him rejoicing at the successful repayment of a debt long overdue. The Dragonborn had stopped casting spells some time ago, and was now holding tightly to his neck, shaking with those selfsame emotions he was experiencing, no doubt.

The other half of his soul -the wolf- was just happy to be alive.
The last rays of sunlight had just sunk below the horizon when the land opened up again after another clump of trees. He was just about to snag a drink from the nearby pond and double back; to ensure that their trail was not being followed, when Nemain suddenly took a generous handful of his hair and yanked.

Yanked it hard.

“Oww, midget, what the fu-”

-quickly saving his skull from being spliced by an icicle. An icicle that was roughly the diameter of his thigh that soared past them. Shattering into a million shining fragments upon a rocky outcropping.

Shit. He dropped the Dragonborn on the ground and took up a defensive position in front of her.

Ignoring the surge of weariness he felt, Farkas welcomed the rage. The hot, coiling burn of battle fury that drove away useless uncertainty, as six hairless skulkers straight from a bard’s spook tale surrounded them. Chittering in excitement as they waddled closer...swinging an odd assortment of weapons that looked as though they had been cobbled together from bits and scraps of metal and shell.

There was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide, except for the foul smelling hole the creatures had emerged from.

So he stood. And waited for them to draw closer, in range of his fists.

The Companion wouldn’t count on Nemain being of any use here. The Dragonborn was blind, after all. Though that didn’t seem to stop the similarly blighted skulkers from sniffing them out with strange, slitted nostrils...pinpointing their location with pointed claws and wheezing snorts.

The attack -when it came- was swift. Hisses and gargled speech mingled with his own, more labored pants as he met them. One by one, one against three, and finally facing them all...until his breath came faster and he could feel his stamina draining, fast, as he spun. Hit. And lunged.

A black blade gashed his abdomen -making him jerk and swear. He slew its owner with a swiping blow. He couldn’t chance it...becoming the wolf without pack nearby to help take down prey was a bad enough gamble, but to give into the beast while protecting a helpless, hurt woman, a woman who stank of fear and death... fresh, tender meat -

Another snarling savage arose to take the dead one’s place. This one wielded a crooked staff that shot sparks that singed and hurt. Wetness dripped from his belly, and Farkas wished suddenly, fervently for his wolfshead armor and greatsword. For the familiar weight of steel and leather, for his brother’s comforting presence at his back-
“Tell me what they be, Farkas!” Nemain yelled, as Farkas laid about him with his fists. “Tell me! I can help!”

He spared a moment to organize the mash of instinct he was currently operating under into a few, sparse thoughts. *White, noseless faces. Sharp teeth. Elongated limbs. That waddling walk. That smell.*

“-Falmer!”

The world went white with pain.

Her scream was...earsplitting. Gutting him with its harrowing pitch, the very ground shaking as the Dragonborn shrieked, on and on and on. Farkas released the slug-like neck he had been throttling and clapped hands over his ears, a tinny whine blanking out all sound. And with a sudden, wrenching pop of eardrums, the scream ended as soon as it began.

Giving way to a light as bright as her shrieks had been loud.

Farkas’ beard caught fire as the sound-stunned Falmer before him exploded in a torrent of flame. The skulkers shrieked, stumbling back with speed into their dank hole as Nemain stood at the center of it all. Hands wreathed in white-hot spirals of flame, cackling as Farkas scrubbed at his neck and cautiously approached her.

“Yaah, run, ye bogey-brained knoblickers! Y’see that! See! I can take care o’ meself! I need no one! No one an’ nothing!” Nemain announced, imperious. “I can-”

She stepped directly into the nearby pond, tilting like a plank-face first into the water. Flailing up with an obvious panic, snorting and coughing, as her foot slipped in the muck and she fell backwards yet again.

Farkas burst out into laughter.

“Hah, hah. Verrah damn funny. Help a lass out, will ya?”

Still laughing, he grabbed her arm and heaved her to the tamped snowy flat of their battleground. “Nice. Look at you now...you're all wet with mud.”

“Grand. Sooo...next time we be fighting something, Farkas, try tellin’ me exactly what it be afore it gets a claw intae ya.” Her hand reached out and trailed down the breadth of his chest, stopping at the slash in his gut. “Yer right lucky this didnae go deep.”
Tact and nuance were not his strength. So Farkas went ahead and asked outright. “How could you see them well enough to aim like that?”

She shrugged while crouching on her heels. He grit his teeth as golden light flowed from her hands, sealing up his wound with a rush of red-hot heat and trickling pain. “Magic.”

“And the scars? Your eyes? What happened to your hair?” It was easier to ask about the obvious than the obscure. If she wasn’t gonna mention their rude awakening, then he wouldn’t be the one to bring it up. “Word on the street is that the Dragonborn perished taking down Alduin. How did you survive?”

Her lips twitched. He watched closely, taking in shallow sniffs as he tried to pare apart the mixture of smells rolling off of her.

She responded quietly. Bitterly. “Ye really want tae know, Stout?”

Damn, but healing magic hurt like a bitch at times. He set his jaw and bore the worst of it without betraying any pain. “…Wouldn’t ask if I didn’t wanna know.”

“Right. Guess I owe ye that, at least, fer saving me.” Her hand traced the newly smoothed skin of his abdomen, then retreated. “Remember the vampires that attacked Dragonsreach? That night Beærgh, Ulfric Stormcloak and his folk fought with your people against them and were run right out fer their pains?”

Farkas nodded. Then, realizing she couldn’t see him nod, he grunted. “Yeah. So what?”

Raking her fingers through the short fluff of her hair, Nemain sniffed. “Well, turns out I be quite the shitty Dragonborn. Tis been an eventful past few months. Those vampires - they be consigned tae kidnap me, but they failed. Some one, uh, else got tae that part. Later on.”

Her hands danced in the air as her gestures became more exaggerated. Farkas listened with growing amazement; watching as her eyes never quite fully opened, but slowly blinked as she talked.

Looking at nothing, and yet...he had the feeling that Nemain could see right through him.

“Anyhoo - got freed after an unwanted makeover tae me peepers an’ mane, and t’was immediately slurped up by Alduin. Some hero, eh? Y’think Akatosh wouldae picked his Chosen One with more discernment. Anyone other than I would hae been a smart choice, I reckon. Stupid Dragon-Time god. Shows wot gods ken of man. Feh.”

“Then uhhh...long story short, I cut me way outta him, Shouted him down tae the ground and kilt him. Course that dinnae be the whole of it, oh-ho no. That be just the cream tae crown the cake of it all. Let’s no even bring up the debacle that be last night’s...whate’er that was. That Sam feller owes me a goddamn staff. And it better be made of gilded heartstone or some such rot, else it shall nae be worth this cor-blasted headache and surprise vacation tae the Rift. Dug-lickin’ Sam’ll pish off’n a nettle. Ballocks. Argh.”

Nemain swiped at the mud daubed across her cheek, managing to smear it all the way across her jaw and down her neck. “And now, we be starkers in the bloody gobbin’ snow. With naught a crust nor a coin to our names. Ugh. What a day.”
She was like one of the great Nord heroes of legend, Farkas thought with a growing reverence. Though you’d never know it just by looking at her. This underwhelming little scrap had hunted and killed Alduin. World Breaker, Son of Akatosh. The Dragon Harbinger of the End Times.

Farkas felt a slight thrill of wonder. He was sitting next to a ploughing hero, the likes of which were shrouded in valor and glorious song. Like Talos Stormbringer and Olaf One-Eye. Fjori and Holgeir...Jurgen Windcaller and Ulfgar the Unending! But in the flesh!

...And she was so casual about it all. As if it would be nothing, if she whipped out a lightning bolt and cleaved him in two for the impolite nature of the thoughts he was currently smothering about her, based on the oh-so-brief snatches of memory he could recall from last night’s debauchery. Elusive as smoke.

One such snatch rolled over him, and his mouth parted.

“...seventy three, seventy four...seventy five! Woooh!”

Farkas managed that last pushup with a full throated yell, as Nemaun toasted him from her seat upon his back. “Yayy,’e did it! Knew he would -hic- do et! Ssshláinte tae the Companionshh! Now, tip yer mugs uuuup...an’ sing, people o’ Morthal! Aaaughh! Ally-oop!”

Mead sloshed over his skin as he rolled over, dragging Nemaun beneath him with that same movement. Farkas buried his face between her breasts, nuzzling playfully as her fingers scritched his hair and she laughed. Half-heartedly shoving him away as he worked the ties of her robes free...revealing that skin that was making him drunk, the more of it he touched. He was dizzy with it; wild for the taste of the Dragonborn. The hero who radiated the scent of blood and honey and smoke, smelling like all good things...all the best life could bring.

Farkas ached for her; a subvocal growl rumbling through his chest as he darted his tongue into the divot of her belly button, lashing it lower...lower still, until Nemaun began mewling and he reached that soft, pink, most delectable part of a woman and-

“Yeahhh!” Somewhere above them both, Sam called out, “This party has officially started! Drinks for everyone!

The crowd in the tavern hollered and cheered, but the two of them were oblivious. Caught up in their own little world, where nothing bad could touch them...no...not thoughts of Jorrvaskr, the Silver Hand or Kodlak or-

-His rough hands were at her hips, holding her with a grip that couldn’t be fought as he swallowed her sweetness down. She ground against him with a moan that was quickly echoed in the Companion’s throat. Sliding fingers slowly up to find her thighs exposed by her robes rucked between them, he gathered the edges and began pulling higher. Exposing more of that silken skin to the cool night air. He pulled a little whimper from her throat as he worked his tongue deeper within her folds; pressing his nose even harder against that small, swelling nub...his free hand brushing
past her breasts to tenderly cup their weight as she cried out, and-

“Heyyy, you two! S’not the right venue for this sorta show! Up! Up ya go! Let’s go to a...a more uppity establishment. One that might benefit from your, uh, unique performance. C’mon!”

Last thing he wanted to do was move, but he could feel her stomach jump as she laughed and pulled at his hair...lifting his face to hers for a consolatory kiss. He attacked her mouth feverishly; hoping she could taste herself upon him. Hoping against hope that she would be inclined to return the favor in the coming hours, for he was so goddamn hard that every stray brush of hand and cloth was a fucking tease.

“Hahah hah, aye! Let’shh be off!”

Nemain looped Farkas’ arm around her shoulders, swaying in place. He nearly cried as her pert little arse rubbed tantalizingly against his length, and he grabbed her hips....if only to keep her still. Fuck.

"Where to, me purveyor o’ fine -hic- drinksssh?!?"

Sam bowed low, bearing a rowdy smile that was almost a sneer. “Where else but to Riften, my esteemed fellow drunks? The Temple of Mara could do with some redecorating. Don’t you think?”

“Bloodyfeckyeeaahh! Heyy, Sam. Sam Guevenne! Oy, you. Watch thishh, aye!”

Snagging a mug from some stranger’s hand, Nemain chugged a deep swig. Pulled a face...and then, she belched a truly impressive spout of flame. “YOOOLLLLL!!!”

Feeling the heat of it fan his face, Farkas watched as the fire seared the inn’s timber crossbeams in amazement.

He thought it might have been thirty hands high. Hard to say -everything was blurry.

And not just from the smoke.

The other patrons clapped and screamed their approval as the tapestry hangings caught fire. Laughing with the carefree laxness of the truly shit-faced, Farkas and Nemain stumbled with Sam out the door of the now-burning Moorside Inn, and staggered towards the shiny, pretty blue portal.

Farkas tightened his hold upon Nemain, who was lazily blowing smoke rings in the air, making him give in to the urge to press a kiss to her forehead. Snickering at the screaming inn owner who was coming at them with a broom, they managed to follow after Sam: step by slow, shuffling step...

Damn.

Clearing his thoughts with great effort, Farkas wouldn’t have been surprised to hear a clap of thunder in the distance. A harbinger of his doom, for daring to aim so damn high. Any minute now, and he’d feel the wrath of the gods.

That flavor, though. To know what she tasted like, intimately...he knew. Knew it would haunt him until he was an old man lying on his deathbed. Farkas shook himself. If I manage to live that long,
What were we talking about? Oh yeah. “You’re a very brave woman. But I already knew that.”

She was silent, watching him with sightless eyes. Farkas fidgeted.

He had to say something.

“So, uh. One time, I cut three bandits in half with one swing of my sword.” Lifting an arm, he scratched his head. “...Yeah. And they were in full plate and all.”

Nemain laughed, a rusty chuckle. Her teeth, he noticed, were quite crooked. But very white. “Cor. That...ahem. That be actually quite impressive too, Farkas.”

“I guess. Weren’t no dragon god. But I get my kicks somehow.” Giving in to the exhaustion, he laid down flat upon the rocky edge of the pond. The sign of the Thief was bright tonight, and he was completely, totally smoked. “For me, that was a good day.”

“T’would be a raw day fer any who’d dare come between you and yer blade, methinks.” A cold hand nudged his arm apart, and with some surprise he looked down...watching as she tucked her body into the crook of his elbow. Setting her chin on his chest, as she looked up at the sky as if she, too, could see the starry night.

He started to speak, but then rapidly checked the impulse. And for a moment it was just the two of them; feeling something odd and powerful pulling between them.

Attraction, yes, but more than that. Shared desperation, most likely.

...For unanswered questions...answers Farkas wasn’t sure he wanted to know, after all.

Nemain grumbled and shifted against his armpit. “So, this be it, then? This be our shelter - or lack of it - fer th’night?”

“Yeah. I run pretty hot, so it won’t bother me none. No wind, no snow...and we’re nearer to the geyser pools than you think. Ground’s not frozen. Why? You cold?”

“Nay. I’m not cold.” The woman went silent again, her face contorted in what looked like pain.

When Farkas had summoned enough energy to ask what her plans would be for the coming morn, she spoke first. “I mean tae return to Riften in the morning. Find out what exactly happened, there...” she cleared her throat. “Erm. Not at the Ragged Flagon. I’ve nae interest in suicide. But I want me staff. Gotta send some missives, too. Make sure me mates back in Falkreath doon hash a fuss now that I’ve been missing fer a full day.”

Bending forward at the waist, Farkas picked out a couple of rocks from beneath them, tucking her back against his side as Nemain continued thoughtfully on. “And...I think, though I be not exactly
certain, that we spent some time at a temple o’ some sort. Temple o’ Mara, mayhap? Be that the right place? Gods, I cannae remember. Wish I could, though.”

Shor’s hammer was going to flatten him in his sleep. Farkas was sure of it. “Well. Wouldn’t mind a trip into town. Mind if I come along?”

“Why? Tae keep an ‘eye’ on me?”

His hand unconsciously stroked her arm. She wasn’t lying...the woman showed no signs of suffering from exposure, though her flesh was slightly cool.

*Perhaps it was a dragon thing.* “Figure we both gotta find some clothes, somehow. And food. Think I could eat a whole sodding mammoth, I am that starved. You?”

Her voice was dark. “Ravenous.”

“Uh-huh. Tomorrow, then. Not gonna lie - I’m curious about what happened last night.”

A sigh. “Thought ye might be. Think I’ve got a stash of gems an’ septims stored somewhere aboot here from me last trip, back from Mzulft. Dwemer shite, weapons, that sort o’ thing. Might have some clothes too. That’ll do tae trade fer a few short term supplies.”

Farkas yawned. “That a dragonborn habit...thing? Storing secret treasures?”

“You could say that. Lessee...I put it in an old stump some thirty paces north of Merryfair Farm in Sun’s Height. Doubt any soul’s messed with it since. We’ll set off an’ grab it, soon as the sun rises. Aye?”

“Sure.” Wisps of magic pulled at his hair, and he blinked as the woman waved her arm around...casting spells that shimmered and shone. ‘Whatever those are, can ya stop? They’re making me itch.”

She slapped his chest. “Suck it up, Companion. These wards’ll be our best friends, come midnight when all the nocturnal beasties prowl aboot on the hunt. T’will waken us when they come, and more. Snap! Bang!” Her laughter still bore that dark undertone, prompting him to pat her hip.

“You’re a dragon and I’m a werewolf. I think whatever comes, we can take ‘em.”

“An’ yet the wards shall remain. Stow yer gab and get some shuteye.” Her arm now rested upon his healed waist, as her right leg snaked to lever around his knee. Their closeness sent his breath whooshing from his chest more heavily than usual.

He hoped she didn’t notice. “Et’Ada only ken what th’ morrow will bring.”

“Good things, I hope. G’nite, Nemain.”

“Nighty night, Farkas.”

He fell asleep just as his nose alerted him to the identity of that elusive, yet somehow familiar smell that hung like a veil around his sleeping partner. It was somehow stronger now than earlier...he hadn’t noticed it before they had gone off on that desperate run for their lives.

Decomposing flesh had a cloying, sweetish funk that few other scents could lay claim to. She must have trekked through something - stepped on a carcass long dead and decayed, to carry the smell of
it still through the wild night they had both shared.

Yet the question remained, as dreams claimed him. Dark and unmemorable.

Why does Nemain smell like rot?

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

It was worse. Far worse than she had ever imagined.

“Married!?” Nemain screeched, rattling the boards that made up the temple walls.

Behind her, Farkas noticeably winced.

“Ah yes.” The unflappable Priestess of Mara coughed and then frowned. “The wine stains have dried on all the forms...which you may take for your personal records if it is to your liking. Oh, and you both forgot your wedding rings and amulets, which have been specially enchanted with a restoration spell. Please, take them. Take them and go. I’ll bill you later.”

At least, the Dragonborn thought the woman was wearing a frown. With the blurry outlines cast by Detect Life being what they were, she could hardly say for sure.

But she was certain her imaginings had not conjured up the injured tone of the woman’s voice.

“Summat else ‘must’ hae happened fer ya tae be so cross with us, priestess. Tell it tae me straight. I be trying tae piece together the events o’ that evening, an’ yer gonna tell all tae me.”

"Now."

Reaching out, she managed to snag a handful of the woman’s robes and draw her close. Which was a buggering mistake...the chit smelled absolutely mouthwatering. So much life, so close for the taking...two heartbeats thrumming inside the fleshy wrapper for the price of one.

The realization of the Mara devotee’s pregnancy cooled her hunger a bit, as did Farkas’ silent presence nearby.


“I don’t know! You tell me!? There we were, holding a peaceful evening devotional, when you two…” Nemain could hear the woman’s teeth grinding, “...and that Sam character showed up, with a crowd from Haelga’s place. All of you, completely soused. Wrecking the hall, the decorations…”

“-the food, the altars...” a nearby acolyte muttered, busily sweeping up things by the sound of it.

“Yes, by Mara’s mercy, you and your friends pissed upon the Mother’s altars and...and tumped on
the benches! It was an orgy! An orgy of blasphemies! That filthy Nord there -he fondled the statues! And you! You drank the holy wine and set a fire to all the blankets in our private rooms!"

Nemain listened impassively as the woman’s strident tone began to gain in altitude and censure. “...And then...then, you threatened to burn me alive, if I did not marry the two of you right then and there! Bad enough that I was blackmailed into wedding the most miserable skeever shits that could be dredged out of the Rift. But the damage you did was catastrophic, and so. I think perhaps...” the woman drew out her last word meaningfully.

Doubtless, she had noticed that Nemain and Farkas were now wearing fancy new duds. A tiny smirk flitted around the Forsworn’s lips.

Who knew moldy and rusted Dwemer armor sold for so barking much, at that? The fear thuaidh in his oddly named shop couldn’t seem to stop giggling at the sight of what they had brought in. Aye, he was practically spitting in his eagerness to catalogue every shield, dagger and bolted piece of wreckage they brought to his counter with unfeigned delight. He had thanked them while pouring septims into their hands, the oddball. Thanked them.

The end result being that Farkas and Nemain now had more gold than they knew what to do with.

After baths and a glorious sit-down all you can eat breakfast at the Bee and Barb, they had gone shopping. Nemain had purchased the finest enchanted blue robes that Farkas offhandedly mentioned would suit her skin tone. Plus a ring with a built-in Detect Life spell. To save time and magicka, which was solid reasoning in her book. She was hardly above flattery, after all...and her Companion now sported the best ebony armor and double-guarded greatsword that Imperial gold could buy.

-Which meant that what remained in their purses for food, drink and lodgings was now considered fair game by this scheming charlatan.

The Dragonborn snorted. Begged her tae marry us, indeed. “Y’ken I have a braw hard time a’membering how I pleaded fer ye tae link us in holy matrimony, Sister Dinya Balu. Since I be rather allergic t’the institution. Bad luck with men, y’understand.”

“Oh, you did.” The Dunmer clicked her tongue. “You certainly did alot of gasping and pleading that night. That will be one thousand septims for the amulets of Mara, if you please.”

“One thousand septims!?"

Farkas was shadowing her a bit too closely, but Nemain was too pissed off to care. “I could buy you fer a thousand wanking bloody septims! What d’ye do...craft them outtae diamond dust an’ Dibella’s sopping smalls? For tha t’would be the only reasonable excuse fer such a weighty expense!”

“You’re right. Make that fifteen hundred for the damages done. Plus two hundred for the cost of officiating the ceremony. Oh, and don’t forget the five hundred gold for the rings, as well,” hissed the priestess.
Nemain was about to come to blows, when a tall figure with an even stuffier voice interceded between the two of them. “That is enough. Enough!”

“Maramal. Darling. I am handling this!”

“Whatever you are doing Dinya it is not working! And you! Breton! Are you incapable of having a conversation without yelling at someone, young lady?”

This new priest, Maramal, scolded her as Farkas’ arms created an ebony band. A barrier which restrained her from lashing out at them both. “-without obscenity and violence? We have certainly seen no proof of it. Didn’t your mother ever bother to teach you manners? You respect her opinion at least! What would she think, to see you behaving like this?”

“Leave me Máthair out of it! What would the likes of you ken aboot my life, ya septim-grubbin’ horkerpuckers?”

“Dishonor! Shame! Filthy stealing n’wahs! Now what do you have to say for yourselves, you drink-besotted blasphemers?!”

An acolyte wrestled a screaming Dinya Balu away, as Maramal fixed her with a glare she could feel. Like he wished it would melt the flesh from her face. “You toddled off to ask your mother for her blessing before going through with the ceremony. Don’t you have any recollection of blathering incoherently about that? Something about Morthal, a prophecy and...ugh, some wailing song about ladders lying near you?”

“Laddie, not ladders. Laddie Lie Near Me. That’s the name o’ the song,” Nemain managed to stammer, stunned by the import of what he was saying.

Her Máthair? Prophecy? Alive?

Impossible.

Maramal shook his head irritably and continued on. “I trust you’ll never drink to the point of blacking out again, Breton, so I’ll say this just the once. Your friend Sam Guevenne escorted you to...somewhere outside of Riften. Darklight Tower, I think it was. Probably some portside dive your Ma prefers. And then, you returned. With that Nord in tow.”

The Redguard folded his arms inside his robes. “Then you wrecked our temple. I’m afraid I must insist. Payment, please.”

It wasn’t. It couldn’t be. Nemain felt herself freeze right where she stood, as Farkas’ arms became that much tighter around her. With a worry she could nearly taste; emanating from the vast aerial sphere he and all the other height-blessed fear thuaidh existed in.

“...What? Hold on just one ploughing moment, priest. Who did ye tell that I be alive? Who!?”

“Here. Payment for damages done.” With a metallic creak, Farkas placed what must have been his share of the purse in Maramal’s hand and began dragging Nemain bodily from the temple. “Thankyouandwe’resorry, goodbye.”

“Good luck with the wee bairn, you ash-sucking bitch!” Nemain shouted as Farkas gave up all
pretense at subtlety and heaved her over his shoulder. Again.

Like she was a sack of taters, and not a woman at all.

...But she wasn’t done. For good measure, she beat her fists against the werewolf’s back, earning only a grunt for her efforts. “-Try drinkin’ mossroot tea fer that nasty constipation ye be suffering from! *Fílleann meal ar an meallaire!* I hear havin’ the Holy Word being shoved up yer arsehole day an’ night be right bloody painful, but - ouch! *Farkas!*”

“That’s enough, Nemain.” The adorably bothered Farkas from last night had disappeared, and his Vilkas alter ego was out in full force. The man had swatted her arse, for Hircine’s sake. “Stop struggling.”

“Put me doon! I can walk, ye ice-brained idjit! Put me doon now!”

“Don’t like being called that.” His deep voice sent a guilty ripple through her. “I don’t think I ever did. Look. If we’re not gonna kill each other, there’ll have to be some rules, wife.”

She arched her back, trying to scabble her way up from where he had slung her over his pauldrons. “Dinnae call me that!”

“It’s what you are. We got proof. The wedding happened.” Why the man was so infuriatingly calm, she could hardly imagine...though he was making good time to some particular destination.

Somewhere secluded, Nemain gathered, since the noise of the marketplace had tapered off abruptly. Had been replaced by the smell of pine needles, freshly turned earth and snow. She sniffed. *Candlewax. Mildew. Flowers?*  
*A graveyard. Fitting.*  
*Wait ’til he knows.*

“Might as well make the best of it.”

He sighed, dropping her down until she was caged between his arms and what felt like the cold stone of a wall. “Marriage. Doesn't feel like I thought it would, but I'm happy. Guess we'll need to decide where we’re living, huh?

“Sod that shite! I need tae travel to this Darklight Tower. I need tae figure out where bloody Sam got off tae with me bloody, overblown staff. I need tae find me son!”

“Those be needs, Farkas.”

The man continued on. Paying her litany no heed. “You can always stay with me, you know. Falkreath is...uh. Not as nice as Whiterun. We’ve got actual walls. You’d be welcomed by my Shield Brothers and Sisters. Treated fair. You’d be safe.”

She laughed, wildly. “Where? Where would I stay? In Jorrvaskr’s spare broom closet? What’ll I do when ye be out on a job, *husband*? Did it no occur to ye that I be havin’ a life of me own already, with...with responsibilities an’ obligations?! Shall I sit and darn yer socks while I pine for yer long-
awaited return? Takin’ up yer twin’s laundering as well? Is *that* what ye think I shall be doin’ with all me bloody time? Cor!”

“That’s a good start. My socks are always getting holes. But I’ll settle right now for more of this.”

Her hunger was gnawingly insistent, and the restless esurience only got worse a moment later, when she found herself being roughly, thoroughly kissed.

It was brief. Angry.

The snapping of a wire that springs a trap.

Fierce and harsh and desperate, his kiss was both promise and possession. It set off a tumult of explosions behind Nemain’s ruined eyes and stole the strength from her very limbs. She wanted—

—And it ended far too soon, cutting off as fast as it began, as Farkas made a noise and released her mouth. Burying his face in her neck.

Nemain was pressed against the wall, legs wrapped around the werewolf’s waist, hands tangled in the messily braided thatch of his hair - and when had *that* happened? They were flushed and panting. When she shifted slightly and her core ground fully flush against the Companion’s tented trousers, it became obvious they were both inclined to proceed.

But they couldn’t.

Shouldn’t, rather.

Well. They could. It wasn’t as though she were attached to anyone else, anymore, and he? *Surely not* ...

Wanton, bliss-laden abandon was one thing, but what they needed was to have a conversation. And at this point even a stilted, awkward and likely unhelpful conversation would serve. She tore herself away from contemplating just how fine all that fiery hot anger would taste and redirected her attentions to the here and now.

“Farkas. I need tae get to Darklight Tower.” She licked her lips, despising how eagerly she had responded. She knew it wasn’t the raw masculine beauty of him that held her attentions. Her appetite lusted for darker things.

She had to tell him. And he...he would hate her.

Would turn away.

It was for the best. “If the priest spoke true, then Ma- me mother will be there. I thought her long dead, but if not, she may be the only being living what can tell me where my foster son, Aventus, may be. I havetae find her. Will ye no come with me? Fer that long, at least? I’ll explain all. Later. On the road.”

“We’re married. Guess I’ll be following you around everywhere, now.”

“No. That will nae work, for ye’ll be free tae do as y’like after this whole business be satisfactorily concluded.”
Nemain took a deep breath. “I want a divorce.”

“Divorce? How long have you lived in Skyrim? Nobody gets divorced.” His laughter was a hot rush of warmth against her neck, making her shiver. His fingers slid up against the cloth-covered curve of her hip, then stopped. “You really wanna go back to the Temple of Mara, Nemain? ’Sides...don’t think they hand out annulments lightly. If at all.”

“We didnae consummate it. We didnae do it. So by all rights, we hardly be married. Tis just rings and words. Both be tricksy little buggers that carry different meanings at different times!”

“Says you. Don’t remember it all, but I remember enough.”

His lips found the pulse point beneath her jaw, and -quick as a flash, he licked it. Smothering her gasp with a press of his thumb.

“Trust me. No one who saw us would gainsay my claim to your hand. Not after that night.”

Her response was not ladylike nor was it intelligible. Farkas waited out her verbal tirade in silence, tracing circles with his nose upon her neck.

She regrouped, perhaps driven by his placid serenity to speak in a somewhat more kindly tone...feeling the strain inside him spool as her words piled up. Like stones burying a bridge.

“Farkas, perhaps we can...keep this under wraps, aye? What happened in Riften can sodding well stay in Riften. Ye have to trust that there be someone out there who’d fall in love with ye in return. Someone y’can feel right aboot giving that Amulet of Mara to. You dinnae really love me.”

She was aware that her tone had crossed over from desperate to pitiful. “Cor, man, ye doon even know me.”

“I know enough.”

Not enough. Nemain laughed in abject despair. “You know shite.”

“I know that you would go outta your way to save a stranger. I remember liking the way you danced. I thought that you had a pretty smile. That I’d like to make you smile more often.”

The hand cupping her rear feathered over her most private parts, and a thin high whine escaped her before she could reign it in. “...Don’t plan on marrying more than once, Dragonborn. Gotta say - think I got the better end of the deal. Since you’re a god-killing hero, and all. Guess I married up.”

He laughed. “Probably out of my league.”

She cursed, reflexively and inventively. He, of course, laughed again...a low rich chuckle that, ugh, did things to her lower half. “Haven’t heard that one before.”

“-blightpodgen’balls,” she ended. With feeling. “You’d stay wed tae me outta some sort of...obligation? Veneration? You have nae qualms aboot the longevity o’ all...this?”

“Nah. Marriage is for life. You’re a good woman. I’m not worried.”

She fumed. “Rumors must be true, then. Ye’ve all the wisdom of a hunk o’ troll dung if’n ye think ‘I’ be a solid catch, Stout.”

He seemed sublimely untroubled by her accusations, choosing instead to drop his head back into the bend of her neck and shoulder. She felt him take a deep breath. “Mmphf. You smell good. Weird, but good.”
“How old be you, Farkas?”

“...Twenty five winters this past Frostfall, I reckon. Why?”

Oh.

That was it. She was a monster. A cradle-robbing, life sucking ghoul. “Ye do realize that I be over ten years yer senior, Companion?”

His chest vibrated with approval. “You aged well.”

“Now that be a backhanded compliment if I e’er heard one, Farkas. I want a divorce. I mean it.”

“Why?” His fingers tapped her ribcage, then slowly but determinedly began crawling upward towards her breasts. “Thought we were suited well enough, yesterday. And the night before. And just now.”

She swallowed. “I dinnae love you. I’m in (don’t think don’t think can’t think about him don’t)... in love. With someone else. That night? Our wedding - cripes, I be sorry, Farkas, but t’was a radged mistake.”

“Says you.” All this touching was giving her fits. “Dragonborn?”

“What.”

Strong hands lifted her. Hiking her up against the stone until she could feel him, in all his warmth and solid surety, face to face. Breathing one another’s breath.

His lips brushed against hers as he spoke.

She resisted the urge to nibble them. “I knew about you and the Jarl. Sorry. You ask me? The man’s a fool. Didn’t know what he had right in front of him.”

“Just-” He cut her off before she could rip him a new one. “-hear me out. I can’t promise we’ll ever have that kinda deal going on. Honestly, never really thought about having a wife before. Gonna be a hard adjustment. For us both.”

Hair tickled her eyelids as he sighed. “But, I can offer you the one thing Ulfric can’t.”

“Oh? And what be that?”

“Devotion.”

Nemain tried -and failed- to squirm out of the werewolf’s arms. “Bother. You’d be wasting yer time. All of this be grotty nonsense. Come with me tae Darklight Tower, and we’ll learn what’s what. We’ll find out more aboot Sam an’ that staff he owes me. He’ll give what you be owed for yer part in that drinking contest too, I be sure. An’ you can send a missive to...to yer brother.”

Vilkas.
Sour faced, perpetually annoyed Slim.

Nemain groused, spitting out strands of Farkas’ hair as the wind gusted, blowing it into her face. Truly, she missed her hair at times like this. Because usually it was her hair catching upon things and blowing into other’s faces. Tangling in places it shouldn’t be.

Payback was such a bitch.

“Gods. Your brother. Vilkas! He missed the ceremony! Damn and blast, now he’ll hate me e’en more now that I’ve gone and bloody well ravished his precious twin. Codswallop. Buggery. Damn damn damn!”

His fists tightened around her waist. “He won’t have any scary opinions, Nemain. So don’t worry about it. My brother is dead.”

What?

“No...Farkas?”

Ceasing to struggle, Nemain lifted her hands and rested them upon his face. Feeling for what she could not see. Searching for those telltale emotions that played on the air. Hovering around them both. Dancing on her tongue.

“Farkas...I’m sae sorry. I didnae know.”

Stroking the broad planes of his face, she thought she felt him swallow. “What happened?”

His breath sighed against her face. Smelling of mead and the roast potatoes they’d had for breakfast. “I was gone...working as a guard for a merchant caravan. The Silver Hand attacked Jorrvaskr. I wasn’t there to stop them, but Vilkas was. He fell protecting our Harbinger. Kodlak. Kodlak he...he died, too.”

Farkas paused, then began speaking once again. His lips moved against her hands; and she tasted him and his Thu’um.


“Came back just in time to help clean up the mess. To burn their remains at the Skyforge. Skjor’s the new Harbinger, now. But...I couldn’t stay. Not for long. It was too raw. Too fresh in my mind. So Aela set me to task, to hunt down the rest of the Silver Hand.”

Nemain continued stroking his face, marveling at how submissively he bore it. Farkas really was one of a kind. And with every word he spoke, a bit more of that horrible tension eased from the corded lines of his throat and jaw. Smoothing the edge of all that pent up verve and gumption.

She had to keep him talking. “To Hjaalmarch. Aye? That be where y’said you came from?”

“Mmhmm. Kodlak did not care for vengeance. But my brother did. Or would have. Killed off enough of them to satisfy even him. To satisfy the wolf. Then, I made my way towards Morthal.”
A hand rough with swordplay lifted...pulling her hand away from his face. She twisted her fingers through his. Willing him, without words, to continue.

“Been tryin’ to drown myself in drink ever since.”

Farkas suddenly cough-laughed. “Shoulda known how hard it would be. Trying to get a werewolf drunk? Damn...s’like seeing my Shield Brother Torvar be sober. Rarely happens -and when it does, it flies by pretty damn quick.”

“Farkas. I truly be sorry fer your loss.”

“S’alright.”

“No…” Nemain shook her head, cursing her own self indulgence. Some friend she was. “I should hae asked ye earlier. I’ve been so banjaxed about me own problems, I did no see the forest fer the trees. I should hae seen it earlier.”

“Seen what?”

“That ye were hurting.”

“Hmph. It’s...better now. I think.” He paused. “That drink of Sam’s might’ve had something to do with it.”

She felt a smile stretch her cheeks. “Aye. Those be some verrah strong drinks we shared.”

“The best. Gotta find him, if only to buy what he’s selling.”

“Mmm.”

And with no further cause for chatter, Farkas eased her legs to the ground. Steadying her arm as she wobbled in place, slowly reshifting her perspectives on which of the two of them was the stronger, for all that they had both endured.

True. She had likely suffered the worst of it...and look at her. She had become a sour drunk on a killing spree. A cranky miser, all fallen apart and faded into a sobbing, solipsistic mess.

Farkas? He had lost his father figure, his best friend and twin -and still, he found some joy left over inside to laugh. To serve: helping when help was needed.

There was no one kinder. Or more deserving of a new beginning, a better wife than she had in her to be.

*Of all the men I couldhae drunkenly wed, though...I be glad it twas him.*

Lifting up on her toes, she gave Farkas an overly tight hug. “Darklight Tower?”

He returned her hug with interest, until her ribs cracked and she pushed him away with a snort of amusement. “Yep. Darklight Tower. I’m gonna travel to Darklight Tower -wherever that is. With Nemain. My wife, the sodding Dragonborn.”

“Damn it,” Nemain grumbled, disgusted with herself as he picked her up and blew a rude faffling
noise into the softness of her neck. “This marriage’s going tae give ye a wildly inflated idea of yer own importance, Companion. First chance I get, I'm picking up papers tae cut ye loose. See if I don’t.”

Against her skin, Farkas’s lips stretched out into a slow grin.

Chapter End Notes

Gaelic translation-

Fillean meal ar an meallaire: Evil returns to the evil doer

Writing hard.


I promise - less romance and more political plotting, fighting and gore coming up. I swear. The feels, they get me going and then this comes out and I just can't help it. Farkas, he's too cute.
The Sun Inside

Chapter Summary

Oooh, I love this pic. It's not intended to be anything Elder Scrolls, but it just screamed 'Farkas!' to me when I saw it. Like maybe a Forsworn inclined Farkas? Ahem....

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/436778863852623674/

Chapter music: Ingwar by Wardruna

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14bsceXmOYU

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Solveig waited with bated breath, hiding.

Holding absolutely still as the Companion and Dragonborn embraced, then wandered off. Out from Riften’s graveyard in which she had surfaced, the oiled *shussshing* slide of the sarcophagus lid almost giving her away before she managed to conceal herself. To press up against the shadows of the walled crypt, as the words she had eavesdropped upon tumbled about inside her head like dice.

Dead.

Vilkas was dead.

Fleetingly, the Nord closed her eyes and forced herself to think past the rumblings of her empty stomach. To focus on him. Their shared past, and how she had enjoyed him and he her; how freeing it had been, to have found a measure of peace in his arms. Reckless and wild and surprisingly tender.

He would have visited her, soon, if not for...she was sure of it.

She’d light a candle for Vilkas. Later. Once she had decided what to do with the information that the Dragonborn -her erstwhile nursemaid, ‘The Bat’- was alive and well.

Alive, and apparently tupping Vilkas’s twin. Moldy stone slicked against her gloves as Solveig chanced yet another look outside of the crypt.
The coast was clear.

Does Ulfric Stormcloak know?

More importantly, she asked herself as round coins decorated with Tiber Septim’s profile began dancing beguilingly in her mind’s eye, would he care?

...And could she expect the soon-to-be High King to pay as well for such information as other, less-reputable powers did?

Snow had begun to fall again, and Solveig walked along the cobbled stones of the graveyard path. Trailing her gloved fingers through the violet petals of bulbous deathbell...giving the darker nightshade blooms a briefer pat of deference as she thought upon it. Her gloves were torn at the seams, she noted with a grimace, as were the rest of her Thieves Guild leathers. Stained and filthy with multiple trips through the sewers. Her last crawl through the shit-mucked sewers of the Goldenglow Estate had done her attire -and her hair- few, if any favors.

And all for Maven Black Briar’s curt ingratitude. A pat on the head from Brynjolf, some measly septims...bruises and several bee stings as the pitiful rewards for her labors.

Hardly enough gold to pay even for a proper bath.

Solveig brushed a tendril of red hair out of her eyes as she thought longingly of the watery blue garment that the Dragonborn had worn. Her own fine apparel and jewelry had been sold long ago, to cover the costs of bribes and to grease the wheels as she worked her way into the upper echelons of Riften’s dark underworld.

Whatever the Forsworn witch was up to, it was clear she was doing well for herself. The silver embroidery on the cuffs alone must have contained an ingot’s worth of precious metal. The entire outfit glowed with expensive runic enchantments, and Solveig had nearly gasped. Inhaled with horror, to see Farkas grind against Nemain so carelessly against the stone walls of the Snowshod residence. Ruining the scalloped raised edges of the linen fabric in one fell swoop.

Didn’t the Bat know she was destroying a Radiant Raiment masterpiece? A magnum opus that was utterly wasted on her back-alley whoremongery?

Perhaps I am in the wrong line of work for accruing wealth. Readjusting her lockpicks so that they would not clink in their harness, Solveig’s lips thinned into an unhappy line.

These twenty-septim gigs were leading her nowhere. Stealing golden baubles and skimming ledgers was all well and good, but with every job successfully completed she found herself bored. Annoyed by safe jobs that paid little and were chained in a repetitive line of bequests. Go here, fetch this. Skulk there, write that.

Only the scenery changed - and sometimes it moved hardly at all. Her last job had been but a street
down from her previous burglary.

*And Mercer…*

She swallowed. Trying not to think too much of the brief, but terrifying meeting she had had with the Guildmaster himself after the heist at Goldenglow had gone off without a hitch.

Solveig was used to being the center of attention. Her particular brand of well-endowed beauty practically assured it - yet the leader of the Thieves Guild seemed to be immune to her charms. Indeed, she thought sourly, Mercer Frey seemed the type to be interested more in the bottom line than any palpable bottom.

Skillfully executed larceny was the only way Solveig would manage to impress him. Jobs taken and accomplished: carried out with a minimum of fuss and the overarching goal of profit held firmly as a guiding light. Greed was likewise an ambition she could appreciate - gold was what made Nirn turn round, after all.

Gold, gems, and glory.

Couldn’t properly use one without a surfeit of the other.

Determined, she pressed the button on the sarcophagus. A wide, yawning rectangle of black spread before her, and deftly she took hold of the ladder and began to climb back down into the guild’s hideaway.

The Bat would be fine, Solveig assured herself. It wasn’t selling her out. It wasn’t! The grouchy mage had a big, strong meat shield in the form of a Companion to keep her safe. To protect her from any residual backlash that Solveig’s information might bring upon her...in the event that the information could even *be* sold to the individuals she thought might be most interested.

And willing -so very willing, to remunerate her weighty price.

Betrayal did not come cheap.

The Nord thief’s guilt was slightly mollified by the thought that the buyer would be paying dearly for the last known whereabouts of the Dragonborn, allowing time for them to haggle. Giving the woman (and her handsome dog) a fair head-start to...wherever this Darklight Tower was. She wasn’t completely cruel.

She was just starving to death. Solveig sighed.

And ever so sick of stealing ugly boats and candlesticks.

Her boots slapped against the damp stone of the Cistern, and while none of her fellow Guild members so much as raised their heads, the smell slithered out to greet her. A stench like none other - blended from skeever droppings, filthy water, mold...and that pungent aroma that only vomit, feces and blood could foment into. Wrapping around her nose like an old man's lingering hug.
No. Solveig couldn’t fathom another evening spent in this rat’s nest. Even sleeping upon the wood floor of that snooty Haelga’s Bunkhouse would be a better situation than this.

Aye, she convinced herself, as she plugged her nose and pulled up her hood. Making her way to where Brynjolf lounged, down where the well lit up the circular waterway...reflecting his wry smile with a deceptively bright flash of her own.

_The Bat would be just fine._

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

“Blood spray is red, and frostbite is blue.”

Farkas struck a pose. Planting his foot upon the hide covered rear of his spoils, which made the body sough out one last, gusty breath. “I smashed a giant to bring honor to you.”

Near the bonfire that had smudged out into glowing cinders, Nemain wiggled her fingers. Soaking in what warmth that remained. “...Nay, ‘I’ slayed the giant, ye tattling ormadorm! T’was my frost spell what brought him down. Doon start lying already. We’ve years tae go afore that be supposed tae happen.”

“Uh-uh. My sword spilled its guts. It’s my kill.” He wiped his blade off upon the giant’s hides, cricking his neck as he rolled his shoulders. Yeah, the balance of this new ebony greatsword was off.

Way off. That Riften smith Balimund had some skill, but the more he handled the weapon, Farkas could tell -this blade was crude. The tang was unevenly weighted...it was nowhere near the quality of blade that he was used to wielding.

He missed Eorlund’s work, and more. He missed the smell of Skyforge smoke on wind-tossed grassy seas...watching the merchants pack up their stalls in the evenings as he strolled through the market towards the shade of the Gildergreen.

Farkas ignored the bite of the howling wind, and briefly revisited Jorrvaskr in his mind.

...Walking through the double doors past the firepit set about with food and mead, chatting amiably with fellow Shield Siblings. Safe and sound from the weather, from expectation and bleak, grief soaked memories. He wanted to roll up in the familiar furs of his room, and sleep deeply, for as long as he was able...

-Or better yet, he thought with an anticipatory shiver, he imagined Nemain in his bed. His breath came faster as he pictured rolling his new and naked wife up in those furs, enjoying one another until they finally fell asleep, soaked in sweat. Limbs tangled in exhaustion.
Fucking words. Farkas knew that he didn’t have a poetic bone in his body. But he tried. Oh. He tried.

Though when he chose to explain just how nostalgic he was for Whiterun, or struggled to put into words just how he felt about Nemain, and the new strange rapport they’d fallen ass-backwards into...the sentiment lodged inside his throat.

Ending up more like stymied mumbling than affectionate prose.

Luckily, the Dragonborn didn’t seem to mind. Though she never went out of her way to touch him, she managed to wheedle him into small talk. Passing the time on the road chatting back and forth, about topics he never in an age would have imagined to be worth discussing.

Like his collection of pick-up lines.

“-And that means I get to take another turn. Huh. Your hand - it looks heavy. Let me hold it for you.”

His wife growled. But she let him hold her hand. Which was wise, because she was about to step right into a steaming pile of mammoth droppings.

He guided her around the pile and turned to bend over the giant’s corpse. Searching for anything that might be of use to them.

“Pssh. I cannæ recall any more limericks, sae it seems there’ll be nae more of yer lines. Tis a wonder you ever got laid at all with cockin’ blarney like that, Stout.”

“Never had any problems before. And don’t worry: got plenty more where that came from.” He rifled through the giant’s hides, pocketing a few gemstones that had been rubbing alongside a skin wrapper filled with something that stank of socks...perhaps, some very ripe cheese.

*Food?* Sniffing it, he grimaced and threw the grotty curds back...allowing them to plop amongst the other rejects the relic had been toting about. Like skeever tails, half-cleaned skulls and a particularly rank and poorly scraped mammoth hide.

*Ain’t worth the smell. Or the shits.*

“Didja find anything aught of worth? Or shall we stand here all day mooning aboot? Gettin’ tired o’ all this standin’ round.”

“Could always carry you, I guess. Do your legs hurt?”

She sighed dramatically. “Nay. We’ve only been fleeing from imaginary Thalmor, wolves an’ all manner o’ bandits fer two straight days o’er Nirm’s most rock-festooned an’ perilous terrain. Why would me legs hurt?”
“...from running through my dreams all night?”

Her snort was almost a laugh. He’d get her laughing, yet. “Ye’d better hope an’ pray that Vaermina Dream-Eater ne’er gets wind o’ that plonk. She’d geld ye on principle. But I confess t’being curious about what else you’ve got up yer sleeve. Lay it on me.”

Oh. He would. They began walking south again, leaving the decimated giant camp behind. “Is that a mirror in your pocket, Dragonborn? Cause I can see myself.”

"...In your pants.” Farkas added.

*There* was a laugh, but she spoiled it by turning it into a raspy cough. “T’ll be a frozen day in Oblivion when that happens, Stout. Come on...ye have the reputation of the Companions t’uphold. Havenae ye got any bosh that be better?”

“Some may call you junk. Me, I call you, ‘treasure.’”

“Ugh. Worse an’ worse. If ya- wait, hold up a mo’? This willnae take long.”

He stopped just in time to avoid yanking her arm out of her socket. Tilting her face up to the sky, which was now sleeting thicker and faster as the wind picked up, the Dragonborn sucked in a deep breath and Shouted.

“**LOK...VAH KOOR!**”

Immediately, it stopped snowing.

Farkas was aware that his jaw had dropped, and he thanked his ancestors for once that she could not see his dumbstruck expression. “Hold up. Nemain.”

She paused in tugging at his arm to listen. Farkas scratched his head, squinting up at the blue sky. “Did you just...stop the storm? Mess with the weather?”

“Aye, I did. Be there a problem?”

“No problem,” he muttered. “Not a big deal...Y’just made the fucking snow itself disappear. Not amazing at all.”

Her cheeks were pinking up. “S’not all that impressive, Farkas. I cannae halt the weather fer long.”

She cast an irritated squint at the ground.

“-mmph. Just...I be wantin’ tae walk without slipping on ice the rest o’ the way tae Darklight Tower. Ugh, if I only had a staff this hike would be sae much easier. You understand.”

“Oh, I get it all right. I understand...” He let the silence trail along meaningfully, until her shoulders shot up to her ears once he added, “-that my wife is a sodding Goddess.”

“I’m no yer wife! And I hardly be anything akin to a Goddess! Stop that!” Her face was scarlet red
now.

**Better and better.** “Stop what?”

“That...that-” It was her turn to stammer, and he took a moment to enjoy it. “All that bahoney-floggin’ flummery! Tis hardly accurate! Yer giving me ructions with all this...this overblown blandishment!”

He squeezed her hand...chuckling as she pinched him in return.

“If worshipping you is wrong, then I don’t wanna be right. Hey, betcha heard this one at least a few dozen times. But maybe not. ‘I used to be an adventurer like you’.”

“Aaargh! Stoppit noooowww!”

Snow began to fall again -blown straight into his face with the force of her annoyed yell, as he tried very hard not to laugh at her vexation.

“Yeah. You’ve heard it. Thought you might. See, what ya might not know is that getting an arrow to the knee is Nord slang for getting married.”


They started walking again. “What wife would turn doon a chance at fresh meat?” Nemain’s voice was genuinely perplexed. “Why not let him go hunt? Cor, I dinnae understand you people sometimes.”

“Right back atcha, Forsworn. S’posed to be a joke. Like, how married folk hold each other down. But in a happy way, I guess?”

“Ugh. Divorce cannae come soon enough,” The Dragonborn muttered.

Trying not to be offended, Farkas scanned the treeline. Noting the ruined tower that was probably Darklight growing more solid in the distance. “Um. Yeah. Anyway, so...all those guards bitching about being guards never got kneecapped.”

Farkas shrugged. Clearing his throat when he remembered again that she couldn’t see him do so. “They got wed.”

“If’n ye keep talking, I’ll show ye a worse comparison for matrimony! See if I don’t!”

He stayed silent after that. She stomped alongside Farkas, hand in hand. Taking a good three steps for every one of his, even as she tried to outpace him...as though she were in some sort of hurry. Or competition.

They were making good time. Her hood had fallen back, and he watched as her short hair ruffled in the cold breeze, standing straight on end.
Rather like a tiny, fluffy chicken he had seen once in Whiterun. Attacking, squawking shrilly at any person that dared to walk five paces in range of her nest.

*Fucking romantic, that.* He amused himself by imagining just what Nemain would say, if he chanced to interrupt her vicious murmurings in that rolling brogue to tell her that he thought she looked like a bantam hen.

An angry bantam hen.

Small wonder she wasn’t giving him the time of day.

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

“Farkas! Be we approaching the tower? I sense the presence of wards nearby. Reach wards!”

They had arrived. The crumbling, tall lines of the tower stood out from the blot of bare-branched trees. Revealing a forest grove and gardens that had been left to seed, for all that the goats and chickens he saw seemed bedraggled, if well cared for. Small twig-dollies and skulls pockmarked the field surrounding the tower, nestled carefully upon poles and brush stands.

Reluctantly, he let go of her hand. “I don’t see any signs of wards or spells, but we are here.”

“Hmmph.” Her face was stuck in a thunderous scowl.

He longed to wipe that look off from her face. “Hey, forgot one. Sure you’re not a sweetroll, honey? ‘Cause I want a hot, thick piece of that a-”

“Shhh.” Nemain flung up a hand in the general direction of his mouth and managed to grab his chin. Effectively smothering the best part of that particular line. “Doon overstrain yerself sae much. Silence be a far more potent aphrodisiac than poetry.”

“Mmph.” She was touching him. She had willingly touched him!

His breath puffed warm against the chill of her fingers, and he felt her hand spasm as he opened his mouth to speak; the barest hint of tongue flicking out to taste her skin.

But before he could manage to do anything else, a hooded woman approached from the entrance of the tower.

She was old; the age carved lines of her face crinkled near the eyes. More from laughing rather than
weeping, he thought, taking in her crescent moon necklace and the daubs of blue woad crisscrossing her face. She had that look. Happiness had marked her more than pain, and it showed.

“Well met, Nemain of the Druadach.”

Stepping forward, Nemain jerked her hand away from his mouth and inclined her head. “Silvia of the Rift. Well met, Sister. As I was...out o’ sorts, upon our last meeting this week, I hope ye can take me heartfelt apology for missing Beltane this past year as a truth. I did wish I could hae been there.”

More slight bows and whisking of robes. “Take no thought of it, Dragonborn. The stars told us you were...otherwise occupied.” For a brief moment, Silvia’s eyes flitted to him.

Farkas stared back in mute surprise. Had she just winked at him?

Odd.

“Aye. I was. Much has happened, and I be fair thrilled tae discover any new tidings ye might have o’ the western wold. But first things first.”

There was a pause...stretching on until Nemain continued with a decidedly different air. “Be you still offerin’ hospitality to me Máthair then, Silvia?”

“We are. Come.” Sylvia turned and began to climb the winding stair. “Melka is not far.”

Farkas followed, more curious than anything as the three of them climbed. Passing other rooms filled with women, young and old, all wearing robes of differing shades of blue daubed with mud and woad: women mixing potions, sweeping floors, reading.

He received several shocked glances, some admiring whistles...and not a few lavish smiles aimed in his direction.

One woman even stood, allowing her robe to open and pool around her ankles. Swaying in naked, open invitation as he paused in the doorway, completely distracted.

“We are headed this way, wolf.”

Tearing his eyes away from the nudist, Farkas realized that both Silvia and Nemain were waiting for him.

The older witch smiled. “You two put on quite a show on your last visit to the coven. I think you’ll find many of the younger ones are...eager, for lack of a better word, for you to visit again Blessed of Hircine. Oh, to be twenty years younger...” Silvia laughed, a deep rich belly laugh for a woman her age. “I’d suck every last drop out of you, young man!”

“Um. Thanks?”

“Ugh. Of course. Course we did.” grumped Nemain, as Farkas felt himself heat under the close scrutiny. A full body flush, for he could not tear his eyes away. Tits big as dinner plates, and that
“Course we put on a bloody damned spectacle.”

The Dragonborn tapped her feet, mouth twitching in annoyance. “Well I willnae stop you, Farkas. This might take a long while, or be but a moment. Either way -do ye wish tae stay and know her?”

Somehow Farkas didn’t think Nemain was inviting him to stay and chat with the woman over a mug of mead. *Was she trying to get rid of him?* His hope for a happy marriage dimmed a shade darker.

The woman’s face livened up as Silvia beckoned to her...then fell just as fast as Farkas slowly shook his head. “Nah,” he said aloud, for Nemain’s benefit.

“I’m with you.”

“Then follow. And dinnae fall far behind, again.” Nemain’s voice faded the further up the tower she went, and Farkas hastened to join them. “...cannae be responsible fer what ye do, should you stray in Darklight Coven lands. Stay close.”

Readjusting his armor, the Companion followed. Swearing to himself that he would find some way to crack the Dragonborn’s icy reserve, as Silvia took up the burden of conversation.

“We found your mother injured and alone, some weeks ago. We took her in. Gave her food and drink. Healed her wounds, of which there were many.”

Farkas listened, interested in learning anything new. He could smell waves of emotion radiate thickly away from Nemain as the witch continued to speak. “In return for our charity, she killed my daughter. Sucked the life from her, until she was no more than a dry husk. A shell.”

“My heart weeps tae hear this news, Sister. T’was not Melka’s first kill, tae further her own gluttonous means. I wish I could hae stopped her long before.”

“Not your fault. We all must weep, for one so lost. But never fear. She is no power now. Not anymore.”

With a creak, Silvia opened the last door. And stepping inside, shebeckoned them in.

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Farkas froze while ducking beneath the doorway, struck by the thing that had been swaddled in throws and cushioned like a delicate dwemer vase.

This creature might have been an ancient woman. If it was, she was the oldest he had ever seen, all twisted and bent in half like a hook. Her beady black eyes were filmed over and vacant. A long
string of drool dripped from her whiskered chin to bobble as she spoke. Continuously, constantly speaking, in a gibberish mash of words he couldn’t understand.

He walked closer, fascinated despite himself.

This was Nemain’s mother.

“What does she look like Farkas?” Nemain had not taken more than a few steps into the room, her clouded eyes blinking furiously. As though she were trying to fight back tears. “Please! Tell me what be wrong! Does she make ready to attack? How does she appear??”

He continued staring at Nemain in perplexed confusion. He didn’t need to look again to relate what had surprised him so. “She’s an old woman. Very old. No bigger than a small child.”

His wife had gripped the doorway, and appeared to be trying to indent the stone with her fingers. “Does she hae wings?”

Farkas frowned. “No, she doesn’t have wings.”

Without any apparent haste, Silvia crossed the room and began raking out the ash from the fire. Building it up again, blowing upon the embers as Farkas watched Nemain’s mother suddenly stop mumbling.

Lifting her claw like hands, the old one began to rock back and forth. Keening piteously, as Nemain stumbled away from the door...walking with heavy steps until she fell at the ancient hag’s feet.

“After the death of my daughter Illia,” Silvia said calmly, “the coven met and decided unanimously that Melka was far too dangerous. Too selfish to be allowed to roam free. In the thrice-blessed circle beneath the full harvest moon, we stripped her of her priesthood—and Hircine’s Blessing.”

“She is no longer a hagraven. No longer a mage.”

Well. Shit.

More cautious now than before, Farkas joined Nemain and crouched down upon his haunches. He chose to keep an eye on Nemain and not the hag, wondering at the complexity of the heated passion he felt. Twining around the two very different women like a rope of polar opposites.


“But her punishment is done.” Finished raking out the fire, Silvia added a few more logs to the blaze. Stirring it up until the light lay in stripes and whorls upon her face. “Melka will live out what remains of her life as a non-entity. A cautionary tale...if, that is to your liking, Sister. Family always has the last word in instances such as this.”

Something like a sob rose up in Nemain’s throat. With shaking hands, she touched a forefinger to her mother’s liver spotted skull. Moving away a skein of white hair to whisper, quicken, as the old Forsworn’s eyes momentarily cleared.
“...Nemain?” Melka croaked. “Be that you, child?”

“Aye.” Her voice was utterly emotionless. “Tis me.”

“Wot a pretty man!”

This really wasn’t his day. He’d have been more flattered if the woman hadn’t stunk like a privy in Sun’s Height. Maybe. If she’d been about eighty years younger, and if he hadn’t just found out that she had been a hagraven.

Farkas had only fought a couple of the bird-women before, and he had nearly had his guts slashed and spilled out while he had done his damnedest to avoid being fried and electrocuted. He hated fighting them, and their freakish Briarheart protectors.

Leaning back and away, Farkas got an eyeful of blackened gums and nubbed teeth as the old woman opened her mouth widely, in what might have been a grotesque attempt at a smile. “Be he a present, mo chroi? All fer I? I do love a guid, strong man.”


But Melka had turned away, and was now picking up a pillow and cradling it lovingly. “Sweet liddle lass. Safe an’ sound, now, och aye. I’d rock me own sweet childie tae rest, in a cradle of silver on a bough o’ the willow.”

Nemain watched her mother sing, then angled her head to where Silvia was watching. Questioning.

“She be mad.”

“Yes. Her mind comes and goes; a side effect of being magically neutered. But in her more lucid moments she has called for you.” Silvia nodded.

”Melka does remember you, Sister. She has called for you, many times before. Speak to her.”

“-Tae the shosheen ho o’ the wind of the west,” Melka sang tunelessly, “an’ the shularoo of the soft sea billow. Sleep, babbie dear! Sleep wi’out fear, Máthair be here beside ye, always.”

“Gods help us all. I suppose tis naught more than ye deserve, you wicked auld besom.” Nemain rubbed her face with a hand, inhaling harshly -releasing it with a burdened sigh. Farkas felt a curl of pity move through him at the sight.

Whatever the story was, here...clearly it had ended unhappily.

Stretching, he caught his hand back just as he was about to touch Nemain’s back. For something, the wolf inside him maybe, warned that his condolences would not be welcomed at that particular moment.

Perhaps never. For all that Nemain’s voice was soft, her expression was hard. “Now. Clear what be left o’ yer mind, Melka of the StoneTalon Clan. Tell me of Aventus...my son. Where be he last? Did you kill him? Tell me of the prophecy ye had me ologonin’ on last I came here.”
“Aventusssss…” The crone licked her lips, her long chin-hairs bobbing with the motion.

“Gone. Like ye wert gone, child. Snaffled up like pine nuts inside the World Eater, oh, ochone, me own daughter...t’were for the best…” Rocking back and forth again, Melka stuffed her fist into her mouth and drooled around it. “Ochone, ochone!”

“Tell me!” Ripping the fist away, the Dragonborn pressed her thumb against Melka’s forehead, forcing a spear of something silver and magical against it. Ignoring Silvia’s quiet complaint as the old woman wibbled and wailed.

“Tell me true, before I strike ye doon an’ damn the consequences! Did ye send them tae bring me doon, tae take me back to ye in Falkreath? Tell me why. Why, Máthair? Why’d ye do it! Any of it! If I’d thought ye e’er loved me at all, yer cursed cruelty hath stripped me of the notion, so why?!”

Sliding backwards, Farkas swallowed as Nemain put her hands around the wrinkled neck and shook the old woman like a rag doll.

Silvia ran out from the room -likely seeking help in subduing the Dragonborn, Farkas thought. But he wouldn’t be the one to stop her. He didn’t know the why of it, yet. Though he hoped he would. Soon.

Grabbing a chair, he scooted it over. Blocking the wooden jamb of the door with the back of the chair to prevent anyone from barging in.

“-Why? Why! WHY?!”

“-Couldnae let it happen!” Melka gurgled, her long nails scratching feebly at the Dragonborn’s wrists. Gasping as Nemain bared her teeth, speaking in halting fits and starts as the hands wringing her neck eased up the slightest bit.

“-the prophecy! When bears lie wid foxes and the Eye grows full, the Reach be in peril! Should a babe be born atwixt thee and he, nevermore will our people be free.”

Releasing Melka as though she were a poisonous snake, Nemain fell backwards. Gracelessly landing on her rear, her mouth opening and closing like a fish.

Melka stood, hunched and proud. “I saved us. Aye, I guided ye, daughter!” She thumped her chest with a bony fist. “E’en with yer stubborn pride and weakness, mo cridh, I taught ye as best I could, tae love the People an’ serve the gods. T’were nay me fault when ye were banished! It be fer the best, yer father an’ I agreed! Galan couldnae ken it, but I could! For in what world would you an’ Ulfric Stormcloak rub along t’gether well enough tae bear a child? Sooth, I thought it likely ye’d be raped, if anythin’...bringing th’ prophecy tae come t’pass! An’ I wouldae held ye, my daughter, should that have ere come tae pass! Would hae loved ye and saved ye from the unwanted child with
poisons an’ healing spells! But ye would not. Ye went to him...like an arrow fired straight fram a bow.”

“Fuasgladh! Forsaken One!”

Her laughter was an ugly thing. “...Never. Ne’er in me wildest dreams cud I hae kent a daughter what would spread her legs willingly for the Butcher o’ Markarth! Lightskirt! Traitor! You shame me, daughter. You kilt yer Galan, arrah, how ye murdered him! Cor, that I have lived tae see such times. Such disobedience! Dibe’s thumbs, yer pride be endangering us all, and I willnae have it.”

“You blinded me,” Nemain whispered.

Farkas closed his eyes at the stark pain in her voice. “You tortured me fer weeks, marked me. Ye killed my daughter for her beauty and youth...and you’d hae done the same tae me fer my power. If you ever had feared a child of mine tae bring about some fucking nightmarish future, Máthair, well. Congratulations. For ye have succeeded. My womb be dead, barren forever...and I’ve you tae thank for it!”

Tottering over, Melka nearly fell out of the window...until her daughter grabbed her hand. Just in time to seat the old woman down upon her cushions once again.

Farkas released his pent up breath. That had been close.

“Good,” Melka whimpered. Her thin, reedy voice was becoming timid...as though drained of the strength it had held only seconds before. “Good...tha’ be good. The People will rise again, I be sure of it. Madanach told me t’would be so...it is good. Verrah good…”

And like the sun flitting behind a cloud, the spark that had enlivened Nemain’s mother faded. Bringing back the drooling, gum-grinning creature. “Shosheen ho, and shularoo,” Melka croaked. “Good, och, good!”

“Hehehe, Nemain! Will ye no sing with me, darlin’ dear?...Shosheen!”

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

Ignoring Melka’s pleas for her to sing, Nemain sat there a while longer. Simply holding the old woman’s hand.

The logs popped and snapped; hungry flames disturbing the taut expectation. The silence - for Farkas didn’t dare to speak. Couldn’t move, as he watched them.
Just the gentle caress of a daughter’s hand.

He thought about raising an objection to the violence he could feel, brimming. Ready to spill over, as Nemain’s fingers stroked Melka’s wrist in repetitive, circular patterns.

-But Farkas kept his counsel to himself. Something had changed. Nemain no longer looked furious, but distant...and weary, as though touching her mother had sapped whatever was left of her reserves.

Whatever she was thinking about had carried her off. Taken her away. Far, far away from him.

And with a snap of intuition, Farkas realized he hated this. This wasn’t what marriage was supposed to be; black secrets and prophecies and...and homicidal mother-in-laws!

All cloaked and shrouded in the scent of death.

But what could he do? He had joked, cajoled the Dragonborn into occasional laughter...but she wouldn’t touch him. And after days of travel and effort, she was no closer to him in spirit than she had ever been.

His fist tightened, white against the ebony steel covering his leg. This was hopeless.

Nemain gently clasped the old woman’s face with both hands, and before Farkas could stop her - crackkk - she snapped her neck.

He stared. Unable to believe what had just happened.

She had just killed her own mother.

Easing the old woman down onto her back, Nemain brushed away a tendril of white hair from Melka’s face. “Shularoo tae the rise and fall of Máthair’s bosom, for ’tis sleep has bound you. And O, Máthair, what cozier nest for rosier rest could e’er my love hae found you?”

She carefully thumbed down the eyelids. “Goodbye, Melka. Perhaps we will meet again, in the halls of Emain Ablach. Though I doubt it.”

And with quick, suddenly brisk movements, Nemain pulled off the eight sided skull pendant the old one had worn, making some sort of foreign gesture before placing the necklace over her own head. “May you bask in the afterlife that yer choices hae made fer thee.”

“Farkas. You should go. Make ready for our journey, if ye wouldnae mind.”
“Right.” He could hear voices beyond the door. Standing, Farkas removed the chair that blocked the way out, dragging it against the stone with a grating rasp.

Sylvia burst back into the room. “What have you done! She paid the dues of her wrongdoing, Dragonborn. You had no right!”

Nemain’s voice was quiet, yet firm in its authority. “I had every right. Perhaps the only right, that justice might be done.”

Her head turned the slightest bit, and Farkas felt the weight of her gaze rest upon him. And as though she could peer into the worry she had given him, her lips turned up in an unhappy smile.

“If ye’d known just how much blood that auld hag had spilt, ye’d no look at me with such condemnation, Companion.”

Farkas had nothing to say to that.

“She suffered for her wrongdoings, Nemain.” Silvia said coldly. “What you’ve done isn’t justice. Every death, every life taken bleeds back onto the killer. It stains the soul. You know that. Anyone who’s been raised to the service of the Gods knows that! ‘Do what you will, so long as it harms none!’”

“I have never followed that creed. Perhaps those what live in the Rift worship differently. I hardly care. Please,” Her head turned back to look without sight upon the body of her mother.

“Both of ye. Go, and leave me be. I must pay me respects tae the dead.”

He wouldn’t leave her like this. “Nemain-”

“-No, Farkas.” Nemain’s voice brooked no objections.

“Just go.”

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He was wandering outside near the forest grove, lost in thought when Sam Guevenne stepped out from the wood. Nearly causing him to draw steel, until his mind caught up with his instincts.

“Heyyy, you’re here. I was beginning to think you wouldn’t make it. Farkas, old buddy ol’ pal! How ‘bout a warm greeting for Sam?”
Sheathing his sword, he cast an unfriendly glance at the Breton. “Hey there.”

“Thought you might not remember your first trip here, Companion. Still nipping at our lady’s heels, hmm?”

Scratching at the deep bags beneath his eyes, Sam inspected the curling bark of the birch trees. Pulling off some of the white fluff and shredding it between his fingers, a subtle smile playing about on his thin lips. “I take it the Dragonborn is none too happy ‘bout the way I left things, eh?”

Bastard. “You could say that. Where’d you come from, anyhow?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Oh, don’t give me that stinkeye. You both got what you wanted. For a while. And I’m a man of my word. Here -”

Farkas deftly caught the staff Sam threw at him, looking over its odd construction with open disdain. He and Nemain had gotten dumped, attacked and thrown over...for this?

It was finely worked, at least: crafted of some sort of polished, green-stained wood. With the ugliest spiked orange-red flower he had ever seen adorning the top. Like a briarheart he’d seen once, back at Arcadia’s Alchemy in Whiterun.

Ouch. He shook his hand where his thumb had been split by a thorn.

Ugly and sharp.

“You both definitely earned it. Now, why don’t you go cheer Nemain up? Go give her a kiss and say, ‘Honey! Check out my staff!’” Sam slapped his knee and guffawed long and hard at his own joke. “Measure my girth, babe...see how hard I am? Get it? Hah hah haw!”

“Yeah. Like that’ll help. Why’d you do it anyway? Stick the two of us together? She sodding hates me.” Farkas was ashamed to speak of it, but it was true: insecurity had been pricking at him since they had left Riften.

It had only grown worse after visiting his now-dead mother in law. After he had seen with his own eyes just how wrecked Nemain was, at the very mention of her ex lover’s namesake. Bears. Foxes. I don’t understand half this shit.

Fucking Ulfric Stormcloak.

What a goddamn mess. He hadn’t seen such a dysfunctional family since his last job working as a peacekeeper between the Gray-Manes and Battle-Borns; back in Whiterun during a mandatory court trial. Held every so often between the two clans, as the Jarl tried to foster kinship and bring an end to their long lived rivalry.

And that event had ended in a stabbing.

He couldn’t help but remember the cold way Nemain had killed her own mother...the ease with which she had snapped the old woman’s neck. Farkas knew just how much strength it took to do that, and doubts that had been lurking within his mind about her nature began to stir. Surfacing,
diverting his attentions from the here and now...

-He tamped the errant thoughts down and switched the staff to his left hand, keeping his right hand near his hip. There was a spare blade there.

Just in case.

“She doesn’t hate you. She doesn’t care enough about you to hate you, you idiot.” Sam’s eyes had gone dark.

Farkas frowned and blinked. *Had they always been that way...* all black, with no pupil?

“Let’s be honest, here.” Sam said. “I don’t always think my decisions through. But you? You’re going places, pal. Putting the two of you together has been a riot. I haven’t been so entertained in a hundred years.”

“Glad we made the party worth your while. Now shove off.”

“Sure thing. Got places to go, people to screw.” Sam Guevenne rapidly fluttered his black eyes and opened his mouth wide, revealing a razor-edged smile. “You know you’ll never be good enough for her, don’t ya? You’ll always be second best. Or first at being the worst. Why don’t you ask her, huh? Ask her if you’ve even got a shred of a chance?”

That slaughterfish smile deepened.

“-Bet I know the answer.”

That was *it*. Farkas drew his sword. “Go. Now!”

“Ohhh, I like you. You’ve got a pair of big steel-plated balls, icebrain. I’ll be watching you both.” The man made a queer, snake-like movement, and Farkas’ hand started to slowly rise to the pommel of his weapon. “Watching you closely.”

With a flash, a blue portal appeared...drifting over Sam and sucking him in with a loud pop of displaced air.

Leaving Farkas alone in the woods.

He cocked his head and listened. Nothing but the wind in the trees and the sound of snow, falling from branches onto the ground. Farkas sighed, shifting his weight as the reality of the situation dawned on him.

Fucktard was right. Nemain wanted nothing to do with him. Shit, she had asked for a divorce the first chance she got...and though she was happy enough to take his kisses and his compliments, he hadn’t heard so much as a ‘thank you’ for his efforts at making her life easier.

He wiped his nose and sniffed, annoyed. That part about being second-best? It stung worst of all.
Shaking his head at himself, Farkas set off for the tower. Wouldn’t do, to get all worked up over doubts about a woman who clearly enjoyed his company to some degree. And whatever that Sam Guvenne was -whatever poison he chose to spew, Farkas contented himself that the man was an asshole. Plain and simple.

Hardly worth the time it would take to find and stamp him out, at that.

Dragging the staff carelessly in the snow, Farkas made sure to hit it on every single dirt rut and rock on the way back. Managing to hail a passing wagon cart with a single shout, his mood lifted at the sight of wheeled transport. Finally. Something good.

They wouldn’t have to walk all the way back to Falkreath. They could sit and talk in style.

And maybe, he thought to himself as Nemain emerged from the tower...white faced and bundled up to the chin in furry pelts. Maybe he’d get through to her after all.

“Here.” Freeing a basket of travel rations from her hands, Farkas replaced it with the staff. “Ran into Sam out in the woods. He said you’d like this.”

“Oh really?” She looked mildly curious. “What else did he say?”

That you’ll never look upon me as your true husband. “Not much. Think he was still drunk.”

Nemain huffed, fingering the staff. “Ach, well. At least I have somethin’ tae feel for potholes and roots ahead of me while I walk, now, at the verrah least.”

“Don’t plan on walking ‘til we reach Falkreath. Might as well enjoy the ride while it lasts.”

He helped her sit on the wooden bench of the cart and haggled with the driver for the fare of passage through the forest. The man Sigaar finally gave him a deal at half the usual rate when Farkas pointed out that he was a Companion, and could easily protect the wagon from any bandits or beasts they might encounter along the way.

As Farkas took the rest of their supplies from Silvia, he almost didn’t catch what Nemain said next. Whispered as her words were, padded down with grief.

“...Thank you, Farkas. I -I dinnae ken what I’d hae done without ye, these past few days. I’d have been lost...or worse...without you.”

Jumping up into the wagon, he thought about ignoring her. Giving her the silent treatment, or better yet, yelling at her...the wasp-sharp anger borne from Sam’s words buzzing like sparks inside his breast. It would be fair, considering all the jabs she had made at his expense. The tongue in cheek inferences that he was slow, and stupid. Her inferior in every way...

But he didn’t. As the wagon began a ponderous lurch, heaving them into the rutted road Nemain was tossed about, falling hard against him.
Steadying her until she could sit upright, he took in just how frail: how exhausted she looked, with the smell of defeat and despair stronger than that ever-present whisper of rot. Guilt picked at him like a scab.

He was not a perfect man. He wasn’t noble, didn’t have it in him to be witty or well-spoken. Likely he’d never be. His strength lay in other areas.

And Farkas was many things, but he was no asshole.

Tucking Nemain into the curve of his arm, Farkas squeezed his armful of furs. Then smiled down at her, sadly. “You’re welcome, wife.”

“Doon call me that.”

“It’s what you are. Like it or not.” Bending over, he brushed his lips against the smooth skin of her forehead. “Look. When you’re ready to talk, want you to know. I’ll listen. Whatever it is that’s got you bothered? I’m here.”

She turned her face away. “Mmm. Where be we a’going?”

Stifling his disappointment, Farkas mentally prepared for what was sure to be a long hunt, this courting of the woman who would not allow him to call her ‘wife.’

He could afford to wait. He was a patient hunter.

“Thought we’d take you back to Falkreath. You’ve got friends there, and now that you’ve got that stupid staff I figure we should bring you back, ‘cause they’ll be worried.”

Farkas continued speaking aloud his thoughts as the wagon rolled onward, south and west. “We both found out what happened four nights ago. Can’t imagine why we’d head back to Riften, after all. Seeing as the Thalmor and everyone else know you’ve been out and about there.”

She made a sour noise of agreement. His arm tightened against her as the wagon rolled over a particularly big bump. “Besides. Got a friend down south of Falkreath who might know more about where your son went. He’s a werewolf; like me. Maybe we could pay him a visit, huh?”

Nemain’s face turned upward to face him, a perfect pale triangle framed in the soft furs of her hood. “Would you like that?”

Her voice was quiet, but fervent. “Och, yes. Aye. I’d like that verrah much, Stout.”

Something trickled down her cheek, and Farkas wiped at it. His nose prickled as he considered his finger, which was now smeared with bright red blood.

And as he watched, another droplet of blood rolled down from Nemain’s tear duct. Coming to a point upon her chin, until it dropped. Spotting the ice wolf fur she had laid over the top of her legs, the hue a shocking crimson standing out against all that snowy white.
Leaning back, Farkas snuggled her more securely and contemplated those tears, as the Dragonborn continued to cry silently. Thinking about things that were easily said, and things that weren’t. Pondering the great difference that a few words could make in the overall bond of a relationship…and how the lack of them could break such ties just as surely.

She was grateful.

Seemed there was hope yet for them both, after all.

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It was the second week of Evening Star when Farkas said, “You realize you haven't touched me on purpose since the graveyard in Riften, yeah?”

She played with the spiky top of her new staff, her furred hood masking everything but the resolute line of her lip. “I be aware.”

“Come on.” Farkas sighed, exasperated. “This can't be a one way thing, me tryin’ to make you more comfortable, and you liking it...until we get too close, and you remember who I'm not. It's me, mkay? I'm not gonna hurt you.”

“It’s nae so simple.” Her breathing was steady, but he could tell by the way she fiercely sucked at her inner cheek that she was ill at ease. “You might treat me like glass, Farkas, but I may be the one tae hurt you. Don’t want to, but I might. I havenae been fully truthful. I will...I promise. Just - not yet.”

Finally. His wife was about to come clean about one mystery, at least. “Gonna tell me why ya don't have a heartbeat?”

She froze; becoming even more stiff and unyielding as the ricketty wagon bumped over a rut. Jostling them closer together.

“Know I’m not gonna win any awards for scholarship, Nemain, but the wolf knows when something smells wrong. You smell like rot. You cry blood. Wanna tell me what that’s all about?”

Nothing. The woman was a statue…the only movement her hands, as they twitched and fidgeted.

He took pity on her, and decided to give her something to keep her hands busy. Anything was better than watching her fingers twist the fur around like that...he could imagine only too easily how that would feel against his own pelt. “Here. Why dontcha take a break from secret keeping and comb my hair?”

Her voice was hoarse. “...comb yer hair?”
“Yep. Comb my hair.” Settling himself down in the bed of the wagon, he reached behind to drop his comb into her lap. “Here’s my comb, try not to break it. It was my brothers. Thought I’d tell ya about some of my jobs and the places I’ve been while you sort me out.”

Her fingers were hesitant, but that first trembling touch Nemain made, of her own free will and choice?

It felt like goddamned sunshine.

He closed his eyes and thought about what to tell her. The snow decided it for him. “Ever been to Cyrodiil, Dragonborn?”

“Cyrodiil?” She sounded intrigued. “I didnae ken ye ever traveled sae far south, Farkas. What’s it like?”

“Green.” He blinked away snowflakes that were starting to pile up on his eyelids. Enjoying the slow glide of her fingers through his hair, as the bone comb parted through the thick of it. Dividing his hair into three sections that the Forsworn immediately set to braiding.

“Yeah...Colovian wine country’s green and muggy. Sun shines damn near all year round, and the air smells like grapes. Hot, wet...sweet. And it's so bright, with so many colors...Shor’s bones, that first month I left the Imperial City to tour Skingrad, I thought the colors would stain my eyes. I could see ‘em, even when I slept. Like they were painted on.”

“Colors dinnae stain yer eyes, Stout.”

Her tone was mocking, but there was an undercurrent of humor there that hadn't been there before. He relaxed a bit deeper against the vee of her legs, even going so far as to tilt his head back as Nemain asked, “What we're ya doing sae far south? I've never been further down than Falkreath.”

“Hmm. Have to take you there sometime. You'd love it. Me and Vilkas went down once we’d become Companions…” Farkas smiled, recollecting the more crazy of their youthful escapades. “...mostly to wench and drink, but we told Kodlak that we were gonna kill a minotaur that had been bothering some of the vineyards. Stealing virgins, spoiling wine vats, that sorta thing.”

“Aye? Think I’ve read of some such creatures. And did ye kill the beast? How’d it go?”

Farkas chuckled at the memory. “Well, after seeing the vintner's family and meeting his lovely daughters -twins like us, damn fool couldn't resist- Vilkas spent all night with them. Uh, ‘drinking’.”

She laughed, tugging at the crown of his head. "Go on."

"So, when the cry for help came it was just me, the vintner, and his-"

A harsh cry echoed out over the pass.

“What was that?” Panicking, Sigaar their wagon-driver stopped the wagon. Looking every which way from the front seat, as the horses whinnied and pawed at the snow.

Smoothly moving to stand in a fighting stance, Farkas had his greatsword out...the comb clattering to
the wood of the wagon as Nemain stood next to him, spells at the ready.

He was scanning the area around them, searching for any break in the trees...any beast that might rush forth to attack them, until Nemain whistled.

“I ken what that be. Tis a dragon.”

Sure enough, Farkas shielded his eyes from the snow and looked up. There -coasting on the updrafts over the spine of the Jeralls was a dragon. Wheeling and dipping, releasing another throaty, challenging cry even as he braced himself. Remembering the searing burn of dragonfire.

“What is it doing?” The wagon driver sounded completely unnerved. “Is it coming closer? Will it strike?”

Slowly, Farkas shielded his sword as Nemain laughed. Light and carefree. “Nay, ye goose. He be staking a claim on his territory. Might be there’s another dovah about, and he’s simply lettin’ them ken that he be laird an’ master of all he sees. Simple as that.”

Nemain sat herself down on the bench again, picking up the comb. “Nought to be afraid of, unless he decided tae investigate our puny liddle cart. C’mere, Farkas. You’ll look a right mucklehead with half yer hair in a braid.”

He was halfway there. She was offering to touch him, now.

"You can't see me. How would you know?"

"Oh. I have me ways."

With a grin threatening to break his face in half, Farkas sat down...pausing as something pinged his senses. Shifting.

He heard a soft rumble. More like a dull roar...deeper. More heavy than any dragon scream.

Sigaar heard it too. “...Avalanche!” He screamed, whipping the reins until his horses broke from a plodding canter into a full out gallop.

Nemain and Farkas were tossed around in back, thrown around like ships on a tossing sea. Gripping the edge of the cart, he managed to endure the worst of it; taking a tight hold upon Nemain’s shoulders to steady her as he peered through the snow.

His breath caught at the sight of the mountain bearing down on them.

Fast. So fast...so much of the mountain had fallen, as though the Jeralls had vomited up a poorly digested meal of trees, rocks and snow. As he watched in horror, more trees were ripped out at the roots.
The sound was louder now—nearly wiping out any trace of other sounds, as he noticed that Nemain was yelling. Trying to get his attention, for all that he couldn’t hear her over the din of the rushing slide of snow.

“-Hold tight to something!” He yelled back, lifting her beneath her armpits as she clutched her useless staff and screamed unintelligible words back at him.

Farkas had been close to death many times. He could feel it now, as sure as the seasons came and went. It was his time. No one, not even Sigaar and his terrified horses, could outrun Mother Kyne’s fury.

Sovngarde was waiting.

But it wasn’t her time to die, he reflected. Not by a long shot.

She was Dragonborn.

If it was the last thing he did, he would give Nemain a chance to save herself.

Taking careful aim, he managed to throw Nemain into the trees to the right of the wagon. She was light and it was a simple toss, but the balance of the cart shifted as he did so. Which made him stumble; seizing the cart with just a single, eternal moment to stare up at the mad beauty of his death, before the avalanche crashed over them.

White. Black. Ice in his nostrils, in his mouth. The force of a thousand mammoths trampling his back, his legs, and he yelled around his mouthful of snow as something below gave way with a sickening shear of fire and one loud, wet snap.

- couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe! The horses were screaming. He thought he heard Nemain Shout, and then something wooden and rough smashed into the side of his skull…

Nothing.

Blissful, pain-free, nothing.

Chapter End Notes
Melka's lullaby is an old Irish one.

I'd rock my own sweet childie to rest
In a cradle of gold on a bough of the willow,
To the shosheen ho of the wind of the west
And the shularoo of the soft sea billow.
Sleep, baby dear,
Sleep without fear,
Mother is here beside your pillow.

I'd put my own sweet childie to sleep
In a silver boat on the beautiful river,
Where a shosheen whisper the white cascades,
And a shularoo the green flags shiver.
Sleep, baby dear,
Sleep without fear,
Mother is here with you forever.

Shularoo! to the rise and fall of mother's bosom
'tis sleep has bound you,
And O, my child, what cozier nest for rosier rest
could love have found you?
Sleep, baby dear,
Sleep without fear,
Mother's two arms are clasped around you.

Máithrín - a derivative of mother that is more like 'mother dear', or in Melka's case, 'mummy dearest,' hurr.
Nepenthe

Chapter Notes

Nepenthe - (n.) something that makes you forget grief or suffering.

"All the hardest, coldest people you meet were once as soft as water. And that's the tragedy of living."
- Iain Thomas

Cold frosted the steep cliffsides of Solitude. Blanketing the architecture in a shelter of perfect, featureless white; in snows so thick that trees could be heard popping and cracking for leagues from the weight of it.

Yet beneath the placid calm of winter lay a seething hive of activity.

Children and beggars scurried behind wagoncarts spilling over with hay and firewood; fetching handfuls of fuel to warm their hearths as the carts trundled their ponderous way towards the Blue Palace. Similar cartloads brimmed with the bulk of other goods just as valuable in the cold season: potatoes, apples, mead, bone needles and bolts of cloth of every texture and color...dripping cuts of meat that were promptly delivered, chopped and sprinkled with a plethora of spices before being grilled, sauteed and roasted.

Servants scrubbed, whisked and hustled along back corridors out of sight like skeevers in hidden passageways as they tended to the errands of the rich and powerful, their masters gossiping and plotting out in the open. All too often, a noble's public veneer bore a smiling countenance; one every bit as false as the paste gold that had been applied to the Blue Palace's patterned walls in lieu of actual metal.

False or true, the servants worked hard all the same. Waiting for any scrap that might fall from a lofty hand to their more humble clime...and even fewer questioning their place in the world, if any. For only the mighty were resolute enough to challenge what was.

To take the fate bestowed by the stars into their own hands.

Solitude's city gates groaned and creaked as they were opened wide, as illustrious foreigners from far off lands braved the cold to reach the altitude of the Blue Palace. Trudging up the frigid path alongside a stunning overlook of the bay, they were greeted warmly with buttered bread and steaming cups of spiced wine as the city prepared for a wedding unlike any that had been seen, nor likely would be seen again.

For it was but one week until Midwinter, and the festivities had already begun! Fanning the pitch of public fervor into a roaring conflagration of nationalistic pride.

Blue and grey! Red and black! Flags of both Holds flew proudly over every lintel post and archway,
for the Jarls of Eastmarch and Haafingar were to wed. East and West, joined in convivial matrimony at the end of what had felt like a long (some folk whispered neverending) war.

A marriage that would broker peace and bring freedom to a people long overlooked and passed over. A union that had tongues wagging and merchants praising all Eight Divines -Nine, if one were truly patriotic and included Talos- for was there anything better than a wedding for profit, royal generosity, and the celebration of a public proud to say that it now governed its own?

Fortune was well and good. But to the warriors of Skyrim, gossip and gold fell short of a good fight in claiming the honor of their attentions.

And in the courtyards of the Blue Palace, far from the chatter of dignitaries and the frenetic bustling of everyone else, two swordsmen were locked in combat. Testing their steel, curved Alik’r against Skyforge straight, as onlookers cheered and placed bets upon the outcome.

Ramad al-Satakalaam of the Forebears swung his sabre, neatly clipping off a swathe of fur from Ulfric Stormcloaks’ stole. “Aha! Point to me! Brrr, Ruptga save me, but these eastern wastes are cold! Still...must all you Nords wear so very much fur?”

He skidded backwards, feinting to the left as Ulfric’s blade lunged right where his torso had just been. “-Not that your furs are unattractive, mind you. I see many ladies here that should be arrayed in nothing but fur, were I to have my way-”

“Wearing fur is unwritten law for Nords.” Ulfric grunted. “Right up there with drinking only mead.”

“I’ll bet you lot wrestle with snow bears, too. You probably catch slaughterfish with your fingers, dangling like hooks over the side of your ugly dragon boats. Savages.”

“Snow bears?” Ulfric laughed, deflecting a blow aimed at his head. He was a savage, if the only comparison held up was to be a pampered and spoiled princeling. “I only wrestle bears when the mammoths are nowhere to be found.”

“Hah!” Ramad was fighting like mad, to the point where he had twice nearly broken through Ulfric’s guard. The lad’s chest was heaving, and Ulfric could see dark spots where the sweat stained Ramad’s leathers. “Walk the Alik’r desert, Nord, and come back alive to brag once you’ve bested one of our dunerippers or giant scorpions. I’ve fought stingers larger than your finest warhorse, I’d wager!”

“Don’t gamble a septim on that, boy. You wouldn’t catch me dead in that oven you call home.”

It was time to go in for the kill.

In a coordinated series of strokes, Ulfric danced around the edge of Ramad’s blade...lunging towards his right arm around and under, as he feigned an attack, whirled, switched hands, then came at him with the left.

A horrible metallic scraping keened as Ramad caught Ulfric’s attack with his curved sabre. The fighters pushed their blades into a deadlock hold; both of them slipping and sliding in the snow as the younger man was slowly forced back. Shouting a stream of expletives in his native tongue as Ulfric roared and gave their swords a rapid shove.

Ramad staggered back, barely managing to keep his feet as Ulfric granted him no quarter. Continuing to duel...both blades weaving in a magnificent flash of tilt, angle and strike.
Breath puffed into quickening clouds as the onlookers screamed out their approval, and they clashed and parted; bashing and breaking apart again as a horn sounded.

"A good fight! Hoo!" Ramad’s good humored face was splitting with an echo of Ulfric’s ferocious grin. "Had enough, old man?"

"Age and wisdom trump youth and enthusiasm, boy." Ulfric lifted his lips in a mock snarl, happily aware that the tangled scrawl of woad he had painted on was shown to its best effect in that expression.

"Prepare to eat your words, young pup!"

"Why not? You've eaten everything else!"

Wasting no more time on words, Ulfric lifted his sword in a cross-handed guard and slashed out at Ramad's belly, retracting to slash again at the knees and then finally the neck. Nearly laughing as Ramad yelped...doing some sort of wriggling jump to avoid his attacks, and eventually he took an undignified lurch backwards. Nearly falling arse-first in the snow.

What better sign of prowess was there than the challenge of maintaining a conversation during a fight, especially a fight between skilled opponents wielding bare steel?

The future High King was enjoying himself immensely. "What? No more insults, Prince of Sentinel?"

"You'll get yours! I swear on my grandfather's grave, it will be so!"

Again the warhorn blew. They raised their swords in a brief salute and began circling each other once more.

The Forebear’s curved sabre was lighter, Ulfric mused, but the boy had the habit of losing his temper and slashing instead of strategizing.

He would wear him away...allowing him to show off his ornate flurry of attacks until exhaustion struck, and the youth begged him for a reprieve. Ramad needed to learn that the most effective techniques were often more utilitarian than not. Simple, yet punishing blows were far more reliable than fancy swordwork.

Unlike most public displays put on by travelling sellswords and performers in which insult-laden duels could last a good half hour before wrapping up, Ulfric knew that true battles were brief. Violent and short: often fought and won in the measure of two or three strikes, and usually occurring after a long and dreary march or period of waiting on tenterhooks. All ears listening...waiting for any sign of the battle that was yet to come.

The Jarl hoped that Ramad would learn this vital lesson in practice now, and not later...when the war he could feeling pricking at the edges of his dreams coalesced into a real and living thing. An event from which none could escape.

“What about your pretty makeup? All those blue stripes and spirals?” Ramad quipped, the muscles of
his exposed shoulders bunching as he turned and swung.

Out and down. “Is that Nord custom too?”

Ulfric grinned even wider, stepping deftly out of the way of Ramad’s wild attack. Countering with a pommel strike that made Ramad grunt, doubling the youth over at the waist.

“Woad is even more Nordic than fur and mead, sand eater. These symbols are sacred to Shor and Kyne...they are protection from the gods and lesser men. Be honored that you have been bested by them.”

“Hoouuurraaghhh! Should have picked better symbols!”

Springing up like a hare from the blow to his gut, the Redguard prince whirled his scimitar into a figure eight form.

*Flashy. But pointless.* The spiralling form was designed to distract the eye, and it nearly accomplished its purpose as Ramad did a shuffling step over the ice covered stones. Ignoring the hoots and cheers of the crowd as he swiftly gained ground on Ulfric, step by smoothly controlled step.

It was a move that might have worked on the shifting sands of a desert. He could see why the boy had chosen this tack, for in drier terrain that shuffle would maintain a warrior’s traction...perhaps even provide an escape, as boots stirred up dust that could blind and confuse an enemy.

Here? It did little but muck up the existing snow prints already laid upon the ground.

Ulfric kept his eyes firmly focused upon the Redguard’s gaze. Paying attention to every slight movement, as Ramad’s brown eyes flickered downward...guiding him to duck at precisely the right moment.

He used the snow to skid easily away as Ramad stumbled. Narrowly evading a vertical slash that could have sliced him from navel to nose, had they been on sand and not ice.

“Hah! I think my woad serves the gods quite well. Don't you?”

Spinning so that they were back-to-back, Ulfric tried again. Jerking his sword into a reverse thrust and sliding it down - tapping the exposed edge against Ramad’s neck.

He allowed himself an amused snigger as Ramad scowled. Looking every inch the untested youth that he was.

“First blood. I win.”

Lifting his chin up aggressively, Ramad pounded the hilt of his scimitar against his chest. "Again! I demand a rematch! Again!"

Flicking his hair out of his eyes, Ulfric gave the boy a wolfish grin. "Your funeral, lad."

"Just try!"

The war horn sounded as the flag bearer called out his victory, and the two reassumed their starting positions. Surrounded by shouts, roars and feminine cries of delight that they both ignored in favor of paying attention to the match.
As his sword spun into patterns made memory by long years of training and taught skill, Ulfric chose to remain silent. Favoring contemplative thought over speech, as he relaxed into the bout.

Allowing his sword to lead as his mind wandered elsewhere.

He thought about Solitude.

It had been over a year since he’d stood here to challenge Torygg: more than two and a half, to be precise. He couldn’t quite halt the catch in his throat when he realized that all of this -the palace, the lands, the legacy- was now his. Or very soon would be.

Somehow it hadn’t sunk in. Perhaps it had just a bit, in the harried calculations he was forced to make daily in his mind as he oversaw the running of Haafingar as well as Eastmarch (and Skyrim to boot) but it was not true in his heart.

Not yet.

Months he had been here, and still he felt like a stranger. Rubbing elbows with Jarls that wouldn’t have given him a second glance after Torygg’s death...yet now those same politicians and thanes toasted him with wine and compliments. Wines that, sold by the bottle and not the crate, cost a sum that he would have blanched at back in Eastmarch. What was wrong with mead?

Gods, and the simpering. He was surrounded by smiles everywhere, social climbers and snakes: all insincere, brittle. False. Their venom-laced whispers trailed him like smoke as he stalked through the halls. They were everywhere he turned, these sycophants. Shedding off of the Blue Palace like shingles from an ill-shod roof, eternally replenishing themselves from some unholy source.

If this was to be the rest of his life, he thought, then perhaps he might -just might- have made a slight error of judgement.

But nothing worthwhile was easily attained. He could put up with a great deal of horseshit...so long as the land he loved was kept safe from corruption without.

He could not help but acknowledge that he had sorely underestimated the corruption Skyrim held within.

Ulfric could not rid himself of the troubling sensation that he was living someone else’s life, masked in a stranger’s face.

Once, while hurrying from one appointment to the next, he had looked up and caught his reflection in a mirror. One of the many Elisif had brought in to decorate the Blue Palace for their upcoming nuptials. Flawless and tall, flanked by elegantly draped wall hangings and a painting placed upon an easel.

He supposed it was only right that for one disconcerting moment, he didn’t recognize himself in the man he saw there.

His grey-shot hair and beard had grown longer, and velvet was his attire now more often than not; with sumptuous furs and silks slowly replacing the more humble wool and steel he was far more used to. Serviceable wear that now gathered layers of dust as they rusted, unneeded in his armory.
But that was not so sore a loss. Ulfric strove to convince himself that he was donning a new sort of protection, dressing for the part of High King.

Yet it was rather like strapping on unfamiliar armor. Armor that had not been worn in properly. It bothered him...chafing in all the wrong places.

Blurring the lines between what had been and what was.

...Which mattered not. He cared little about his appearance beyond being presentable and suitably intimidating, but there had been a day not long past when he had run his hands along the nubby texture of embroidered linen -and it had not caught against his calluses.

He had held up his hand to the light, and squinting, Ulfric realized that even his fingers were turning traitor towards him. His daily sparring practice had been replaced with hours of reading, writing and listening to supplicants of the court.

Clerical work. Fit for the soft bellied and soft of hands. And now, it was his hands that were losing their edge in this new regime, from exertion that was far more mental than physical.

Not that he ever went about unarmed. Especially in Solitude. There had been no attacks as of yet upon his person, but he knew it was only a matter of time. The weight of his sword sat heavy on his hips -an inescapable reminder that he was ridiculously out of his element- but he felt the absence of fighting like a physical ache.

He didn’t feel like himself like this: not the man he’d once been, and certainly not the man he’d clawed his way back into becoming...diligently making ready to wed a woman before the gods. Binding her to him until death’s sweet release.

A woman who despised him almost as much as he resented her.

Coming back to the present moment, Ulfric stepped away from another exuberant swing from Ramad; finishing the fight with a high-low double tap delivered with the flat of his blade. Blows that sent the Forebear sprawling into a nearby snowdrift with a surprised screech.

His arms burned pleasantly as Ramad guffawed and rolled onto his back. Holding up his hands in a visible sign of submission. “Fine, fine! I give up! I give in!”

"So be it. Better luck next time, boy."

Ulfric nodded to acknowledge the surrender, and the horn wailed one last time to herald that their match was done. Keeping his gaze to the front, he lifted Ramad by the hand up to his feet...chancing only a few, subtle glances towards the royal box where Elisif sat. Surrounded by her favored courtiers and the dignitaries from High Rock, House Redoran and Sentinel, her face remained a study of attentive courtesy as she moved her hand in a limp-wristed wave.

Showing that yes, indeed, she had seen him.

He could be polite, too. Ulfric bowed his head to the ladies, and the onlookers cheered even louder.

An elegant Redguard woman smiled fondly down at him and Ramad both, her mouth moving silently as Elisif nodded. She pointed down at what Ulfric guessed to be her son; his guess confirmed
as Ramad preened beneath her attentions.

Undaunted by his loss, the youth stood and raised his scimitar in a salute to the roaring crowd. His accented voice punctuated the roil of noise surrounding the palace courtyard. “Hmm. You know, I don’t think I approve.”

Inspecting his sword for any visible scratches or mars, Ulfric murmured back. “Approve of what?”

Ramad rolled his eyes at him. “Of your future wife, of course.”

“Why ever not?”

“Eh.” Ramad shrugged. “While Elisif the Fair won’t make a terrible wife for some other tosser, she is simply not right for you. By Morwha’s Four Arms, why did you choose her?”

Ulfric raised a single pale eyebrow. Ramad was either taunting him, or truly didn’t know by now the widespread story of his unusual engagement.

By all rights they should not have been having such a frank conversation so soon into an acquaintance, but the Redguard prince had asked so casually that it felt...well. Natural.

Either way, Ulfric was hardly going to enlighten the lad about his innermost feelings. It would be easy to respond. Simplicity itself, to tell him the truth of the way things were between himself and Elisif.

But Ramad was a guest, and so he ignored the intrusive question. Nodding towards the refreshment table that held a staggering variety of meats, cheeses and drinks, Ramad followed him eagerly...sheathing his blade with practiced ease as they waited for a servant to arrive.

One maidservant raced forward from the shadows, her bored look replaced with eagerness. And quickly their horns were filled to the brim, with hot wine that steamed fragrantly.

They both took appreciative sniffs as the scent of spice filled the air. "Mmm. A local specialty?"

"Aye, Evette San's make."

"It's good."

"Hmph. I'll send some home with you to Sentinel. For your mother."

"Many thanks, High King."

Ulfric took his time to formulate a polite response to Ramad's earlier question, sipping slowly as the youth drained his horn at one go and lifted it again. Gesturing impatiently to the maidservant for more. “Elisif is widely viewed as the most exquisite woman amongst the nobility of Skyrim.”

“And yet her beauty does not move you to watch her, to follow her every movement as other men of the court do. She is beautiful, no?” Ramad countered.

Ulfric shot the younger man a weary glance. “You think so? You can have her, then.”

“Hah! You got me there. I cannot say I am overfond of cold fish. Me? I favor the warm-blooded type.” Ramad gave the serving girl a dazzling smile as she refilled his horn, causing her to flush from the neck up. “And you know Mother wouldn’t approve of reviving your civil war. No matter how
amusing it would be to watch from afar.”

Gulping down another hornful, Ramad sucked in a chestful of cold air and promptly coughed. His choked gasps turning to laughter, as Ulfric reached over to pat his back none-too gently. *Nosy little bastard.*

“I suppose the benefit lies in that you are stealing Elisif from any number of young suitors who write ballads to her eyes, lips and other, more fleshy parts.”

Ramad coughed one last time, casting a sly glance up at Ulfric. “But you don’t care about any of that, do you? And after a week of your hospitality, watching you both sit like statues at table...hardly speaking save to ask the other to pass the salt?”

Resting his horn upon the table, Ramad flipped the hood of his cloak over his dreadlocks and tightened the strings, enveloping his face in a halo of white fur. “Mmm. Nope. You are not right for her. And she is not right for you.”

Whatever Ramad meant by that, Ulfric did not deign to guess. But since the prince was all of seventeen years old - a young seventeen, for all his boasting about conquests of the feminine type- he would not read too deeply into it.

He chose to sound amused rather than offended. “Elisif is but a means to an end. Perhaps you haven’t heard, but she proposed to me. This marriage cements our alliance. Paving the way towards stability, for there is still much to do. The new Jarls need help building armies, and enforcing their right to rule. The Empire may try to reclaim Skyrim, and I need everyone ready for that.”

He tapped his lip thoughtfully. "Though the biggest threat, of course, is the elves."

“Ouch. So Elisif is but a means to an end, then. Small wonder she cannot bear your touch. Or is it the other way round?”

Ulfric shrugged, refusing to be baited. “I see little reason to gild the truth of things.”

“Yes, well, we’ve tried alliance by marriage in Hammerfell.” Ramad grinned, his teeth starkly white against the deep blue-black of his skin. “And every damn time we Forebears try to reach out to those misbegotten louses the Crowns, why, the peace talks fail and the blades and bows come out! Some differences are too deep to overcome, I think.”

“Perhaps that is the way of things.” Ulfric fingered the strand of ice wraith teeth hanging round his neck. “I killed Elisif’s previous husband, you know. It is unlikely that we will achieve anything further than mutual toleration at this point.”

“Such courtly romance! Your bards must be rolling in their graves. Are you truly from the land of Fjori and Holgeir’s immortal love, Ulfric?”

“Mmhmm. Right along with bears, mammoths and dragons. Mustn’t forget the dragons.”

Ramad fidgeted, untying his hood with a huff of frustration and shrugging out of it, brushing the snow away from the fur until it stood straight up in tufts. “Feh, I can hardly forget them. Such a stir they made flying over Wayrest and Elinhir. But Alduin - your black dragon of doom, the instigator. He is dead, yes?”

“Yes.” Ulfric sat down heavily upon a nearby bench. “Dead.”
Ralof had returned not a week past with confirmation of Nemain’s demise. At least half a dozen other couriers and newsmongers had passed on similar news.

Alduin was no more…and the Dragonborn had gone to her death with him.

He wanted to deny it, to defy them all for the sake of his hope, but too many had seen it happen. Too many had passed on the news of seeing the World Eater implode into a thousand shards of darkness. Too many had related the events of the massacre at Orphan’s Rock for him to retain any doubt of the Dragonborn’s fate.

There were still several holes in his knowledge of what had transpired since Nemain had left him, that sultry autumn night when she had walked off to go look for Sofie. So many questions, with answers that defied him. Eluding reason itself.

How had she been kidnapped, and why? Leaving no tracks or tracery of magic for him to follow, nor news save that she had delivered her captors a great deal to think upon before the eyewitness accounts became utterly confused.

How had Nemain overcome her bonds to slay Alduin, or was it that she had been eaten? Some said she had been killed and had come back to life, with just as many disagreeing as Ulfric listened to them bicker in mounting frustration.

The stories he heard were never so clear upon that point.

Regardless, the grief-stricken cries of the dovah did not lie. He had almost mistaken their Thu’um for thunder, as the crashing clash none could ignore rolled down from the Monahven. Awakening the Blue Palace with cries that an earthquake had come to pass, as the bells rang out in warning, but he heard. He knew better.

And their words haunted him still. For in the deepest parts of the night when he was at his most desolate, he could think of nothing but his failings. Could only imagine Nemain’s terror; her loneliness and pain as she faced Alduin alone, in the final moments of her life.

He should have stood there with her, at the end. Galmar was wrong…his lover had *not* willingly left him that night. It had been no clandestine escape, but an underhanded attack. It was burglary of the closest relations that he had ever experienced akin to family, a theft which he would not soon forgive. Nor forget.

He should have kept her safe.

*My fault. Mine, and mine alone.*

*I should have found her sooner.*

It was then during the night, when despair hunted him, that he would crawl out from his bedding and get upon his knees into a meditative stance. Breathing in staggered, broken chains until his heartache eased and his inhalations attained that artless, thought-voided grace Ulfric so fervently sought. The
peace of the Way was his balm, but it lost its efficacy with every night he was forced to kneel. Exhaustion, stress...even the cold he ignored in favor of seeking serenity.

He would sit like that for hours, unable to sleep. Turning thoughts of Nemain over and over in his mind almost as penance: reliving past conversations and (when he dared) remembering vividly the shared moments of passion that had come, oh-so briefly in that two week period they had traveled together out of Whiterun.

Those memories were daggers, picking away at his guilt like a scab that would not heal.

“That was a very fine eulogy you gave last night about your slain hero, the Dragonborn.” Ramad wiped his mouth and held back the barest beginnings of a belch. “The language you used was not one I am familiar with. Though it was impressive.”

Ramad then blew into his hands, rubbing them briskly together as he sat down next to Ulfric. “What did you say at the memorial? Alduin mal-daan? Dovah-whatsit something?”

“It is Dovahzul, the language of dragons. And their words are their own, not mine.”

Leaning his head back against the cool stone, Ulfric watched through lidded eyes as another sparring bout began. The words fell from his lips almost without effort. “Alduin mahlaan. T hur qahnaraan. Dovahkiin los ok dovahkriid! Thu'umii los nahlot.”

“I am not even going to try to repeat that. What a mouthful. But I am sure it means something splendid.”

“It means the Bringer of End Times lies dead at the hand of the Dragonborn. I spoke of her victory. How she saved us all, and what her sacrifice meant. She did not die in vain.”

“Hmph.” Ramad peered up at him. “You knew her, right? The Dragonborn.”

"Was she a Nord like you? All furred, fierce and blue with woad?”

“No,” laughed Ulfric. He could well imagine the indignant response Nemain might have fired off to such an accusation.

“You may not believe me, but she was actually a Forsworn.”

“One of those Old God worshippers. Huh.” Ramad clucked his tongue. “You know, everyone west of the Druadach says that they're two pints short of an ale.”

“Oh. She was.” Ulfric smiled fondly. "But in the very best way.”

The Redguard prince looked as though he were on the verge of asking another question…but it only took a beat before his smirk transmuted into a reluctant, wry smile.

“Judging by how solemnly you lauded the woman, one might think that dragons were more of a pressing issue than the elves. At least in Skyrim. Yes?”

Ulfric frowned thoughtfully, then shrugged. He felt little desire to go into overt detail upon how
miserly it would have been to be ruled over by the dovah.

One only needed to study their histories...their cruel, blood-soaked past fraught with draugr sacrifice, dragon priests and subjugation by force to gain a glimpse of just how lucky they had been. How very, truly lucky Skyrim was to have avoided a repeat of the Merethic era. Alduin’s chosen future.

Regret raked through him, raising new scars. To be added to the tally that was piling up -ever weighing down what joy he could find in these new circumstances.

It was enough, wasn’t it, to have won? To have achieved fame and glory beyond his wildest dreams?

*It would have to be enough.* “It is fortunate that the Dragonborn managed to slay the World Eater before succumbing to her wounds. As pressing as the dragon crisis was, it is over and done. I must allocate our assets where they will do the most good, and right now what we need is defense. We must protect our economic, domestic and military interests. Rebuild what has been left to suffer from years of neglect. It is not a light undertaking.”

“An army cannot fight for long without food, Ramad, and food does not thrive without centers of commerce engaged in attending and dispersing it. This you should already know from your lessons.”

He balled his hand into a fist, waiting out the fine tremor that shivered through him as his mind supplied unwanted flashes. Vivid, stark pictures of his previous encounters with the Thalmor...as fresh and awful now as they had been twenty seven years ago.

Stretching his fingers, he sighed. “As far as the elves are concerned, well. Some have called this conflict a holy war. It is, I think...but not in the way most would have it. The fundamental conflict, Ramad, is this: elven pride will not allow the Mer to relinquish control over Nirn. Not while their gods, their superiority is called into question. Man may wish to live free and long without interference, but so long as we worship Talos -a heresy the Dominion cannot permit- will we ever be at liberty to exist without fear?”

“No. The Altmer will never leave us alone.” Ulfric’s deep voice echoed in the break between cheers, as the warriors in the makeshift arena saluted and were replaced by two new combatants.

“And so, I cannot ignore the threat they pose. I would not go so far as my second in command Galmar boasts. I have no immediate plans to sail south to Alinor, in order to attack the capital of the Dominion itself. Let them attend to themselves, I say. And if they sail north to our shores? Then we shall repel them, as oft as they invade. We did it once. We can do it again.”

Ramad was listening closely, his dark eyes wide.

Leaning forward from where he had rested against the walls, Ulfric laced his fingers together and fixed his gaze upon the Redguard. “But mark me well. It is the wholesale destruction of man that the Mer intend to deliver, as they render their poisoned worldview into reality. And I cannot stand by and watch it happen.”

“I will not yield- but Skyrim cannot fight them off alone.”

“That is why I hope to gain your mother’s alliance, Ramad, as well as the association of young and noble warriors such as yourself. This world we make? This future of which I speak? It is not for my generation.”

He closed his eyes and pressed his fists against his forehead, feeling a headache coming on. “It is for yours.”
Well. That diatribe was an easier -and no less true- explanation for his motives than the memories surfacing like bruises beneath his skin. Triggered by change after change after change.

And all of it outside his control.

Both of them sat in silence after he ceased to speak, consumed with their own personal thoughts of pain. Ulfric turned his gaze from watching the fighters spar to sigh, almost imperceptibly, as scores of men and women unloaded a line of caravans that seemed to have no end. The wagoncarts stretched out across the Blue Palace’s main archway in clumped bundles, and even snaked down the cobbled city paths.

Probably stretching all the way to the outer gates, if his future wife had any say in it.

What a waste of sodding time. Resources. Sanity. He curled his hands around the lip of the frozen stone bench, watching with increasing sourness as three workers struggled to lift a marble framed mirror through a side door. A mirror that was probably costing him a fortune.

If the wedding itself was the end of it, Ulfric reasoned, he might have been able to bury himself in work until the whole sorry mess had passed. But there was no escaping the sound of stone being chipped away as Elisif continued issuing orders. Her honey-sweet tone of voice hid a backbone of steel, as at her command towers of wooden scaffolding went up and tapestries and banners were hung. Hammers rang nonstop, back and forth as if they were calling to each other, clanging until he could scarcely tolerate the din of it. For the sounds he had long associated with battle had been turned into harbingers of indolence.

Ridiculous, wasteful extravagance. Was he to have no say in the decoration of his own home? Castle Dour was looking more appealing each and every day.

When he chanced to take a break from the neverending paperwork and take in the fresh wintry air standing near the ramparts, he had but to look down to see the cresting wave of change sweeping across the castle. Incredible. Nay, it was staggering to see the work that Elisif and her newest advisors had accomplished in such remarkable speed.

There was no way she hadn’t already been planning these renovations for weeks. Months. Spending septims at a rate that would have them all chewing boot leather for their sup, once her lines of credit ran dry.

He reminded himself to have a up close and personal chat with the keeper of the treasury soon. Before all of their combined wealth was frittered away on candelabras and gowns and...and chargers!

Ulfric had not even known what a charger was, until a well-meaning servant had informed him that chargers were voluminous plates meant to be placed beneath actual tableware, to enhance the appearance of the display and show off the ruler’s abundance. What a ploughing waste.

If required, he would be more than happy to repeat the debacle of the dressing room. Though he had gained some amusement from spoiling Elisif’s pleasure in the whole affair of attiring him appropriately back then, this - this was nothing less than a coordinated attack of the very worst kind.
The kind that involved dignitaries. Watered-down drinks branded with foreign, unpronounceable names.

And dancing... always the damnable, boring dances of state. Moving in foursquare rounds, bowing and touching fingers. A mockery of the vigor and joy that his people danced with, when left to their own devices... and no one to impress, or cajole into alliance or truce.

Ulfric shuddered. Dancing! More than itchy velvets, letters parlaying debt or giggling maidens, he despised the hum-drum dances of the High Court most of all.

“My uncles and grandfathers lost their lives in the Siege of Hegathe.” Ramad softly said, breaking the Jarl free from his brooding. “Mother’s first husband died, along with the rest of my cousins, in the Battle of the Red Ring at the White Gold Tower.”

“All my life, I have been taught that we held the line. That Hammerfell stood alone against the Aldmeri Dominion, when all others gave in or sold out. And now, hearing you speak, I am forced to question all that I have been taught, for it is as though my own Mother speaks to me through the words of your mouth.”

He fiddled with the toggles of his jerkin. “I was so certain of myself in coming here. And now I find myself not knowing how to answer you, for your speech though earnest does trouble me greatly. I cannot say in any suery of what I now think.”

“But I can tell you that my brothers think ill of your coming coronation. For was it not your folk who retreated right alongside the Imperial forces in the Conflict? Did you not serve in the legion that abandoned us? Leaving Hammerfell to the tender mercies of General Arannelya?”

Ramad waggled his fingers vaguely, indicating the armored boots, the furs and warpaint Ulfric had pulled together. As if he were casting a spell upon them both. “And now that your insurgency is about to become a regency, what changes will you bring? Is this treaty you wish to broker with my Mother genuine? Who will you slay, should we take your side? And who will you spare?”

Suddenly the Forebear prince looked very young. “And...do you really think that there will be another Great War? A war to end all wars, like Ruptga’s shamans say?”

Watching the emotions flit across the boy’s face brought out a twisting wire of sympathy in him. He had not been much younger when he had left to go to war, all bright optimism and naive hope. Ramad sounded all at once so fragile, so young, that Ulfric’s instincts were roused in a paternal urge to protect the lad.

Yet there was an undercurrent that cogitated, even as his thumbs traced the pommel of his sword. How interesting...that the seers of other faiths had been gifted with a Telling. A sign that was so eerily similar to his own predilections.

He filed that thought away for later, to be digested during his nightly meditations. “I do. But if war comes, it will come quickly or not at all.”

“You ask what I think? I think there will be peace for a time; during which myself, Elisif and the
other Jarls must rebuild Skyrim into the land it once was. Strong. Self-reliant. The center of mankind.”

Seeing Ramad’s puzzled look, Ulfric hastened to explain. “...because getting rid of the Empire was only half the problem. I fear the Thalmor will see the Stormcloak’s victory here, and decide to turn greater attention to our shores...and with it, your borders as well. We both must be prepared to face the full might of the Dominion.”

Ramad’s dark eyes held a bleakness he recognized. “So. It will come to war again, after all.”

“Elves have long memories,” Ulfric agreed. “They remember Hegathe, Ramad...and Skavan, and the Second Treaty of Stros M’kai. And doubtless they will not forget their prompt dismissal from Solitude’s shores.”

“But make no mistake - it will be Skyrim that shall lead Tamriel in the dark days yet to come, when the fate of the world is finally determined.”

Standing, Ulfric clapped a hand to Ramad’s back as the lad stood as well. “I should be proud to stand at your side when that day dawns. You are a fine warrior. I can only pray that your diligent efforts in practice pay off, when that scimitar of yours is wet with more than snow.”

“But it is not quite that day yet. Here. Take this.”

Wincing at the soreness in his shoulders, Ulfric lifted the necklace of ice wraith teeth from around his neck. He placed it over Ramad’s head. “I see you, Ramad al-Satakalaam of the Forebears. I see your resolve. I felt your strength.”

It was not pandering if it was true, Ulfric told himself silently. And he needed Hammerfell’s support.

Now more than ever. “The youths of my people hunt the ice wraith as proof that they have come of age. A man stands before me. Wear the symbol of men, and do not falter. Talos guide you.”

“M-my thanks, High King! You do me great honor by giving me this token.” Ramad’s proper speech was somewhat ruined as his voice cracked. Soaring from a high tenor to gruff bass notes as Ulfric tried very hard not to smile at his expense.

“And more importantly,” Taking in the exalted look on the boy’s dark face as he delicately touched the necklace, Ulfric could not hold back a chuckle as a sudden gust of wind surged past the courtyard. Tossing all their cloaks into disarray.

“...do not freeze.”

“Aaaurgh! Cold! Coldcoldcold! How can you stand this...this chill without freezing straight through?!”

Pulling at his clothing, Ramad seemed to forget the wonders of ice wraith trophies as he stripped down; pulling at his undershirt as he struggled to make sense of the layers that had been thrown askew.

The older man shook his head and took pity on him. Taking Ramad’s jerkin and furs, he shook them until they were snow-free, then offered Ramad a linen towel from the nearby refreshments table. “Here. Wipe off that sweat. To stay warm in Skyrim, you need to wear many thin layers, not just one thick coat. And wool is a far better insulator than linen for your smalls. Take that shirt off and leave it off until it dries.”
“No, don’t - bah, put on that jerkin with the fur against your skin and then tie the overcloak loosely. Even looser...there.”

He tied off the hood with a square knot, noting how uncomfortable the Redguard still looked. “And if you are still sweating, you should take off one or two layers. Sweating in the cold can be as deadly as wearing nothing at all.”

“I take your point.”

“Good.”

From a nearby doorway, Falk Firebeard cleared his throat just loud enough that Ulfric could not ignore him. The steward’s face was set in a perpetual look of long suffering...yet the Jarl fancied he could see a twinkle of merriment there as Ramad grumbled a slur against Nords, snow, and Skyrim in no particular order.

“I will see you again tomorrow, Ramad. Same time, same place. Bring a better sword.”

“Yaaah, say that to my face you snow-backed defiler of sabres! You had best draw on your prettiest facepaint! I’m bringing my scimitar tomorrow, cursed Darvak! You will fall to its might!”

Pretending to be terrified, Ulfric pressed his fist to his heart. “Trollsblood. I’m shaking.”

Ramad threw his drenched shirt at Ulfric’s head, but it fell to the ground. Falling far from its intended target who was already heading inside the palace, for Falk was already muttering in a fast-but legible stream of words about issues that required his attention.

He did not look back. He had a government to run.

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For Nemain, coming awake was pure instinct.

...As jarring as those dreams in which by flapping her arms she could fly, but always ended up in freefall: falling, falling until reality asserted itself with a crisp, cold snap.

Falling with a shriek until she woke up.

Where…

Pieces of memory slowly oozed back into place from where they had been jarred loose. The mountain. The wagoncart. The driver Sigaar, his horses, the avalanche and-

And buried in the instinct driven present was agony.
Nemain hadn’t expected it to be pleasant. She’d been happy...deliriously happy at first, merely to awaken in Skyrim and not in Sithis’ realm.

But gods, did it ever hurt. She became aware that her bones were resetting, slowly. Usually they snapped together like crackling twigs underfoot, but this was more of a...a bending. A slow, curling weft that felt torturously deliberate. Her lungs were full of blood that was being pushed up, salty cool and trickling out in ribbons through her mouth. Muscles twitched and convulsed as they repaired themselves, and it was all she could do to accept the pain and bear up beneath it. To take it, as her body healed. Slow and sure as the march of time itself.

She accepted the pain as her due for the price of cheating death yet again, with a fatalistic mental nod to the unlife that she had earned. Better to be undead in ructions than dead for good, of course...but that optimism stretched hair thin as her back arched, impossibly bent - making her blank out for another, unending eon lost to the ages.

It was all visceral. Nemain had been reduced to her most basic, animal hindbrain - whimpering, twitching...an overwhelming sense of the world rushing over her, sweeping her back into a bloody swirl of agony and fury; and it took time.

More time than was wise. Precious, immeasurable seconds for her conscious mind to fight its way to the front. To be able to begin to analyze her surroundings.

There was a lot to process. And it wasn’t good news.

She coughed out what felt like a waterfall of blood as her legs dangled. Kicking fitfully as she kept coughing and hacking. Her staff was gone, but her pockets and her robe seemed to be intact. And the necromancer’s amulet was secure on its chain, tangled around her neck.

She coughed again, and this time managed to drag in some air, breathing in deeply. Gratefully.

If she was breathing then she was alive, _damn the truth_, but what was that-

Reaching...simply reaching out her hand ground her guts against a pillar of what felt like razor blades. Surprising her with the intensity of this new pain, as she fought not to scream...to Shout, to destroy in retaliation.

The last thing she needed now was to bring down yet another avalanche upon their heads, and getting free would be her first step to being capable...ready to help the others. Whatever their situation.

Making her movements more measured, Nemain wriggled her shoulders experimentally; finding herself unencumbered by snow but still borne aloft.

Leaning forward, her hands scraped against bark. _Tree trunk. Evergreen. A broken branch?_ Feeling tentatively down its length, she discovered that the trunk (too thick to be a branch) had a jagged end buried deep in her gut. Effectively pinning her to the tree, her back facing the ground...or was it the sky?

Whichever way was up. She sighed and leaned her head forward, lethargy making her woozy.
Threatening to overtake her again.

It had been so sudden.

Farkas had been teasing, and she -she had been laughing. Genuinely laughing, when time itself seemed to pick up its pace... *why couldn’t he hear her?* She had thought perhaps the dragon was choosing to attack. She could have dealt with it easily enough. After Alduin, anything seemed possible.

But no. It had been the mountain itself that had attacked. The roar of Kynareth herself, unstoppable, inevitable...strong arms flinging her into a vast unknown that immediately became chaos, as the avalanche hit.

She had no idea how far beneath the surface Farkas had been buried. No idea whether or not he lived...there was only so long a man could hold his breath. Even a man so stalwart as her rube-witted husband.

Nemain swallowed back more blood and forced herself to focus. No- there was no time to grieve. Not when she did not know if Farkas...no. Not yet.

*First things first.*

Bracing her arms around her chest, Nemain Shouted, *FUS ROH DAH!* Flying through the air as the tree was torn away from her in one great sucking pop, until she landed near one of the living. Half buried in the snow.

The new hole in her innards crashed into her consciousness like a battering ram, and she almost cried out just from the shock of it. Everything sounded wrong through the waves of pain as the emptiness inside her began to knit together, *too loud,* and vertigo hit her senses just as hard. The snow beneath her was spinning wildly like a top, even though she was flat on her back on the ground and it was pain. All of it.

Nothing but the pain.

Nemain gulped in tearful breaths, heard the uneven, too-fast beat of her heart, and felt the last important, load-bearing bones seal together, as something gloppy and wet dripped its last drop from deep within.

Just banged up ribs and fingers and toes left now. The nonessential parts... *they’d heal up soon.*

*Right. To Farkas, then.*

Pushing herself up on all fours, she stretched a shaky hand out to the body -still alive, near to her in the snow; and nearly sobbed again in frustration when her fingers encountered broadcloth, and not
the smooth shell-like metal of armor.

This was Sigaar the wagon-driver. How fortunate he was, to have floated to the top instead of being smashed into bits by the crushing power of the snow.

Nemain had heard of avalanches in the Druadach: had seen them from far off, watching glaciers move, crackle and shifting their cumbersome weight, but she was far more accustomed to rock falls and injuries gained from stepping awry on the cliffs than snow shears.

Grimly, she crawled closer and began to inspect him. Keeping an ear out for any pained cry or call for help.

Touching Sigaar, Nemain leaned closer - she could hear the bubbling of a sucking chest wound. It almost whistled as he laboriously inhaled and exhaled, straining to gasp in air. Feeling for his head, she laid her palm across his forehead. Fevered, he was. Burning to the touch.

She removed her hand and sighed.

The man did not have long to live, and since she had no hollow needle to grant his lungs reprieve or a clean hide at hand to bind his chest, she could do little for him. Turning away, Nemain fist her fingers in the snow and moved her head from side to side. Searching.

*Where was Farkas?*

The first hunger pangs hit her then, and she doubled over.

It was like a giant had punched straight through her tender just-healed innards, and Nemain stumbled. Choking...something feral clawing its way out from inside her. That healing had drained any reserves she had stored from killing the occasional bandit and wolf, and her head pounded with the all-encompassing demands of her undead body.

*Food. Now. NOW.*

Before she could think more clearly about what she was doing, before she could even try to think, she was lunging at Sigaar.

“Sorry, fear thuaidh.” Her voice sounded badly garbled, but she hardly could control herself. “I’ll make it right fast for ye.” It would be a quicker death than what nature had intended, which was some small sop to her conscience.

She would make it so. She would be swift. Painless.

He wouldn’t suffer for long.
Clawing her hand down the man’s forehead, she found his lips and pressed hers against his...ignoring the fearful whimpers as something red and hungry passed between them. Violent and desirous and needy.

Something inside her crowed at that touch, rejoicing as with whip-crack intensity she yanked what remained of the Nord’s life force away from his mortal flesh and basked in it. Soaking in the glorious heat of energy, life...the healing rays of the sun itself as he died with a rattling sigh. All swallowed up eagerly, as she pressed every ounce of flesh she could expose against his, in search for more, more...a process that had nothing of pleasure to it and everything of desperation. Mine!

The red eased its grip on her. Just a bit. She kept her mouth fully fastened upon his, until she was sure she had regained control of herself. The wagon driver was no one: hardly more than a stranger, and it had been practical as well as merciful, but Farkas was no stranger to suck dry. He-

This be nae time t’ examine yer bloody mooncalf feelings! Find him!

Sitting up, Nemain stretched...feeling the last bits of her that had suffered from the avalanche heal with pops and snaps.

Crawling away from Sigaar’s cooling body, she flailed across the mountainside. Breaking through the crust at times to flounder, coughing at the cold grit that found its way into her mouth as she crawled over broken trees, rocks and what felt to be a stiffly dead deer on her way. Until she reached the dimming glow that had to be Farkas.

Buried alive.

He was still living -he still glowed- and so she would not panic.

Everything depended on her, now.

Nemain whispered ‘Yol’, then blew upon her fingers and used her heated hands to swiftly scoop away the hardening snow. Choosing to work where she estimated his head to be, she carved away the settling weight of the killing ice. Blowing super-heated air laced with Thu’um over the rest of his massive body, hearing ice hiss as it melted...until she nearly fell in on top of the man.

Her chin smacked into his pauldrons, and her scrabbling fingers encountered not snow, but a cavity. An upturned bowl containing nothing but air...something she noted with abrupt relief.

The Companion must have flung his arms out at the last second, for the avalanche had compacted around his gauntlets. Affording Farkas a fighting chance, though it seemed he was making small use of it.

The sound of his breathing was shallow. Erratic.

But it was there.

Feeling something tight within her ease at this realization, Nemain set to work. They were in the
middle of nowhere, somewhere outside the Pale Pass, and Nemain could think of no easily pinpointed landmarks aside from the pass itself to orient herself.

They might as well have been cast adrift at sea. Perhaps Farkas could tell her more, once he woke up?

If he woke up.

Hooking her finger inside his mouth to clear away the snow caused Farkas to gag, and she spent a full minute repeatedly slapping the Companion’s back like a bairn. Casting spells...Calm and Healing Hands twined with Courage, as she methodically took stock of the damage her foolhardy savior had endured.

Bad to worse. He was rapidly entering the second stage of hypothermia, and she kneaded her hands against the rock hard ice of his fingers, helplessly. Wishing she had more than a Thu’um and the lukewarm heat her body could afford to warm him.

A cabin, a pair of helping hands and one good roaring fire would have been better than a dragon’s hoard of gold, right then.

Aside from several cuts and superficial soft spots she thought might be bruising, Farkas’ right leg had been twisted fully round and she began to turn it right side up at once...her concern growing as Farkas did not awaken immediately from the pain as she set his leg to rights.

Whatever trauma his head had endured, keeping him comatose... that was the most worrisome. Nemain licked at her chapped lips and began ripping at the cloth of her robes for strips of fabric.

To bind his leg, for though she could do nothing if he did not awaken soon, this was something that would help. Expensive though the robe had been, it was merely cloth.


Nemain had to make sure his leg would not shift as she finished her healing. She could practically hear the edges of the bones grind together, and more than once she whispered a quick prayer to Hircine that the leg was cleanly broken. That it would heal well and fast, as the silver embroidery stung her hands. Fizzing where it touched his exposed skin.

She hurriedly rucked up the cloth until nothing touched him but linen.

There had to be some way to wake him up. If he could but sit up and use her as a crutch, half her worries would be solved. She could follow the distant (very, very distant) tremors of life at the uttermost end of her magical senses, to what was likely the town of Falkreath-

“Hallooo! You there...lady! Be ya needin’ any, uh...any help?"

“Aye!” She called back.

_Twas a child, by the sound of it._ Reachborn.
Thank the gods.

Or merely raised to be. Nemain wasn’t sure how much the boy could see of their predicament, but she prayed he would not be put off by the blood...or her bedraggled appearance.

She could use all the help she could get. “Och, yes child! I dearly need help!”

Sliding further along the snow, Nemain bit her lip as her leg caught against the rough bark of a branch. She could easily survive a night out in the open, but Farkas… “Can ye send for yer parents, lad? I’ll be needing some strong hands tae help me lift this one out of the snow and into a sled. I can pay ye well for lodgings, fire and food. What say you?”

“I’ll be right back!”

“Wait!” The Companion’s condition was stable for now, but night was falling fast. She needed to cement the bond - to ensure that this windfall fate had provided for her would, in fact, return.

Before it was too late.

“What be your name, boy?”

“Arhuid! An’ you?”

She could hear him scrabbling across the crust of the snow, at an angle from where she sat tending to Farkas.

“Nemain!” Her voice was cracking, but she managed to make her words understood. Calling out loud and clear. “Tell yer parents that...that one called Nemain bids them come! And will pay well fer assistance! Make haste!”

He did not reply, and she listened to him scurry over the snow for a long, long time...until the silence reclaimed all sound.

And she was left alone with Farkas.

She prayed the boy would be swift. That his parents knew something of healing, for though she had re-aligned his leg the best she could, doubtless there were injuries she had missed that required attention.

Forcing herself to think of nothing but the breath, as Bear and the Greybeards had taught her so long ago, Nemain stoked her inner fires until she felt nearly awash with heat.
Then, draping herself over the Companion, she covered every exposed inch of him and waited.

Waited for help to arrive.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:

Wow. Everyone thought Farkas was gonna bite the bullet. Syke!

Just to clarify the timeline, yes, it has been MONTHS since Ulfric and Nemain left Whiterun. It was early autumn and now it is the dead of winter. Some time has passed.

Soooo it makes perfect sense that Nemain's hair has grown to be a short fuzz upon her head (hair grows around half an inch a month, so she probably has just enough to be floofy and not bristle like some primal Imperator Furiosa).

Ditto for Bear.

Another point I want to bring up is that yes, people do survive avalanches. It is all about where you are when it happens as well as how much luck you have been blessed with.

Most modern skiers and snowboarders carry -or should carry -shovels, probes and beacons just in case. Someone who gets buried needs all the help they can find, because they probably aren't going to be able to dig themselves out by their lonesome.

If you ARE lucky (like our wagon driver) you'll float on the avalanche debris and be only half-buried by the snow. Hopefully head up. That does happen occasionally, but more likely you are gonna be rolled over by tons of snow, rocks and anything else the mountain washes down. Sucks to be you.

So. Who survives an avalanche? You can suffocate while buried beneath even a few inches of snow. It's a horrible way to die.

But statistics show that about 90% of avalanche victims can be recovered alive if they are dug out within the first 5 minutes. However, after 45 minutes, only 20-30% are still alive - and after two hours, almost no one survives.

Let's just see what happens next. And as always, read and review.
Farkas awakened somewhere warm.

Warm. Dark. Strange.

His skin prickled. Preparing at once to grow barbs of fur as his teeth grew points, a growl vibrating through his chest- but he held back the wolf and looked. For it was not so dark that he could not tell what was around him.

The first thing he noticed (aside from the searing throb of his right leg, shit, shouldn’t move it) was the hushed sound of many mouths breathing. Soft snores filled the cavernous, slab-sided structure...what he could see of the roof sloped upwards at a nearly vertical angle, and there were tiny hammocks swinging from the lowest joints where wall met floor. Rumbling, swaying with the occasional whimper or sleepy grumble.

Lifting his head with some effort, Farkas scanned the room. Sleeping furs lined every available space, crowding around the glowing embers of a banked firepit, and the Companion swallowed against the dryness of his mouth as he struggled to stay awake. To rouse himself from the heavy inertia that threatened to take hold, every bat of eyelash bringing him closer again to that mindless state.

But unlike the rest of him his nose was alert; busily cataloguing scents both fair and foul. He flared
his nostrils, taking in several slow, steady breaths...gradually relaxing as he detected no immediate threat.

No predators. No unbarred openings (the one door he could see was solidly bolted). Nothing to interest his wolf save for the presence of many, many children fast asleep...joined by the deeper respirations of adults that Farkas could hear, but not see.

Tensing his neck, he let his head fall back with a reassured wheeze as his nose itched. Thud. He lifted his hand. Frowned at the linen bandages padding his fingers, then scratched his face.

**Burnt rabbit. Curdled milk. Brains from a tanning bucket, woodsmoke, drying herbs, soiled bedding...**

Shor’s beard, he was *thirsty*, and his back ached from where his shirt was wadded into a ball and he had to piss like a drafthorse.

And he still didn’t know where he was.

Jiggling his injured leg only spiked the pain to greater heights, and Farkas bit back a tart oath and stopped trying to move. Or think, particularly about waterfalls, or cool mountain streams or lakes or-

He was somewhere indoors. He supposed he should be thankful for that.

Wind howled in from the outside, rattling the glass windows in their sills, and the werewolf appreciated the scent of snow as it forced its way in through the cracks. Swirling in the eddies of air like magic. Helping him stay awake.

The taste of it was bright against his tongue, and he licked his cracked lips...nearly falling off the bed when he finally caught sight of her.

*Nemain.*

His wife. The mighty Dragonborn, curled up like a squirrel in a nest of thick sleeping furs. She lay almost directly below him upon the floor, back to back with a gangly boy whose face was concealed by a mop of black matted curls.

Even amongst the dark huddled shapes scattered across the floor she stood out. Or maybe she stood out because of the wild disarray spiraling around her, as if she were their tumultuous center, their still core. The flash of the beveled skull amulet lying across the curve of her bodice caught his eye first - its dull winking light drawing his attention to the lush line of her waist, the heavy fall of her woolen shirt exposed from the furs...a pale swell of chest rising from what had to be a fully unlaced neckline.

Oblivious to his stare, Nemain took a shallow breath. And her breasts pressed against the dark material, spilling invitingly forward before she exhaled, lips parted.

Farkas wasn’t the sort who ogled women. He wasn’t the type to let his eye be drawn to bare skin and swaying hips. His face may have borne a striking similarity to his twin, to Vilkas, but their tastes ran in completely different veins when it came to the fairer sex. He *never* gawked, shit, she barely had enough meat on her bones to spark his interest, so *why* would he ever feel the need to? He wasn’t-
Shor’s aching ballsack.

Nemain twisted around in her bedding as if she could feel his eyes, though her blindness ensured that her gaze did not quite make it to his, thank the Divines. He wasn’t sure he could stand to be caught staring like a lackwit. And as she forced herself to sit upright, her ugly shirt falling practically to pieces in the process, Farkas felt his thoughts slide away from him like water from a sieve. Drawing him back into that weary numbness: a dark lake. A placid surface that hid monsters beneath the deep.

Monsters he did not care to bestir. Fingers flexing, he reminded himself that it was nowhere near a full moon. No reason to fret. He would have been able to feel it, if Masser or Secunda had waxed full and round...feel the lunar light tickle his senses; his wolf. Hiding in the shadows of his soul.

No. His inner monster did not hold sway over him, this night.

Not yet.

“Farkas. Ye woke up.”

She sounded drowsy and relaxed. At peace, as she shuffled beneath his bed. Grasping for something that made her mutter under her breath in her singsong tongue.

Farkas squinted, color dissolving into glass-gray as his pupils narrowed into vertical slits. He couldn’t even say what it was (beyond her breasts) that drew his attention. Captured and kept it, despite her constant rebuffs. Beyond her insistence that she needed no one and nothing despite all proof to the contrary.

It was the force of her personality, perhaps. Her natural charisma. Unlike any other woman he had known, the Dragonborn was wholly, unapologetically herself. A study in opposites...so small and fragile, yet fierce. Reactive and inscrutable.

Stubborn, yet unsure.

Being injured (even amongst children) was setting his teeth on edge, and he cleared his throat as he prepared to ask her the first of many questions. Pausing only when Nemain lifted a finger to her lips...a subtle reminder to keep their voices low.

“Where -” He watched as she fumbled with something.

He felt the heat of her against his arm, which made him suddenly, viscerally aware of their proximity as a small hand glided against his cheek. Bumping along his nose and the planes of his face, until her palm rested against his forehead.

“...What happened?”

“Ye’ve been insensible for two days, Farkas. Frankly, I was nae sure you’d e’er come out of it.”

Her breath blew into his face, smelling faintly of apples. “Thank Hircine’s bloody bawbags ye did. Else I wouldae been forced to take drastic measures in order to awaken ye.”

Two days.
This didn’t make any sense. He hated that nothing made sense.

Farkas forced himself to feel grateful again, for though he had lost days to...whatever this was, at least he had survived the attack that had landed him with an injured leg. He’d ask about his missing armor and sword later.

He coughed as his teeth impacted with the vile film coating his tongue. He hated that he still didn’t know where he was, that he was unable to remember anything beyond the dark dreamlike abyss that still beckoned to him like a lover.

But, hey. Now that he was somewhat awake he wouldn't have to suffer whatever the necromancer deemed to be ‘drastic measures.’

*Definitely a win-win.* “Happy to oblige. Where are we?”

“You doon remember?”

More movement, as Nemain’s hand brushed the hair from his eyes and drifted down. Measuring his pulse as it beat a rapidly increasing staccato. Farkas shifted, uncomfortable with how badly he yearned to lean into that touch. To accept her caress, for impartial as it seemed to be...still. She was touching him.

His wife was *willingly* touching him.

“We be at me cousin’s longhoose. That of Rhys an’ his bonny orcwife Baz and their brood. Our original destination in the end, hah, can ye imagine it? Though I must beg ye tae tell me how it was that ye met up with the rascal. I havenae seen him since we were youths together all the way back in Deepwood, north by west of Markarth. Cor...it be thanks tae this blizzard that we’ve had gobs o’ time tae catch up one with one another.”

*Rhys?*

Dimly, Farkas remembered bright brown eyes paired with a wily tongue. Laughter. The yeasty tang of alcohol. Playful snaps and snarls.

*Yes...* the wolf gave him memories in the form of scent and sound, *fierce-runt-hunter/not-yield.* Aspen, pine and rotmulch overlaid with blood. Then his man-self, the self that thought in abstract and made connections that the wolf could not, finally supplied a history to go with the name.

“...p’raps now you’ll be finishing the tale ye told aboot the minotaur and Vilkas. I’m ever sae sorry we couldnae manage t’find that comb, but perhaps come the spring thaw t’will have better luck...Farkas. Farkas, be ye listening tae me?”

“Uh.” Swallowing the gunk that had piled up inside his mouth took a few tries, but he forced it down; smacking his lips in disgust. His windpipe was drier than the dustlands of Vvardenfell.

“Yeah...the minotaur? I killed it.”

“Not exactly the dramatic finish I be hopin’ for, but...maybe ye can tell me the details later. Aye?”
“Mmhmm. Sure.”

He gathered his thoughts. Concentrate. “I met Rhys years ago. Bumped into him hunting deer in Falkreath woods. He’s a bastard, like all your kind from the west, but unlike most of ‘em? A smart bastard.”


“Yeah. Right.” Farkas blinked, focusing upon the scars that patchworked her neck -one thick rope weal and five thinner, sharper lines that curved in almost-straight rows. Decorating her throat like a necklace.

_Clawmarks._

In the embers they caught the light. Looking rather more like silver than skin. “Hey. Refresh my memory. We were riding in a wagoncart. We were gonna ask Rhys about your son. And then…”

_Damn it._ It was as if a battering ram had smashed through his skull. Scattering his thoughts like feathers to the wind. He couldn’t remember. He couldn’t remember!

As though she could sense his distress, Nemain squeezed his shoulder. “Och, dinnae fash yerself, Farkas. Rhys didnae impart anythin’ unflattering about ye. Save that ye can out drink just about anyone under the table.”

That didn’t surprise him. “It’s my biggest talent.”

“Scarcely the biggest, I should think.” After a little pause (in which he desperately wished to know what had got her thinking so hard) Nemain shook her head.

“Well. Ye wish tae know every bloody detail, an’ so ye shall. After hauling ye free of the avalanche wreckage, we made it back tae the house just in time tae avoid the storm. And Rhys wouldnae shut up concernin’ some malarkey ye both did together some ten years past. Summat aboot werewolf rites an’ hunting trips, though I think t’was more bosh than anything akin tae a speckle o’ truth. Hunting white stags fer Hircine indeed. Hmph! No one's laid eye on a white stag north o’ Bruma fer bodgin’ ages.”

“Aye, but enough o’ that. Here. Ye must be parched.”

A waterskin was lifted to his lips. Farkas drank eagerly, swallowing until there was nothing left. He made a face as his guts -and the rest of him- complained, lesser needs making themselves known as the most pressing pain had now been solved.

And again with that eerie foresight, Nemain anticipated him by placing an empty bowl in his hand. Helping with practiced motions as he floundered with the furs swaddling his hips, searching for the drawstring of his pants. For he was desperate now to avoid shaming himself any further... _gods_ his bladder was tighter than a drum! Nearly fit to burst.

Both relieved and dismayed to find that he had been dressed in a skirt of fur-pleated wool rather than trousers, Farkas sagged forward as the sound of his water sloshed into the hollow bowl. Noisily. Ruining the tranquility of the moment.

“Sexy.” Nemain whispered, deadpan.
He chuckled hoarsely as she took the bowl away. Stowing it somewhere out of sight. “Hey. I make this look good.”

“So I see. Tis a good sign, though, that ye felt the urge tae void. Means yer insides be working adequately. Saves me heaps o’ trouble in changing an’ airing out yer bedding, too. Specially in this weather.”

Farkas winced as he thought of just how many times he must have soiled himself in the past two days, lying on his back with a leg broken and brain scrambled. Dead to the world. “I owe ya one.”

“Hah. You owe me several, as I see it. You threw me straight intae a tree when last we were on speaking terms, Farkas. I was skewered like a prime salmon and it damn well hurt.”

Shit. Double shit. Yet as his eyes raked over her in concern, he could see nothing out of the ordinary. Could smell no seeping wounds nor any stink of infection.

He decided that apology was a wiser choice than dubious silence. “Sorry, Nemain.”

“Eh, think nought of it. Ye did save me from bein’ buried like you, so chalk it up tae a learnin’ experience. For us both.”

She leaned closer and smiled conspiratorially. “Next time a force of nature approaches with nae warning? Try to take better aim, or better yet -doon bother tae throw a lass at all. Ye’ve a terrible arm.”

Avalanche. Rhys. Broken leg? He tested his leg once again, and managed to bend it halfway. As long as he ignored the gnawing bone-deep soreness, he could move it.

He could walk.

Something inside him eased...he wouldn't be a cripple. So far, so good. “Probably good advice. Archery’s not my thing. Ugh...must’ve hit my head harder than I thought, ‘cause I don’t...I can’t recall much.”

Another hazy face floated across his mind. Tumbling along the aftermath, the violence that Farkas had believed up until now to be the trailing wake of a dream. Or a nightmare. “Sigaar. The wagon driver, his horses. Did they-”

Her voice suddenly cooled. “Nay, Farkas. He did no make it out alive.”

_Huh. Too bad._

More memories were resurfacing, and he remembered with a distant longing how he had mentally prepared himself for death. Prepared to walk the whalebone bridge after strolling the flower-kissed hills of Shor’s realm, reaching at last His hallowed golden halls.
There, he would have greeted Kodlak. Svalblod, Hralund, Jergen...his parents and so many more. Warriors long since dead and gone. Fallen to dust, and nothing more than a memory. A shield, hung in ceremony upon the upturned prow of Jorraskr’s decaying hull.

How he had dreamed of clasping arms with his twin; of sparring and laughing as they drank endlessly to the other’s valiant deeds! To have come so close! To have walked the cusp of the afterlife itself, and not reach Tsun, God of Trials? To be bereft of that reunion, together at last with the only family he had ever known, those of the Companion’s Hall, greeting his arrival amongst the others. Renowned - forever at home in Sovngarde?

It was almost a shame that he hadn’t suffocated. He would have liked to see Vilkas at least one final time.

Though he found in retrospect that he was not all that anxious to receive their judgement when it came to Nemain. What would Kodlak have lectured him about concerning his rough and tumble marriage?

*Brave hearts beat out lesser ones, boy. You’ve begun something rashly, hmph...yet another decision made under the influence of spirits. But it is done, and now? You must see it through.*

Heh, and the others. Alive or dead, they’d be sure to drub him up and down. Aela would probably fix him with her gimlet glare, trademarked since childhood. He could practically feel her green eyes searing into his skull.

*That ugly Forsworn dwarf? The one Balgruuf chased out of Dragonsreach? Pffft. Tell me you’re joking.*

And Vilkas? *Tell me you're fucking joking.*

Even imagining that sardonic voice in his mind hurt.

Farkas closed his eyes. Cracking them open only after Nemain’s fingers crawled down the cloth of his shirt to rest upon his belly. Stopping, she cocked her head. Seeming to listen for something that had no sound.

He held his breath as the silent mystery of magic flared around her, creating a halo around her hands.

Satisfied that the part of him she touched was in good health, the fingers then continued on their creeping way; continuing to stop at odd intervals as he slowly began to tense up from the strain of pretending disinterest.

The way she toyed with the sloping vee of his hips with her thumbs did things to his blood pressure, so he decided to ask her another question. “And your boy? Your foster son. Aventus. Is he here?”

Immediately Nemain’s expression lit up with such perfect joy that the shame he felt from being
helpless was subsumed by fascination. “Yes!” She whispered, exultant. “Right there, he lies. The tall lad. Aye...the one with th’ black hair.”

She looked so damn beautiful when she smiled.

He didn’t bother to look over at the boy, content as he was to continue staring. *Whatever I’ve done to earn this*, he thought, watching as tiny silver flakes drifted down from the windows to melt in Nemain’s hair, *whatever god deemed it necessary to bring me here, to this place and time and not to Sovngarde, I’m grateful. I am so sodding grateful.*

“Turns out he was snatched from the skratty mess at Orphan’s Rock an’ kept safe right here by me cousin and Baz. We’ve been sae verrah blessed, Farkas, an’ after such a run of bad luck! Not a scratch nor a scrape upon the lad, fer all his exposure tae danger. And now, tae have us be brought by the avalanche right to his doorstep, Goddess, the fates do be kind. Tis nought short of a bloody miracle!”

“That’s wonderful,” Farkas said. Genuinely meaning it. “Good. I’m glad you found him.”

“Aye. I owe Baz and Rhys a debt I may ne’er be able tae repay.”

“Mnhmm. Sounds like they’re both good people.”

Farkas shifted, wondering if it was too early to try to stand up. He wanted at least to try. Her fingers stalled his efforts; tickling the base of his knee as they circled around the fine hairs of his thigh. Making him nearly groan with frustration.

She was driving him crazy.

Though perhaps not on purpose. “Can’t say I’m a fan of his clothes, though.” He whispered. “Really, midget? A skirt?”

At his words Nemain made a sound that might have been either a laugh or a snort. “Tis a kilt, not a skirt ye ormadorm. There be a massive difference. Huh. An’ you try changing a man what has pissed and shit himself in trews, and ye shall see why I’ve dressed ye so. Kilts be invariably easier tae clean. Wrap off, rinse, wrap on.”

He hated that she had been forced to care for him in such a way. *You take care of everyone, little woman. Who takes care of you?* “Nemain, I—”

“Shhhh.”

For a child had rolled over. Stirring in near wakefulness, as they both froze in place.

Waiting for something. Anything to happen.

When the child did not move for the space of ten breaths, she moved to sit upon the edge of his bed. He could feel the quiet thrum of attraction, his anxiety, echoing back at him as her hands lifted to lace up her shirt...small, quick movements that held him fast. For the darkness made all of this, all their whispering far more intimate than it should be (Shor’s sake, he had just pissed into a bowl she had
held for him) and these slice-thin glimpses he stole of her, all wraith pale in the fireglow?

It should not have been arousing. For he was in pain and at the mercy of another werewolf in strange territory.

It shouldn’t matter - not when she didn’t want him.

_Or did she?_

He took a cautious sniff. Too many scents around to know for sure. *Bum leg. Rank breath. Nopenopenope.*

*Blest not to try anything.*

“Besides,” she whispered as she laid down next to him, making him give way as he willingly scooted over. “I always kenned that I’d be the one tae wear the pants in a relationship.”

Her lazy amusement sent ripples of something hot down his skin. Something electric. Nearly causing his arm hairs to stand on end, as her bird-thin frame butted up against his vastly more solid one.

“Ha, hah. Very funny. Hope changing my shit was damn miserable then, boss lady.”

“Och, I had help, Stout.” Her voice turned positively mischievous. “The older lasses in particular wanted tae ask if yer todger was...mmm, typical in size for yer kind. For the fear thuaidh.”

He craned his neck to look directly down at her. Kyne’s teats, she was *smiling*.

“Todger?”

“Yer manly spear. The milky warhorn. Love crumpet? No? Purple heided pizzle-”

“...Alright, I got it, yeah. Enough.”

His mouth eventually got the better of his slow, plodding brain as she continued to chortle. “So, um. What didja say?”

Nemain’s arm snaked around him and she squeezed his waist. Hard. “Told them t’was none o’ their barking business since they be too damn young fer sich things. And when they pressed me fer more, I informed the wee scullynuggins that it bain’t the size o’ the ship, but rather the motion of th’ waves what be important in such tarmadiddle.”

A burst of laughter shot out of him before he could reign it in. “Ho! Bet they liked that.”

“Hmph. At that age they like nothing. Least o’ which nagging reprimands from long lost aunties.”

She sighed indulgently. “But aside from their, heh, overweening curiosity, they be a bunch of darlings. Truly. Quite loveable scamps. I shall be sorry tae leave them, when we do be forced tae go.”
Sleep was weighing down his eyelids like stones, but he managed to ease her against him more comfortably. So that her head would not make his arm ache, if she should happen to choose to stay. He half-hoped she would...it felt surprisingly nice to cuddle her.

She was so petite. Like a doll that walked and talked.

The errant thought of playing with her brought back some of his previous discomfort below the belt, and so he grasped upon yet another talking point. Praying she did not notice the heightening interest of his pizzle, or crumpet, or whatever fool name women used in common speech to discuss a man’s cock.

The damn fool body part seemed to have a mind of its own, and he shifted his legs as everything down south throbbed. Todger? “Hmm. Betcha had fun with all these rug rompers while I was out.”

“Fun?” She whispered incredulously. Her breath tickled his ear. Making him wriggle. “Farkas. Have ye e’er been trapped inside of a wee cabin with a gaggle o’ bairns in the middle of a blizzard?”

“Uh. No?”

“Hah! Well. I cannae wait for ye tae take on yer share o’ the childrearing duties come the morn. It should be verrah...instructional.”

She could be so pessimistic sometimes. “Hey. I like children. That seems kinda harsh.”

The smile she graced him with was affectionate, if not a bit grim. “Huh. We shall see aboot that. I think ye’ll be eating those words, fear thuaidh.”

“Hardly a proper meal. Anything else to eat?”

“Mmm, healing do be requirin’ vittles. Ye can eat tomorrow. Or later today, I think: tis hard tae tell the position o’ the moon when one cannae watch the sky. So...get some rest. While ye still can.”

Like that didn't sound foreboding.

Farkas startled; forcing himself to not react as he felt soft lips press against him. Gentle against the unshaved roughness of his cheek. Half of him rejoiced. Yes! Shit, it had only taken an avalanche to get her this far, but he’d take it...take anything that this hero of men chose to dish out. He was blushing so hard it was a wonder his beard did not catch fire.

But the other, smarter half (the part that thrived on scent and instinct) was more wary. She had been fighting to stay aloof and away from him ever since Riften, and nothing had significantly changed aside from the obvious.

So it begged the question. Why?

Heedless of his mental struggle her mouth lingered, and he ignored thinking in favor of savoring this delicate touch as he hardly dared move. Allowing him to breathe her in; to taste on his tongue the unique scent that every person carried. Her scent -a scent that he now knew. Intimately.
She smelt of juniper. Apples and ale from her meal, and smoke of fire. Further beneath that, there was musk. The perfume of her salt laden sweat...an aroma that perhaps only a wolf could enjoy, but still, he did. He could smell her, so close: the woman. Cloaked in the dragon’s incense-ash scent. Hiding.

Revealed to only him.

He fought a wild urge to reach behind her and tug apart the ties holding her top together. He wanted to feel her softness, the gentle give of flesh and not the scratchy cage of her shirt. He wanted to let the swell of her breasts tumble free...wanted to drag his hands along the flare of her hips, wanted to brand her. To bite her; to bruise her neck and mark her with his scent, until her smell became his and there was no end nor any beginning to it because everywhere was filled with them, and-

*Shit, get ahold of yourself.*

Farkas swallowed. Prickingly aware of Nemain, as her lips skated further down along the angle of his chin. He watched her as a skeever would mind the idyllic glide of a hawk, agonizingly aware.

If he wanted to hold her close and drift off to sleep without embarrassing himself, he needed to stop thinking along those lines. He needed to stop thinking at all - about any of this. Right sodding now.

Praying she wouldn’t choose to rest her arm against his tented skirt-kilt-thing, Farkas folded one of her hands in his and tugged her body higher, unable to hold back a yawn. Cradling her more securely, tightly in his arms. He half expected for her to complain, or get tangled up in the furs as she pushed him away; but no -she moved with him as if she could read his thoughts (*Kyne and Shor*, he hoped not, though he would not put it beyond her).

Falling as naturally into his embrace as if they had been doing this for years.

She made it feel so easy. She made all of this feel easy. Effortless. Inevitable. As if he had been shaped for her without even realizing it, and Talos preserve him, he really needed to stop letting his thoughts run wild like this.

He knew she did not feel the same way.

But...he could not stifle the little thrill that moved through him as his wife touched him again, all of her own volition. Her thumb traced spirals in the wiry length of his beard, and he let her. Let all his worries about what it all meant, and what she would want from him wait until the sun came up.

For the morning would banish this dream state, he knew -like mist that melted with the heat until it became invisible. Dissolving into thin air. And Farkas wanted to keep pretending that all was well, that what had grown between them would prove to be solid and whole and good. He wanted this. Wanted to hope.

-And then he found himself yawning yet again, as the cries of the wind retreated into the background. The logs still burning in the firepit popped and snapped, crumbling into ashes as the children continued to snore. Sighing; some mumbling in drowsy slurs as his ears pricked up at the novelty, then stilled. And he was further lulled by the rhythmic slow crawl of Nemain’s hands. Traveling up and down his chest, as his head gradually... *oh-so-slowly* ...listed to the side.
He made a noise of complaint as the pressure on his chest increased. For she had crawled up from his hold to rest somewhere new, all snug and coddled in the crook between neck and shoulder.

Farkas wanted to say something smooth, as her nose brushed the lobe of his ear. Wanted to be like her Ulfric: better, even... and toss off some clever compliment about her smile, her tits, damn, maybe even her healing ability. Could he could come up with something that would qualify as eloquent right there on the spot? He wanted to say something.

But all he could manage was a gruffly stale ungh.

_Suave. Real suave, dipshit._

“-Sleep, now...shhh. Sleep.” She laughed breathlessly as he slipped back into slumber. “Close yer eyes, _a sheòid_. Take now your worthy rest. I’ll watch over ye as ye do.”

Her whispers chased him into the dreaming...making his mouth spread wide with an uncurled, artless smile as her lips brushed the curve of his ear. And the darkness waiting? It was no longer something he feared.

It was colorful - not black, but vibrant. Filled with all the smells of home.

“Ye woke up, Farkas...I be ever sae glad that ye did.”

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Late that next afternoon, a giant stood watch as he guarded his mammoths from certain extinction.

“Raargh! Nobody eats my mammoths but me!” Roared Farkas, as he brandished the ladle that served as a club. “Choke on this, bandit scum! Yaaagh! To me, mammoths! To meee!”

Shrieks and giggles erupted as a horde of children scampered around his legs. They were well covered by makeshift hides as they dragged their rope-twist trunks along, trumpeting furiously. Some used their pointer fingers as tusks, tickling anyone they could reach...steering clear of the bandits who lay in wait. Ready; watching.

Waiting to pounce.

The bandits -Aventus and his cronies- waved blunted sticks, their ‘spears’. Hooting and banging their chests with the hafts as Farkas guarded his charges...boldly growling to keep from laughter, as a few of the mammoths were upturned in all the excitement and waved their legs and arms in the air.
Pleading for rescue, for mommy, and also for dinner.

 Mostly in that order.

 “Hah! Dinner? You are dinner!” Aventus crowed as the deposed mammoths wailed. The other boys danced around and stabbed their sticks into the air, ignoring the rustling of cloth and whispers coming from the far side of the longhouse. Farkas chanced a look over to the corner, but the elf girl popped her head out and mouthed, ‘no.’ Gesturing for him to keep playing.

 **Women! How long could it possibly take her to get ready?** Farkas wasn’t sure he could distract them much longer.

 Gaining momentum with every mammoth that cried for its mommy, Aventus dropped his spear and pounded his chest. Surrounded by strutting youths... *barely three pubes between ‘em all*, Farkas thought, as he watched as the grandstanding continued. “Nothing can stop us now! Hahooo! We’re gonna chow down on mammoth steaks tonight!”

 The bandits yelled their agreement. Flexing and puffing out their chests. “Aye! We’re gonna catch ya and then we’re gonna catcha, mammoths! Prepare to be murdered, drawn an’ quartered you furry roasts on legs! Hahah hah ha! Go ahead, try and fight back!”

 “Eek!” A tiny Dunmer girl attached herself to Farkas’ leg and blinked her huge, ruby eyes up at him. Fluttering her eyelashes for all she was worth. “Save me, great giant! I don’t wanna be etted. Eeek!”

 He’d endured enough love ballads to know just what the right answer should be. “Never fear, fair maid. I’ll save you!” Giving the bandits plenty of time to duck, Farkas swung the ladle around him in an exaggeratedly slow arc. Causing a gust of air to ruffle the hair on the would-be killer’s heads.

 His new legwarmer swooned appreciatively as he gave it another go. Missing them entirely -on purpose, of course. “Ooh! Yer sooo strong!”

 One of the mammoths gagged. “Gaak! Tha’s what Mamma Baz says when she want summat from Papa! ‘Ooo, yu so strooong!’”

 Several of the other mammoths and bandits found this hilarious and joined in with the retching, making nearly flatulent noises as the girls tutted in disapproval.

 He nearly snorted himself until the boys made their attack. An enthusiastic (somewhat collaborative) hail of blows rained down upon him; his just reward for all that rueful caution. “Oooh! Augh! Furr, ack! Hey! Not the face, you little bastards, gaahah-”

 His good knee slammed to the floor as he struggled to shield himself from the beating that the heftier bandits were doling out.

 Focused on survival, Farkas managed to detach the orc baby that had climbed up the ridge of his back. Somehow the tiny skeevershit had got up there without him noticing, and the babe was gainfully employed bruising his scalp...tugging at his hair with those fat little hands.
“Talos, that tyke’s got a firm grip. “Ugh, off. Off! Stay outta the way, Gar. Your Mama’ll be back soon.”

The boy sucked greedily on his fist, where frizzled strands of brown peeked out from his fingers. He continued to babble nonsensically, strings of drool dripping down to the dirty floor.

Farkas gingerly patted Gar’s head, almost getting the wind knocked out of him as a mammoth headbutted him in the gut. “Aye, there’s a good boy,” he crooned as the boy gave him a gummy, twin tusksed smile.

“Stay right there. Stay...yep. Good!”

Hoping that the other younglings were similarly out of range, Farkas flinched as half a dozen sticks suddenly pummeled into him. Forcing him to take evasive action, as he waded through a sea of torn rope pieces, crying children and bits of sticky snack food. Raising his arms up he warded off the bandits with gentle nudges, as he strove to create an awkward, albeit last-ditch defense. He was unwilling to risk playing too hard for fear he’d injure the smallest of the rabble rousers.

Of course, there were consequences for that. “Hey! Ack, that was my toe... aww, shit. No -keep your stick away from the babies, Arhuid. Watch where you strike. Ha... you ! Yes you! I saw that! Knock it off!”

"Time to die, hero! Yahahah hah ha!"

"Whatcha gonna do? Huh, giant? Whatcha gonna do ?"

"Tell you what. You start running...so I can stab you in the back!"

Cabin fever and pent-up aggression were a potent mix. But they were no match for a Companion!

Farkas coiled his arms and pushed them all away with ease. Grinning evilly as a few of the boys fell over...slamming their arses and elbows against the hardness of the floor with stifled cursing and bitchy moans.

Victory.

He then tested the balance of his right leg, satisfied that it held his weight even as it sent a zap of complaint up the leg all the way to his spine. Farkas only blanched the tiniest bit. Hardly a yelp, when the Dunmer girl squealed and reattached herself to his hurt shin. Mangling the bandages as she climbed him like a tree. “Yaaay! My hero!”

Still hurts. But not too bad. He was hobbling, all right, but walking was a damn sight better than lying abed all day long.

Farkas had lasted up to mid morning at rest like the healer ordered...until the cheeping, insistent questions of Rhys’s brood had led to him talking. Trying to give demonstrations of sword forms, defense postures and more; all on his back, until their squawks grew absolutely insistent. Rousing Farkas to find something useful that all of them could do. Something that would while away the hours stuck indoors, something fun.
That thought had devolved into the crazy mess of all...this.

*And damn if it wasn’t hilarious as fuck.*

Out of the corner of his eye Farkas spied the older girls waving their arms madly. They were ready! He waved the ladle in a grand salute and nodded back, picking up the rugrats who had become distracted. Moving them safely to the side, as the remaining mammoths whipped their rope-trunks. Creating brown blurry moons, as the bandits stomped their feet and waited impatiently.

Excited for the grand finale.

“Why, what’s this?” He yelled, repeating himself as the babe Gar let out a high pitched yip of joy, smacking his newfound stick against anything he could reach. “Hey...what’s THIS?! Why, it’s a dragon! Come to feast on cowards, liars and thieves! Huzzah! My herd is safe!”

In a swirl of tatty, mended cloaks (and a headband strung none-too-evenly with a pair of twisted goat horns) Nemain jumped out from behind the changing screen. Brandishing her hands like hooked claws, she leered at the mammoths and giant alike as all the bandits began to snicker at her costume.

“Bow before me, insolent *joore*, or be eaten! **Raan Mir Tah**! Flee, flee for your lives!”

The half-elf boy poked at her horns with his stick, tipping them over until they were askew. “Some dragon. Betcha I weigh ‘arf as much as yew do, h’auntie.”

“Stow that cheek, bandit! I be nightmares! I be hunger! Danger! Deathhhh!”

“Show ‘em how scary you can be, **Alduin**!” Aventus shouted, rolling his eyes at the mocking chuffs of the other bandits. “Show them the real thing...make ‘em see that *you’re* the one they should fear!”

Nemain did not skip a beat. Merely quirking an eyebrow as she accepted the change of identity with graceful aplomb. “Aye! I be the one an’ only World Eater, puny mortals!”

She fluffed her cape dramatically. “The snarfer o’ souls! Blarfer of blandishment! I’d talk ye bored as soon as eatcha...a fate that any sensible man kens ta be worse than death, ye ragtag curmudgeons! *Graaaaawww! Hrrrrnngh!*”

Farkas grinned as Nemain tripped upon her own ‘wings’. Advancing with bowlegged steps towards the bandits, she continued to laugh scornfully as her feet swept the floor ahead of her. Testing the battleground for objects that might cause her to topple; every careful step a waddling stride. “Flee! Run from me cursed monologues afore I jabber ye silly with me bloody bodgering Shouts! *Yarharhah hah ha!*”

Lifting her hands towards the vaulted ceiling Nemain cast forth fire: long ribbons of flame that blasted from her hands and open mouth as she arched back. Releasing an earsplitting, unearthly howl, as Farkas hurriedly clomped over... putting out the fire that taken hold of the ceiling rafters with a few flicks of a discarded hide.
Aventus rushed over to help him, and Nemain gave them both a sorrowful blink before launching right back into her tirade. “YOOOLL! I am fire! I am death!” Smoke poured from her teeth. “Now...ruuun! Run, ye savory wee sausages, afore I sharpen me teeth an’ claws on ya and feed ye tae the souls aslithering t’gether inside me gullet! Rooaaauuuuureeeggghhh!”

That did it. They all ran. Fleeing in every direction - only a couple of intrepid bandits (and mammoths) daring to take on the dragon as she stamped and made further threats to bits of their anatomy.

Nemain/Alduin snarled furiously as she was cornered by the violent mob; yowling and screeching as they brought her low by the furious drubbing of their bandit spears. Down to the ground, where (after flopping her cloth wings) she pretended to die. Convulsing and gargling; crying out ‘no’, and ‘doon touch me horns, yew ingrates’ as the children lost track of which game they were playing and set about to tickle her.

“Aaaugh! Torturers! Pillagers! Wee daedra! Heeelp!” She writhed on the floor as Farkas finally gave in to the inevitable and laughed, long and loud.

Struggling to get away as one particularly devious toddler began slobbering into her ear, Nemain turned her face in his direction and began to whine. “...Oh gods that be a foul smellin’ breechclout. I dinnae want tae crush any of you lot, but I will make me bid fer freedom, so help me Dibe. Farkas! Heeeelp!”

“What can I do? I’m just a giant with a ladle.”

The Dunmer girl tugged on his kilt. “I fink you’re nodda giant nomore. Yerra wolf for real. Like Papa. Aye?”

He chuckled, sweeping her up into his arms so that she would not be trampled. It was nice to meet a little one so unafraid. Likely her father’s doing. “Aye. I’m a werewolf.”

“Well, then! Leggo anna move it!” She made shooing motions, as Aventus ripped off Nemain’s socks and began to tickle her feet. Holding tight with a maniacal cackle as her yelping increased significantly in volume. “Gaun an’ save her from bein’ tickled, hero! Go! Tickle ‘em back!”

Farkas shrugged and went on all fours, grimacing as the little girl clambered up onto his shoulders. “Giddyap, wolfie!” She tugged at his ponytail, ripping half the hair out of its binding in her eagerness, her heels kicking against his ribs. “I wanna ride! Go eat alla the mammoth ticklers up, yum yum yum! I’m a wolfie too! Awooooooh!”

“What was it about women and babies wanting to pull his hair... Sliding against something gooey that he really hoped was food, Farkas did his rider’s bidding.

Howling right along with her. “Awooooh! Let’s get ‘em! Tickle ‘em dead! Hoowooooh!”

Reaching out with one arm, he snagged away child after child from Nemain as each got a taste of their own medicine, all of them shrieking hysterically as he blew into each soft belly in turn. His fingers unerringly found all the nooks and crannies inside of little armpits and smocks, under the backs of knees, between tiny toes and pudgy necks.
All this crazy was making the muscles of his face sore. Not just sore; they positively ached from the nonstop laughing and smiling. Gods. He hadn’t smiled so much in months.

This was good. Unusual, but good...and he hadn’t even had an ale or a mead yet that day to stoke it, this sunshine. A warm happy burn he could feel blazing from somewhere, deep inside. “Pfffbghft! Hahah! Gotcha! Got you...and you, and -come back here, you!”

With a wild bray of victory, the Dunmer girl screeched “Heyyy ya did it! He did it -ope, no, hey don’t push, aaargh-!”

The weight on his back suddenly multiplied. He was not prepared for it, and so his injured leg buckled and gave way...causing him to land right on top of Nemain. Accidentally crushing her as she crawled backwards in a fruitless attempt to avoid him.

There were too many of them. It was done.

He released a long suffering groan as the Dragonborn giggled, trapped beneath his chest as he worked his hands beneath his shoulders. Trying to lever himself up, as he slipped once more and sagged back down, ending with a noise of defeated fatigue. He was finished, tired of putting up a fight. The brats had officially won.

A small mewl of irritation eked its way out from under him. He shook his head, trying to dislodge whoever was busily sticking fingers in his ears. “Gah. Get those fingers out, whoever stinks like eidar cheese. Out!”

“Farkashh. Geroffamee.”

“I can’t. The mammoths are stampeding, and they’re way too heavy. I’m stuck.”

“You be too heavy. Dinnae blame the bairns fer all that breakfast ye scoffed.”

Someone he could not identify cried out indignantly. “Hey! Movva yer arse! We’re light as thistledown. Papa says so!”

The chorus of agreement chirped from behind him. No, they were not heavy, and why wasn’t the giant standing away from the dead dragon? “Better move it, mister! She’ll eat ya up!”

“Aaaugh! Kill the dragon! Kill it dead!”

“Uhrgh, when’s dinner? I’m sooo hungry.”

“Where’s Mama Baz? Mamaaaa-”

He slouched over, pretending to be overcome. Moaning piteously. “Ughh. Not true. Can’t. Move. Too many...lard...asses. On top.”

“Uhhrrk! Farkas! I cannnae breathe!”

“He’s gots such big muskles. Why don’t he move off?”
In Farkas’s peripheral vision, Aventus shook his head and smiled. “You all ate too much for breakfast. Now, we’ll never get back our dragon and giant for playtime.”

“Nooo! Waaugh!”

“My wolf doggie’ll fix it!” Screeched the Dunmer girl as the others protested his appraisal of their combined mass. Some tittered as Nemain’s hand flapped free, striking out at anything she could reach. “He’s gorra kiss her an’ make up fur et! Mama Baz always kisses Pa if’n she squishes him!

That idea seemed to be popular. Some of the children rolled off, wanting to watch the action. High voices began chanting ‘...kiss’er! Kiss her! Kiss her!’

Finally. With the weight brought down to a more manageable burden, Farkas lifted himself up a few, hard won inches. Still half caught, the Dragonborn tried to wiggle free...stopping as he placed his hands on either side of her head. Preventing her from making her escape.

He had to accommodate the mob, after all. Death by mammoth was a sorry way to go.

“An’ how do doggies kiss, hmm?” Up this close, he could count every individual eyelash as she spoke, her chest heaving shallowly. “When they be blackmailed intae doin so by wee daedra what won’t quit?”

“Blackmail’s got nothin’ to do with this, Tiny.”

And he couldn’t look away.

She was beautifully flushed. Her lips were parted, quivering with merriment, and her eyes - they had once been as grey as his, before. Hadn’t they? Somehow he remembered them to be a darker, more clouded silver than the eyes that stared back at him from his reflection.

He’d never thought he could be struck dumb by the warmth in a blind woman’s eyes. By their fire. The fiercely intelligent weight of them.

He could practically feel their touch as she studied him sightlessly, half lidded and shrewd; a dragging pull sparking through his loins as she made a tentative strike at freedom. Her body stroked against his, once. Twice; causing the breath to whoosh out from his lungs.

It was too much, too close. All too soon. But she was growing impatient. “...Well?”

He considered, then bent his head down and gave Nemain’s cheek a long, wet lick.

“Ugh! Ack! Ewww!”

The children, who had been waiting expectantly, all broke out into peals of laughter as he continued to lick her face all over with quick, playful strokes.
They gleefully took up her cry as she struggled to free her hands from where he held her hostage, her wrists caught up as he held them high over her head. Fighting. Always fighting, as she turned her head as far away as it would go, yet still she was unable to fend off the evidence of his tender loving care.

“Doggie slobber! Ew ew ew! Eat the doggie, Dragon! Eat him!”

Dropping his mouth down to the exposed line of her scar-traced throat, Farkas let his teeth score gently down her neck as she quieted. He felt her suck in a quick breath as he tenderly bit down on her lower lip. Worrying it in his teeth...a feral kiss.

“Aw, sick! Don’t look, Damien! He’s eating her face!”

Within seconds, she was pressing up closer, gripping at him as if he were a lifeline...as if she wanted nothing more than to meld their bodies together. He could sympathize. But gods, this was not the right place for such things. Not for any of it, because he wanted more.

He wanted to drag his hands over her skin. He wanted to cup the mounds of her breasts and flick his thumbs across the delicate flesh of her nipples; wanted to peel off the skin tight leggings she wore and discover her slick, hot and ready for him. He wanted to fall on his knees and spread her wide, wanted to follow her down that rush of ecstasy and stroke his tongue deep into her core.

He wanted to savage her like a beast, and only the thinnest trace of his fraying control kept him from doing it.

“-Want me tae eat you?” Nemain gasped, his grip going too tight when she teased the very tip of her tongue up the column of his throat. Making him shudder, as she kept going and the children continued crawling all over them...making him whimper as she flicked the lower edge of his mouth.

“Sure. It’s your turn anyway.” Didn’t she understand how close he was to snapping? He felt like a wild thing, half mad and aching. The Divines take him, it had been too long since he’d given in to his baser instincts, and he bracketed her head with his arms, covering them from prying eyes. Willing the moment to last.

Wanting everyone else to simply disappear.

“Farkas, I—”

Krkcchh-bang. “Hello, hello! We’re home!”

The longhouse door opened, and Baz and Rhys stomped their way inside. Shaking off a dusting of snow: all bright eyed, bushy tailed and absolutely reeking of sex.

He sighed. Sometimes life just wasn’t fair.

Rhys fixed him with a severe look, though his voice was jovial. Warm, even, as he perfunctorily
scanned the longhouse, taking in the mess and the children screaming and jumping around them, all tangled up upon the ground.

Farkas rather thought he was counting their heads, checking to see that they were all alive. He almost felt insulted. “We be back, ye liddle tyrants. Were you good fer Auntie Nemain an’ her pet?”

Farkas felt her push against him, gently but insistently, and he obeyed; rolling over onto his back. Sitting up with a huff, Nemain raked a hand through her hair and shot a perky smile in the direction of the couple. “Aye. They were grand, Rhys. As usual. No complaints here.”

“Good.” Baz brushed stray hairs back, securing them into her topknot as she waded through the mess. Steadily closing in on her whispering brood, who were now shedding their sticks, ropes and skins. “Whew...looks like a windstorm kicked through here. Damien, Felan - you too, Arhuid and Aventus. Start cleaning up! Get those bowls and utensils on the table. Get the younglings to help you. Come come! Almost time for dinner.”

In a low symphony of groans and ‘yes, Ma’s, the children did as she asked.

“Ugh. What a mess. Did you miss me, love?” Picking up Gar, the orcwife crooned into his cheeks. Kissing the babe as Rhys folded his arms and pointedly nodded at Nemain, which cued Farkas to move even further away from the woman who was breathlessly chuckling. Tangled hopelessly up in her cloak.

Baz suddenly made a noise of disgust and held the babe an arms length away. “Oh Malacath preserve us, look at your smock!”

There was a greenish stain slowly spreading from the direction of the child’s rear, soaking through the linen of his garb as he gargled and reached out...the sagging breechclout hanging on for dear life, as the seams oozed and stunk.

“Yeah.” Farkas scratched his head. “Uh. We went through all the honey nut clusters and taffy, keeping ‘em in check. Probably didn’t do his digestion any favors. Sorry.”

“Gotta say I’m more troubled by this clout, but as for the treats? Don’t be sorry, friend.”

Gracing him with a surprisingly lovely smile (despite the tusks), Baz hefted Gar into Rhys’ hands and walked over to check the pots and pans that had been left to simmer, steaming with delectable smells as fatty drippings hissed into the coals. “It was wonderful to have some time alone together. It happens so seldom...I had almost forgotten what it felt like, having Rhys all to myself.”

“An’ there be plenty more where that came from, darlin’. Long as our oh-so capable nanny here doesnae mind helpin’ oot while he convalesces, eh Farkas?”

“Aye.” Standing up, Nemain dusted off her pants with an exaggerated pout. “Not that ye take much advantage of the opportunity, coz. Since yer ‘alone time’ only lasts like, cor - what, Rhys? A minute? Mayhap two? I feel horrible sorry for yer lass if that be the best ye can do...”

Baz laughed, unoffended, and Rhys merely rolled his eyes. Busy as he was changing his son’s clothing. “Ha hah, yew brat. Think yer sae clever. Wasn’t it nae twenty years back thatcha composed a love ballad fer….huh, he-who-will no-be-named, an’ sang it...only tae be booed outae th’ circle clear intae the woods? Hmmm?”
“They didnae boo!” Nemain made shooing motions. “...And I’ve gotten a damn sight better at the lute, I’ll have ye know!”

“Little ears, you two.” sighed Baz, as Gar punched his fat fists in the air. The Dunmer toddler looped around Farkas’ ankles, dreamily whispering “damn, damn, damn!”

“Hush.” He told her. She quieted instantly.

“Pfft! I’ll believe tha’ when I hears it, Nemain.”

Bundling the filthy clout into a ball, Rhys opened the door and deposited it inside a barrel. Slamming the lid with satisfaction as he wedged the door back into place. “Whew. Glad I’m no on laundry duty this week.”

The elf maid Felan made a sour face at the were behind his back. *One guess as to who has that fun job.*

Farkas cleared his throat. He would *not* laugh. He would not. “You’re lucky, though...got some decent land round here, near the Pale Pass. Plenty of fresh water. Lots of game. Seem able to feed all these mouths just fine.”


Farkas scratched his head, intentionally keeping his eyes cast down. Last thing he wanted was to start a fight. “Co-what now?”

“He called ye a stranger. Rude, Rhys -verrah rude.”

Nemain shuffled up to them both, placing her hands upon each of their arms. She was nearly of a height with Rhys, but on Farkas her hand reached only up to his elbow. “Ease up, coz. He’s no a stranger tae me. Aye, I ken that you both be butting heads in here what with Farkas invading yer territory, an being injured at that. But he’ll no be stayin’ here much longer...and. And nor will I.”

She bit her lip. Accepting the staff Baz produced out of nowhere, as she shouldered her share of the travel bags.

Farkas narrowed his eyes. *Whoa there, wait a minute...*

“Guess that’s that. I must be off. I truly wish I could stay awhile more, I do...but there be folk I need tae see, and delays ‘ave cost me enough precious time. I’ll be back as soon as I can manage.”

It was obvious that he was not invited. There was nothing he could think of that would not sound pathetic or needy in return, so Farkas kept his mouth shut.

“Ye cannae stay fer a dram, Nemain?” There was a wicked look in his eye, as Rhys fetched a fur and laid it carefully around his cousin’s shoulders. Knotting it gently around her neck. “It be music night tonight. I’ll be a-playin’ the pipes. Baz ‘as got her flute, an’ ye can deafen us wid yer twangin’ an’ hollerin’ on Arhuid’s strings. Blow me, I’ll e’en let the bairns have a go at bravely listenin’ t’yer
ruckus if'n ye'd only stay awhile longer, me bonny darling.”

“Not on yer life. I value me hearing, coz, an’ if Farkas does as well he’ll stuff his lugs full o’ tundra cotton a’fore listening tae that muckle-targed bamtrap ye call music.” Nemain muttered, tugging at her pack straps. “All honkin’ an’ screeching like a sack-trapped goose.”

“Haven’t heard Forsworn pipes before,” Farkas said. “They can’t be that bad. Can they?”

"Th’ war pipes o’ the clans!” Rhys's chest puffed out with pride. "Ye cannae say ye've e'er visited the Reach without hearing th' beauty o’ the dronin’ pipes across the crags, boyo!"

Nemain grimaced. “Lemme just say that I’m of the belief they brought them tae war not to inspire our warriors, but tae scare the opposing side shitless with their screechin’ yonk.”

"That's yer homeland's tradition ye be slanderin, mo cridhe!"

"Some traditions should keel oe'r an die."

“I dunno.” Farkas shrugged one of his shoulders as his newest friend grew bored and ran off to play with her siblings. “I play a mean drum. Betcha wanna see that, right?"

She was busy rewrapping the front of her robe. “How hard can it be tae play a drum, fear thuaidh?”

“Very hard. First I hit it like this, and then -bam- I hit it like this …it’s amazing. You’ll love it. Please. Stay.”

Snickering, Nemain hopped about; pulling on her boots as Farkas reached out a hand to steady her. He managed to cast off a dire mental oath as her staff whacked him on the hip. That stupid staff. Shouldae gotten buried in the avalanche. Damn nuisance. “Nah. Later, mayhap.”

She swiveled her head to where Rhys stood lurking near the door. “Ye will tell him, will ye no? Explain it all?”

Rhys nodded. “Dinnae fear, lass. I’ll set him doon once yer gone. We won’t have music night without ye, either.”

“Thank ye, Rhys. I owe ye more than I can say.”

Farkas was confused. “Explain what?”

A look of peculiar chagrin passed across the Dragonborn’s face. “All this malarkey, an’ now? I have nae nae time.”

She took a deep breath.

“Farkas, Rhys has learnt everything of which be important tae tell ye. Concerning what we discussed before...during the time ye were down an’ out. I truly wish I had the hours tae tell ye myself, but...tis better this way. For you may think upon what you wish tae do, once you ken the truth. Whate'er you choose? I'll understand. And I promise, I'll be back soon.”

“Know what?” A chord of disbelief raised his voice nearly an octave. They had spent the day together, practically attached at the hip, and now she was going to just walk off? After saying that?
But she had already turned away.

“I’ll take her as far as Falkreath. Gotta pick up supplies from town anyhow.” Baz reassured him as she guided Nemain over the doorstep and out of doors. He wondered if it was that apparent that he felt like *he* should be the one to help her out, limping as he was. Fidgeting.

It was depressing, realizing how much of a mother hen he was when it came to her. But - she was so small. So fragile, even with her spells.

-And she had the damnedest knack for stepping directly into trouble. “Won’t take long, with all this new snow frozen to a crust. Long as we stay to the paths and use the sled, we’ll stay right on top of it. So don’t worry. Bye, Rhys...be sure the children clean up before bed.”

“Haste ye back, love.” Lines of worry creased the Forsworn werewolf’s forehead. “Keep ‘way fram the ruins...there’s been recent activity there. Stick tae the path. I’d rather no be slayin’ a horde o’ bandits only tae find yer corpses, should you be beset by ‘em.”

Baz picked up the handles of the handcart and gave her husband a long suffering smile. “I have made this trip before, husband. See this sword? And this dagger? And this armor?? Huh, and even if we did run into bandit filth, you know me. No one bests an orc.”

“Tha’ be my lass! Good. Mind one another, an’ stay safe. Safe an’ sound.”

“Aye, doon worry. Either of ya.” Nemain saluted him as they all waved goodbye. “You just enjoy the rest of yer night and day with the wee boogers, as they pay ye all their particular favors. Snafflin’ up yer vittles. Peeing in yer furs. Wailing when y’be soundly sleeping…”

Despite his worry, Farkas smiled. “…We’ll hold the fort. Just...don't take too long. Yeah? See you soon.”

The men were silent as they watched them go. Her staff stabbed into the snow as she held onto Baz’s arm for guidance...the handcart trailing twin lines in the snow until finally they both disappeared into the forest.

His exhale clouded the cold air, creating whorls that twisted like smoke. Somewhere, lost amongst the pines and firs of Falkreath, his wife was wending her way toward some unknown goal…but she had promised he would see her again. She had promised. Soon.

“Right, then. I can ‘ear the bairns fussin’ an’ eatin’, so it be likely we only have a little while noo tae chew the fat an’ cover all what she wishes ye tae know. Sit ye doon on this stump, an’ we’ll begin.”

Farkas sat on the worn stump that the smaller man gestured to, watching with curiosity as he
produced a small keg and uncorked it. Handing him a cup that felt like an eggshell in his hands, Rhys filled it halfway; dragging his foot in the snow as he kicked shut the door. Closing off all of the heat, light and noise emanating from inside, which left them both alone to contemplate the beauty of the setting sun.

Orange and gold; painting the tops of the pines in black edged relief. “Go on, then. Take a wee sip o’ that, an’ tell me what ye think.”

He emptied the cup and promptly doubled over. *Shor’s beard*...

Rhys laughed merrily as he poured for himself, as Farkas struggled to come to grips with the sensation of his insides being dissolved. Fuck, they were on fire. “Hah, outlanders allus hae a mince when they suck doon their first taste o’ poitín.”

“Po-what now?” The aftertaste was kicking in: dirty socks, stale metal, and a numbness that was making his head spin.

“Th’ elixir o’ the gods, lad. Poitín - brewed fram beets, taters an’ wheat. Heh -I brew this meself out back, twice a year. Aye. Right there in the vats next tae our smithy.”

A gnarled fist pounded his back, and Farkas swallowed down what felt like loose shreds of his throat. Likely peppered with evaporated teeth by now. The numbness had disappeared, leaving behind a floaty, light-edged feeling, and tears were welling up in his eyes. “…N-not bad!”

“Shee, this liquor’ll knock ye flat on yer arse if yer no careful. Grand stuff. But since we be all jammerin’ an’ drinkin’ in comradeship-” The Forsworn swigged his drink, smacking his lips in enjoyment.

He refilled both cups, the sun continuing to set as his voice became decidedly less friendly. “…S’pose it be time. Aye, past time, tae clarify some things atwixt us both. While I’m fillin’ ye in on Nemain’s personal issues an’ such.”

“Guess so.”

Rhys nodded as if satisfied. Though Farkas knew this mild overture could only be the beginning. He took special care not to raise his eyes any higher than the Forsworn’s chest, and even tilted his throat up a hair. *Couldn’t hurt to play submissive for a talk like this.*

It wasn’t his home...and it definitely wasn’t his cousin being sheltered from a potentially rocky relationship.

He could respect a man’s desire to protect his female kin from harm. Making him like Rhys that much more, despite the awkwardness the Forsworn seemed determined to delve into.

Yep. Too bad the Reachman didn’t seem to be fully informed, else he would be setting his sights on Solitude...and *not* on the Companion sitting right before him.

“Ye’ve a stout heart, fear thuaidh. So then. I be Nemain’s only livin’ male relation what cares tae protect her interests, and now…” Rhys gave him a wry look that said everything, his smell both
smug and annoyed.

Oh. That.

Farkas flushed from scalp to chest. “Walkin’ in on *that* mucklesome scene in my own longhoose? Cor. It do prove that this talk be lang overdue. Aye. What designs do ye have, Farkas o’ the Companions, upon my fair cousin?”

*Designs?* “Don’t know watcha mean.”

“I think ye ken exactly what I mean. Nemain be a right firebrand, all piss an’ vinegar, but I willnae stand by an’ watch her risk a’bein’ strung along by some daunerin’ galoot sich as ye, should ye hae any ill intent. She be made heartsore already, fer far too lang. An’ I would ken what yer intentions be. If indeed ye have any beyond rollin’ round like pups all oe’r mah floors.”

Sipping his cup made less of a manly statement, but it allowed Farkas to actually taste what he had been served. It was actually a far more complex brew than he had initially thought: summer wheat mash, blended with frost mirriam, beets, potatoes... *and something else.*

Something earthy, like mushrooms. Or maybe moss.

He drank and slowly thought about what he should say. “Guess she never told you, huh. Figured she would, since you had two days to talk, but as far as my wants go? I’m a safe bet, Rhys.”

“Och, aye? Do tell.”

Farkas stretched his leg, working the cramp out of it. “Welp. We got married ‘bout two weeks ago in Mara’s temple, so-”

Alcohol sprayed everywhere, as Rhys promptly spat the mouthful he had just downed.

Looking mournfully at their empty cups, Farkas wiped his face with his sleeve. “Yeah. She didn’t tell ya, did she. Damn...got any more of that pa-cheen handy? I could use some more right about now.”

Chapter End Notes

*more coming soon.*

Gaelic Translation
A sheoid: my hero
The following morning was the sort that usually follows a violent storm - sunny and clear, but with a fine, damp mist. A fog that settled cold and refreshing upon the skin.

But Nemain was oblivious to the weather, having spent most of the long walk to Falkreath staring into the darkness of her ruined vision. Ruminating upon what she could recall of Farkas’ face...desperately trying to recollect the exact shade of those stone-grey eyes.

Wishing she had taken a longer, harder look at the man. Back when she had been afforded the chance to look.

She and Baz had walked all night long, and the trilling songs of pine thrush and mudlark now filled the air. Announcing the arrival of dawn's light as the distant rumble of noise cleared. Becoming audible: the drawling gossip of guards, arguing merchants joining with the rasp of lumberworkers sharpening their axes, for it seemed they had finally arrived.

Nemain skirted around people, avoiding even idle greetings thrown her way as Baz guided her through the town. After a long night of sporadic, yet comfortable chatter her cousin’s wife had ceased to ask those friendly-but-prying questions, and now the noise of Falkreath battered at her skull. An unwelcome, buzzing disturbance. A fly in her ear.

She steered clear of both road ruts and strangers, remembering all too well what had occurred the last time she had visited the local tavern, and kept to herself.

Yet for all her tenaciousness, the racket inside her head never ceased. Old pain she thought she’d forgotten resurfaced, times and places that she’d hoped to forget persisted. Desire and regret. Urgency and complacency. Envy, hunger...rage and despair and grief. All these things in spades and more. More and more, louder. Drowning out the few, brief happy moments she had nurtured from the past few days in a torrent of guilty want.

Skyrim was vast. Her suffering was more so, for Midwinter drew ever closer. By her count, it was a mere five days away until Bear - Ulfric’s wedding, and her shoulders ached and everything felt so heavy, really, what was the bloody point of it all, when-
“...You never answered my earlier question.”

“Eh? What?”

“Spending the night in his arms? You did that deliberately, didn’t you.” Bazoth gra-Shugor set down the handles of the handcart with a grunt. “How shameless.”

Accidentally clacking her staff against the side of her boot, Nemain slid her foot in the snow and managed a mighty snort. “Oh, that be rich coming from ye,” she retorted. “Be it me, or were you and Rhys not gossiping like auld henwives every other mo’? Stealing off for wee walks completely blooted on poitín, knowin’ all the while that me an’ the bairns were wise to all yer comings, aye, an’ goings? Could that not be called shameless as well?”

“I won’t be held responsible for what I said or did under the influence of that swill Rhys brews,” Baz said firmly. “And don’t think I’m not grateful. It was good, having an extra set of hands at the longhouse. You have no idea how stifling it can be, having no chance to be together alone. But don’t pretend to put on airs. You are hiding something.”

“I be hidin’ a powerful urge tae clobber Rhys senseless if he refers tae Farkas as ‘tha’ wee pup’ e’en one more time.”

“He’s not used to sharing his territory. Makes him crabby. But, is it true?” Baz pressed.

“Rhys says he saw you sleeping in the Companion’s bed yesterday. Then you said he had awakened sometime in the night, and then he went ahead and thanked you for taking such good care of him. Soooo…”

The orcess’ deep voice slid upwards on a hopeful note. “You are together?”

“Not in that way. He be so verrah young…”

“You don’t exactly have one foot in the grave, either.”

"Do I not? I may no hae a’ heartbeat anymore, but I still burn, Baz. I still bleed. Sort of.”

Sliding her hand down the front of her robes, Nemain felt the smooth concave curve of her belly. Feeling for the withered womb, lifeless and inert beneath. “And I cannae give Farkas what he wants - what any man o’ sense would wish from a lifelong spouse. I wish I could, but tis simply impossible. I cannae see it work, bein’ together with him in that way.”

“But what do you want, Nemain?” Baz asked. “All this talk of what he thinks or wants, and I haven’t heard yet about how you feel. What do you need?”

“I…”

This was the most she’d yet spoken, her tongue perhaps loosened by the hidden unreality of the bustling world around them both. Being blind certainly had its drawbacks, but Nemain now found herself appreciating her lack of sight. She did not have to fear any wayward reflections or mirrors; needed no reminder of how deeply she had been altered since killing Alduin. Inside and out.

And the disconnect made it simpler to say things that might not have been so easy, in the bright light of the real world. “I used tae think I had somethin’ tae give, ye ken. A purpose...somethin’ greater than myself that be worth fighting for.” She kicked at the snow, hating herself for sounding so damn plaintive. “I had a man...aye, an’ a mission that deserved all as far as I could strive towards. Does a
nail stick out? Well. I be the hammer. I had Seen the alternative should we fail, an’ it twas a bleak future, Baz. Dark, and cold. Not while I had breath in my body would I hae allowed those events tae come t’pass.”

She tilted her head, listening as a woman cried out a jingle for her eggs. *Eggs, fresh eggs! Buy my eggs...five septims a dozen!*

“...And now with the crisis averted an’ a High King soon tae be crowned, what? What do I do? The Dragonborn hae served her use; it be all done and o’er with. I played me part as much as I could be used fer such purposes. I was the Dovahkiin. Til I won, I ended the danger, and was left with nought but this fer me pains.”

Nemain angled her head back and stroked her neck meaningfully. Her skin there was rippled with scars, like knotty yarnwork. And her chest and stomach were near as bad, though not on display. Thank the Divines. “I was as strong as I needed tae be fer a verrah long time, but I doon be needin’ tae carry that burden anymore. Truly, I dinnae want to.”

“And what about your friends? These associates of yours that you were so determined to meet...the ones who could not wait even a single night?” Baz said cautiously. “Surely they have some claim upon your time and talents. It’s not as though you lack for further purpose, really.”

Nemain shuddered at the thought of the Dark Brotherhood’s purpose becoming her single focus for the rest of her unlife. Her interests narrowing, thinning into a blade in the dark and the cold clink of coins. *No thank ye.* “Aye, they do be havin’ a claim on me, though tis more of an obligation. Truly, I be fair sick of folk wantin’ things, and cor, I doon have tae explain anythin’ else tae you, or t’anyone! Why can’t ye all just leave me be!”

She regretted saying the words the instant they burst forth from her mouth.

It wasn’t decent, or polite. It was unfair of her to speak so petulantly to the orcwife, who so far had offered her nothing but sympathy. But she could hardly help it.

For Baz was wed to a friend -no, family that heralded from another life and another time that she had long struggled to forget. Coupling that with the confident aura of Farkas and the joy of seeing Aventus (*the wee pip was alive! Alive!*) again was still frankly overwhelming, and she felt smothered by all their concern and attentions. Trapped.

It was all too much to take. For good or ill.

But her unreasonable reactions were no one’s fault but her own.

“Apologies,” She spoke into the waiting silence. “I have nae call tae blame ye for this, or any of it. You be listening, and I havenae gabbled of this to, well. Anyone, really. I’ve never been asked, persay, how I feel...just told. What do I want? When I, well-”

And her bravery failed her after all.

“-I...I did no wish fer intimacy, exactly.” She finished a bit sadly, deciding to speak only half the truth. The full truth was too painful to bear. “I crawled intae his bed fer comfort, not for anythin’ interesting. Not after dreaming about Orphan’s Rock. Not after...well.”

“It’s all right.” Baz was sympathetic. “I know.”
She did know. To pass the night they had discussed in detail the events of the gathering at Orphan’s Rock...and it had brought back memories. Unpleasant memories that had already been troubling her. Unwilling to be banished, no matter how many cups of Rhys’s awful poitín she drank.

No matter how often she forced herself to think upon happier things, those dark recollections continued to lurk. The dry ache of thirst, the searing pain of her bonds, Melka, wolves, bears and foxes spinning in one long eternal hunt in her fever dreams, Sofie...no.

They were never far from the forefront of her mind.

Nemain had been so relieved that Farkas had woken up to break the cycle of her nightmares, had been ecstatic that he had not died and...and she hadn’t wanted to be alone.

She cleared her throat, remembering her boldness -the ease with which she had slid beneath his furs to be cradled like a bairn in the strength of his arms. And how he had let her take that comfort with his customary cheer, never minding that she had dealt him thus far only distance. Patronizingly holding him at an arm’s length, and with such scorn!

He was a better person than she- and it caused fear to thrill through her, to know. To realize that perhaps at that very moment, Farkas and Rhys were now waking. Perhaps discussing her, and the strange immortal dilemma she had found herself wading in.

It was likely she would never see Farkas again. He was probably making tracks towards Whiterun through Riverwood right now...escaping his dotty necromancer bride while she had given him the chance. The choice - to know all, and stay.

Or go.

Though she could not bring herself to regret the whirlwind of the last two weeks. No, not one bit. Even with the guilt, she would never regret waking up; his hand still clenched tight in hers. She would never forget the warm, sleepy laugh he’d barked out when he’d found her wrapped around his side.

Nor would she forget the way it had made her feel, being trapped underneath him – both content and incomplete at the same time.

“Well, then.” There was a creak as Baz lifted up the handcart and paused, waiting for Nemain to grab hold. She did, wrapping her hand around the she-orc’s elbow as they took up an unhurried, steady pace through the rest of the main thoroughfare. “What are you going to do, once you get to talk to your pup about how he drunkenly wed the undead?”

She winced. It sounded so much worse when it was all laid out in the open like that. “I truly dinnae know.”

“But you like him, do you not?”

The teasing tone of her husky voice vexed Nemain to no end. “Of course I do...havenae I been transparently obvious enough? He be kindness itself, and mark me; I saw the man afore I lost me eyesight. I ken exactly how devastating he be tae gaunder over.”

“But all of what has happened be nothing, should he decide I be no worth it. All of this...it depends sae much on him, and on what he shall choose.”

Underneath her hand, Baz’s arm flexed as she harrumphed. “Hmph. True. Men are contrary. Their heads and their hearts are rarely in agreement. And as womenfolk know all too well, their actions are usually ruled by a different aspect altogether.”
“I be all too familiar with that aspect,” Nemain grouched.

“Oh really?”

She slapped Baz’s arm and nearly tottered headfirst into the empty handcart. “Oofh! Like anything couldae happened with yer vast horde o’ minions eyeballin’ our every move.”

“Yep. My lot are good for that.”

Hauling her back onto her feet, Baz brushed off Nemain’s fur cloak and clasped her shoulders. “There you are, right as rain. See you soon then?”

“Soon.” Nemain was decidedly not looking forward to her erstwhile reunion with the assassins guild. But checking in with the Night Mother, transferring prayers into contracts...it had to be done. If only to salve her unrest at having left without a single word of warning or farewell. Even unintentionally. She only hoped that they had received the letter she had dictated weeks ago, all the way back in Riften. Explaining everything that had happened.

Scunnered at a wild drinking party, with a temple raid and a Riften wedding. Such a likely excuse - Astrid’s goin tae shank me. “I’ll be finding ye here at Dead Man’s Drink in aboot a day or so. We’ll return to the longhouse afterwards.”

“And I’ll be waiting. Phew! Think I’ll sleep off the trip before haggling with that thug down at Gray Pine Goods. His brother is one of those Nords...thinks he’s so subtle, following me around as I browse his wares.”

Baz huffed. “Like I’d steal anything in that crusty dive.”

The image of the hulking orcess walking out of a shop, arms full of stolen goods and trailing a passel of ineffectual Nord warriors was actually quite amusing. “Should you fancy a burglary, wait until I return. I’d like tae see ye fight them off.”

Snow scraped against the wheels as Baz did something with the cart. “Huh. Not interested.”

“Aw, c’mon then. Just a wee scrap, fer fun? Steal a sweetroll? Or a lockpick? I’ll bet ye could take ‘em all on. Single-handed like.”

Baz’s hard hands tilted her shoulders until she was aimed in the right direction - northwest. “The spectacle of a fistfight would be wasted on you, so don’t tempt me. Off with you then.”

And then she gave her a firm pat on the butt. More like a slap, as Nemain’s staff stuttered and raked the ground like a plow, catching her just in time.

“I see more than ye think! It’d loosen ye up, ya ornery hulk! Come on! Live a little!”

But by the sound of it, Baz had already rushed inside the inn. Probably to nab her precious beauty rest instead of kindly providing her newest kin a splendid reason to procrastinate her trip.

Figures. I could hae watched...sort of. Fusty orcs an’ their swotty sense of honor.

Nemain was not tired, but then, she did not require sleep as much as other things. Using her staff and
her feet to feel for the disintegrated cobblestones of the old Imperial roads, she tromped directly through a steaming pile of horse droppings, swore, then wiped her boots on a nearby fence and carefully set off for the Sanctuary.

She didn’t get very far.

After what felt like hours - and several falls - later, Nemain hauled herself up from the ground for the millionth time. Cursing her blindness as she dusted off her robes...picking out sticks, small bits of gravel and snow from the inner lining of her boots and her hair. What was that again about the barkin’ benefits of bein’ eyegormed? Cor! Any more o’ this, an’ I’ll be arriving at the Sanctuary on all fours.

Muttering to herself, she stiffened as she heard a crackling sound in the woods. A sudden snap.

Danger!

Without waiting she aimed her staff in that direction and released a small thread of magicka. Trickling it through the weapon, triggering some unseen switch.

The air immediately in front of her displaced itself with a sucking whump.

A small animal shrilled out in pain, then was abruptly silenced by a meaty thwack - the sound of a blade ending life.

Nemain shifted on her feet, twisting her hand with the prescient heat of a destruction spell as she listened to the sounds of deep, even breathing. Sounds of a sword being wiped clean, then sheathed.

A conjuring? Just what sort of creature had she brought forth by waving her new walking stick around??

She had not borne high expectations for the staff she had won from shifty Sam, but she certainly had not been expecting this.

“Uh. Who be you?”

Dark and rough syllables answered her. “Markynaz.”

“Be that your name or yer rank, Dremora?”

“Both, mortal.”

Nemain could almost hear the slurring of slippery words, spoken over pointed teeth. Practically dripping with condescension. She nearly opened her mouth to ask another question when the he -it?-cut her off.

“Speak your desires, blessed of Sanguine,” the daedra said disinterestedly. “I am at your service for exactly one hour in this realm, and I would have my task be rendered as efficiently as possible.”

Sanguine?

Sanguine. Sam Guevenne.
Nemain’s fist tightened around the hefty diameter of the staff. *That cocky bastard!* Suddenly the events of that alcohol fueled night made so much more sense.

“So.” This could work to be a great boon, if the rules of summoning were properly followed. She had no wish to be burnt into a paste as so many did who studied the school of Conjuration.

Then again, that unhappy ending usually resulted from an overweening sense of pride and a deplorable lack of caution. She remembered from her studies that daedra cared little for mortals, yet thrived upon their peculiar guidelines of hierarchy and order - rules and respect.

Nemain could deal with beings who played by the rules.

“-Right. What, uh, did ye kill fer me, Markynaz?”

“A rabbit.”

Only a daedra could manage such defiant insouciance while sounding utterly bored.

“Grand.” *Stupid fecklesome wee beastie.* “Um. Clarify th’ bounds of yer ties to me staff, aye? One hour of yer time per charge…?”

“...no more, and no less.” His/Its voice sounded firmer now. “Until death claims this flesh or your time has run its course. Until then, I will do your bidding.”

An easy, uncomplicated relationship for once.

Nemain grinned. *Perfect.* “If that be the case, then I order ye tae carry me to the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary...whilst protecting me from attack, injury or fall!” She added hastily, remembering the many loopholes this Markynaz could take advantage of, had she left off that addendum.

There was a pause. “As you wish.”

In one clanking breath she was lifted up, and suddenly the air was breezing past her face as the daedra’s armored feet pounded into the road. She gripped her staff even more tightly, striving to keep her grin small and sufficiently demure.

It was working. She had gained not just a walking stick, but a veritable coach and bodyguard all in one!

The being’s armor chafed and bit into her legs and back, but damn if this didn’t beat falling over every ten seconds. There was only one way to possibly make the experience better.

She cleared her throat pointedly. “Markynaz?”

“Yes, Blessed?” Drat the thing, he wasn’t even slightly winded.

She considered. “Sing tae me a popular tavern song while ye march. Somethin’ cheery.”

An even longer pause than before.

Just as she was about to reconsider her request - *daedra had their pride, after all* - a deep baritone voice surprised her. Making her jump, as the depth of his raspy voice shook her down to her bones.

“Our hero, our hero, claims a warrior’s heart!”

“Really? This be a popular tavern song now? What rot!”
“I tell you, I tell you, the Dragonborn comes!” The daedra continued blithely, ignoring her offended statement. Since it wasn’t a request. “-With a Voice wielding power of the ancient Nord art, believe, believe, the Dragonborn comes!”

“Someone clearly never met me, if’n they believe flatterin’ words associated with the fear thuaidh would win me o’er. Blast, I could hae come up with better tripe that that. While a’ sitting on a chamber pot.”

She rapped his breastplate. “Smokin’ skooma.”

The daedra kept singing. “It’s an end to the evil, of all Skyrim's foes. Beware, beware, the Dragonborn comes! For the darkness has passed, and the legend yet grows…”

“Me legend be growing? I didnae even know they had writ me a sodding song!”

Markynaz finished, sounding almost within a hair of being out of breath. “You'll know, you'll know the Dragonborn's come!”

“...oy, an’ that just be filthy. One must think the lyricist be possessed of a grotty mind.”

Nemain enjoyed the peeved huff of the daedra’s breath as it grunted in what might have been agreement or umbrage, picking up his pace. “Hey. D’ ye ken the tune, ‘Ragnar the Red?’ Och, I havenae heard that one in ages.”

This time, she managed to wring out from him a groan before he started to sing. “Oh, there once was a hero named Ragnar the Red, who came riding to Whiterun from Old Rorikstead…”

This Markynaz had a slight accent. Barely noticeable, but there.

Her grin had stretched into a full-fledged smile by now, but she was fairly sure the daedra was too occupied to notice, for he had jumped into the gory bits with definite enthusiasm. *Jivvens n’ tribbs. A ride and a show.*

*Better and better!*

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“What. Is the music. Of life?”

“Silence, my brother.”

“Welcome. Home.”

Nemain pushed open the bounded stone door of the Sanctuary and clopped down the worn stairs, feeling mildly refreshed.
In the end before he had poofed off to Oblivion or wherever Sanguine did abide, Markynaz had sung virtually every song known to every bard in Tamriel - plus a few she had never heard before. Songs that the daedra implied had come from the realms of Molag Bal, Sheogorath and Malacath. *For such frightful reputations, the Princes of the Ether had marvelous good taste.*

She wished it were a simpler thing to journey between dimensions. She had never actually met anyone (*aside from herself, circumstances being different*) who had managed such travel, but the curious mage in her was already plotting calculations. Pondering if the transference of a physical being was as transactionary as conjuration was, and how one returned home once the sojourn was done. Was it not a simple matter? Couldn’t a soul be transferred into a realm quite as easily as pulled out by a summons? Would Ancano know? Hadn’t daedra done that sort of thing to heroes plenty of times before in stories and tales and lived to tell of it?

...And would they do it for something as trifling as the Dragonborn’s desire to hear a ne’er before-heard song?

Lost in her imaginings of eerie, otherworldly music, Nemain sensed the presence of the entire Brotherhood gathered around the table before they noticed her. A great puddling of glowing green forms shifting in her second sight; the spelling of Detect Life nearly as unconscious as thought now, thanks to her costly purchase back in Riften. *This ring be truly worth its weight in silver.*

She forced away more pleasant wishes and concentrated. Picking out strands and phrases that were beginning to sound troublesome, the more she overheard. Flattening herself against the wall, she made herself as small and still as a mouse, and listened.

“-easier if we go in underneath the arch. Go up the guard stairwells, in and out. No one will know. No one will see to know, or even care should they spy upon us. Haafingar’s tabard and mail are easy enough to lay hands on, if you know the right people.”

"Ooohoo yesss, teehee hee! And when I next meet that fair maid Nelly, I'll plunge my knife into her belly! Yeehee hah hee hah!"

“Cicero. Shut. Up. By Sithis, I cannot think with all this racket!”

“Oooh, do you dislike poor Cicero’s songs, Festus? I am, as you say, just an innocent jester. A fool! Oh, but my work is not foolish, no. For I am our mother's Keeper!”

“Then ‘keep’ her somewhere else. With less noise, I ask you. This murder we plan is far from simple.”

“-But can we get out the same way? The guards will be everywhere, out for blood...I wouldn’t be surprised if the townsfolk of Solitude pitched in, trying to take us down! No, I still say we climb, using the ropes and ladder chains. It’s so easy, why, even a dunce could do it!”

“Then why don’t you volunteer, Babette, since you know so much better than the rest of us.”

“I just might, if the rest of you don’t properly assess the other security risks! We can’t do a half-assed job, Arnbjorn, not on a score like this. I’m only doing my part.”

“Well, I think-”

“Peace!”
Astrid’s voice oozed out like soiled honey. “We have the pleasure of being reacquainted with our dear, departed Listener, Brothers and Sisters. Let us pay her our respects.”

Damn. They noticed me.

Nemain tentatively walked forward, her staff tapping against the stone floor as Astrid continued, “- and also, our thanks. For with her assistance, her guidance from the Night Mother, we have now gained our most lucrative contract yet.”

The Nord’s voice rose in a triumphant shout. “...A call to kill Ulfric Stormcloak, the soon to be High King of Skyrim himself! A contract that will lift us, the Dark Brotherhood, back where we belong: in the acclaimed patronage of the wealthy and powerful!”

“Here here!” The mage Festus Krex creakily lauded as the others sounded their approval with clapping, laughter and sounds of hearty agreement. “And we’ll all be stinking rich to boot! Rich, I tell you!”

She was frozen.

It was as though it were a lifetime ago, and she stood not in the Sanctuary but in Markarth: nervously pacing in her worn-through brogues before the fireplace of Nepos the Nose. Back when she had wanted no one and nothing and had cared for little; except for perhaps a full belly and a bottle of something mildly alcoholic now and again to dull the memories. The pain of her banishment. Aye, she remembered the simple naivete of her past, when she had greeted the news of the Bear of Markarth’s imminent demise with eagerness. With blind, bloody-minded joy.

What did I ken of justice, then? Was I sae easily bought...for a mere pair o’ boots and a hot meal? Truly, I was a bargain.

Something inside her crumpled. How Nepos must have laughed, after she had left! Clutching her paltry bag of septims like a child with a sweet. Had the man given a shit for her chances, even with Galan pulling the strings from beyond in the Redoubt? Giving the order, nay, the command, to place her out of Markarth into an assassination that was so difficult as to be impossible? What part of her orders had even come from Madanach? Did Nepos know? Had anyone truly thought she might succeed?

Things were so different now. She was different. The bright flare of hope she had carried like an ember at such news, before, was damped this time around with the cold lucidity of truth. Replaced with the acid backwash of nausea, as wolves, bears and foxes ran around in widdershins, ceaseless inside her mind’s eye.

It meant something, she was sure...Nemain just didn't know what exactly her visions were supposed to mean. Yet.

As the other assassins laughed and cheered, she felt old. She was having difficulties prying her own tumultuous thoughts away from yesterday and she could not see her way past the chaos to tomorrow. She ran her free hand through her hair, short-cropped and dirty as it was. Scratching at her scalp, rubbing her aching head as if she could expunge those traitorous thoughts with mere physical force.
Prepare yourself for the journey to Windhelm. For you have been assigned to assassinate the Jarl of Windhelm himself...the Bear, the Butcher! The Voice that threw down the walls. He who ground us under the boot of the Nord and the Empire.

Kill him. Do it painfully or quickly, by poison or point of blade I dinnae care, but kill him.

-And she had failed. It had all turned out gloriously, wondrously gold-edged in the end (she certainly hadn’t counted on love being part of the equation) but truly, were she to judge by Nepos’ directive? Not only had she failed, but the entire operation had gone tits up. Tits and arse way, way up. Cor, if Nepos ever discovered that she, Nemain StoneTalon, was single handedly responsible for handing Ulfric Stormcloak the Jagged Crown…

Well. She could look forward to a short drop and a sudden stop, were she ever feeling bold enough to return to her old den in Markarth.

Frisking her fingers through her hair, she blew her lips in frustration. It all circled into a spiral of death; animals of prey turning tail and honing in on the predators. Red teeth and flashing eyes, whirling. Ever out of reach. Her head pounded with the reductive concussion, the violence of it. They were going tae kill him.

They be bound tae kill Bear.

And they had a far better chance at achieving such a goal than she ever had. “-Hello? Still with us, Listener? Or did your mind not arrive with your body this time?”

“I heard ye, Astrid. Shame your murder willnae happen, though.”

Squeezing her right hand down the length of the staff calmed her somewhat. It was reassuring to know that with a flick of her hand she could have an armed and tuneful daedra here at her beck and call. That was something, at least.

The others had quieted, obviously eavesdropping as Astrid’s pleasant voice froze over. “And whyever not?”

Too many bodies. Too many, in such a tight place, pressing in against her - Nemain felt for the moisture flecked walls and slowly made her way down to the main cavern of the Sanctuary, where there was less crowding. More fresh air.

A cool gust of wind brought with it the smell of water, green plants and mold, and she inhaled slowly, relaxing. Listening.

She knew that Astrid was following her like a shadow. Never very far behind. “Many have tried, an’ many have failed. Ye may have heard that I be amongst those what attempted tae do the Bear of Markarth in, before, and ye’d hae heard correct. The man be not exactly easy tae kill.”

She allowed a sliver of ridicule to color her words, with just the slightest exasperation souring her manners. “And seriously. Why would ye take on such a contract, now that he be straightenin’ out the dobbering dredge what be left o’ yore government? Och aye, ho, let’s murder the man what has the best chance o’ cleanin’ up Skyrim and guardin’ against the Aldmeri Dominion and the Empire. Seems fair counterproductive tae me.”
“We’ll do it for the gold.” The Nord was unrepentant. “For the glory. And because we always fulfil our contracts and follow through, even if some of us feel they are beyond such concerns.”

“By some, I gather that ye be referring tae mesel.”

They were now in the main cavern, and Nemain could sense the others clinging to the stairwell. Watching as Astrid continued to circle her round about.

Stalking with light words and lighter steps.

“Yes, Listener, I am talking about you. I have a problem with you. Your unexplained absence, your flagrant disregard for the well being of your family....which has lasted as long as your bony ass has graced the hospitality of our hideout. Since you cannot see, you should know that Veezara will bear the scars of your attack for the rest of his life-”

“I was no in my right mind! I’ve apologized fer that! Many times!”

“It issss nothing, Lissstener,” Veezara called out somewhere in the beyond. “It isss all in the passst, Asstrid. Let usss move on.”

“See? Veezy forgives me.” Bless him for speaking out. “An’ I wrote him a bonny song, tae make up fer the misunderstanding of mashin’ his lizardy hooter then, along with all else. Even set ‘The Lusty Argonian Maid’ tae a stately court reel fer dancin’ and singing. In three bodging parts that make a fine chorus.”

Nemain passed her staff to the other hand and leaned upon it. Suddenly, intensely tired of this useless exchange. “We can dance to it t’night if ye suddenly decide tae remove that rod ye’ve been steadily shoving up yer arse, blondie. An’ hove off on this whole ‘kill the king!’ nonsense. Tis a horrid bad idea.”

“Hah. As though a mere song could excuse you.”

No doubt those golden locks were being tossed flippantly right about now. Nemain would bet good coin upon it. “I’m not asking tae be excused fer anything. I feel no guilt. Though I certainly shall be far more carefull of who I be accepting drinks from, now on an’ in the future.”

“Words, mere words.” Astrid stopped right before her.

So close, Nemain could smell the woman’s stale breath. “Utterly pointless. And worse? You abandoned the Night Mother. You abandoned us as though we meant nothing to you, forcing us to muddle through rumors and conjecture about who called the Black Sacrament. Without our Unholy Matron’s divine help.”

Nemain threw up her arms, barely managing to keep hold of her staff. “I came back, did I not?!”

“Too little, too late. I thought you were grateful, Nemain. I took you in when anyone else would have thrown you on the fire and set you to the torch. I gave you a chance. I thought you cared.”

She did care, though her affections for Astrid and crew were steadily dwindling the more the woman droned on about it.

What did the woman expect of her, miracles? Instantaneous transmission via daedric portal? Dwemer automaton-like obedience, as all her other huddy machine workers marched in syncopated steps, all
to her merry murdering tune?

*Nah. I doon care that much.*

Casting out her thoughts, Nemain called out to the dark female presence hovering within the Sanctuary. Hopefully She was awake, aware and in a somewhat better mood than the pissy blonde bitch.

*Night Mother, speak tae me. One of yer bloody Daedric princes ye like sae much fucking poisoned me bevvy an’ shivvied me off intae a muckly patch of surprises. I’d ne’er hae left fer sae long otherwise. Tis a grand story and I’m sure you’ll be a’hankerin tae hear of it...specially the naughty bits. Just slap me wrist an’ let me off with a warning, aye?*

Pausing to wait for a response -any response- Nemain heard only silence. No sepulchral voice spoke, no mellifluous spirit probed her soul.

She mentally shrugged. *Later, I guess? “As I said, I sent ye a letter. T’was not intentional, my long absence...more like a kidnapping, really. And I returned as soon as I was able.”*

“Spare me your excuses. One might think that being Listener - the highest calling in our dear Family - was a mere afterthought to you. I had our people scouring the woods, searching for your whereabouts for days. Days wasted! And now, when at last you deign to show up, I inform you of this; our most prestigious offer in living memory. Only to have you sigh and sulk because the job might hold repercussions for you and you alone. Why do you not celebrate with the rest of us? What could be more important than this chance to put the Brotherhood back on the map?”

*Highest calling, her arse. Nemain knew she had never made any grasping pretense at leadership before. If anything, she had turned tail and run at the very mention of it. I already have one impossible title as Dragonborn. I doon need another.*

Nemain made her voice casual. Composed. “Have ye no care for the stability of yer homeland, fear thuaidh? Do you no care that the Stormcloak’s death would be leavin’ the throne empty, a vacuum of power ill-filled by any who be currently in position tae take control? Can ye no be slightly more choosy when it comes tae taking out marks fer death?”

“I realize I am not entirely traditional when it comes to the way I lead the Brotherhood, but I’d never turn down a contract, Listener. It’s not only blasphemous, but bad for business.”

“Right, right...the business. Sure. What will ye do, then, fer your perfect business plan when the fighting breaks out yet again? For it will. I goddamn guarantee it.”

“Our dealings were rather slim during the civil war,” Astrid acknowledged. “And the cost of death tends to runs cheap when the public value on life plummets, this is true. But you speak as though Skyrim should be my sole concern. It is not. Your Brothers and Sisters in the Void, this family? They alone are my priority.”

“And how will ye feed yer priorities when Skyrim be nought more than a stopping point fer bandits an’ passing treasure hunters then, hmm?”
Leather creaked as Astrid stepped closer, laughing softly. “Ah. I see. Well. As for that, I hear that the beaches of Hammerfell down in Hegathe and Sentinel are really quite lovely this time of year. And Sithis himself has no bounds. We change our base of operations, if it comes to that point. The Brotherhood already moved once after the Great War, and we can surely move again. Though I think it highly unlikely.”

The woman wasn’t listening.

Nemain decided to be blunt. “Astrid. Turn doon the contract, or you will force my hand.”

“Oh, Listener.” Astrid’s voice hushed, as though she were sharing a secret. “I had him too. It does not become us to grow so...attached.”

“Twenty thousand septims. Think - just think about what we could accomplish with such a vast sum. Where we could go, and what we could do! And all for the simple task of killing Ulfric on the day of his wedding coronation.”

"The Thalmor ask so little, Sister, and in return they give so much. So very, very much.”

Nemain’s skin crawled as the Nord’s voice took on a sly inflection. “Of course, if you are suffering from some sort of anxiety about the whole thing, we could kill him during the nooning banquet before he is crowned High King. We might not get the bonus, but we could do it. It would make the question of succession much more tasteful, if Elisif is not directly in line to take over after him. Yes. We could kill him then - in the thick of it, right before the toasts, just when everyone is good and soured with mead and spiced wine. I’m sure we could find some reason to pull the man away for a private audience before he takes the eponymous arrow to the knee.”

“Or, perhaps we could let him finish dessert and kill him before he is assaulted by those tedious toasts to his longevity and good health. Hmm. Poison works at different levels of dosage depending on the level of alcohol inherent in the beverage it is added to, and Ulfric usually favors mead. Traditional, undiluted mead. So there ‘is’ a chance that he might not drop dead in the middle of dinner. You see, Listener? I’m not unduly cruel, after all.”

Astrid’s hot breath brushed by the shell of her ear. Making the cartilage cage of flesh twitch, as her whispers grew harsh. “...Or perhaps I have you all wrong. You know, I hear things. In this line of work, it pays to be well informed. And you know what I have heard? I have heard that our dear Jarl of Eastmarch does not, in fact, favor his beautiful betrothed, Elisif the Fair. Tell me, Listener. Do you long to see him again? To lay with him?”

Her words dropped to a throaty purr. “To say goodbye, just one last time?”

“Stop it.”

“We could get you a wig.” Astrid continued, almost as though she was speaking to herself. “Perhaps paint your face? No no, too much. Hmm. Yes, but we could sneak you into his chambers, cause that his steward should be distracted, and then once he is pleasantly surprised-”

“No. I’m not doin’ that.” Fingers were lightly tracing her noose scar, tickling. Nemain gave Astrid a sharp shove, grinding her teeth as the assassin laughed gaily.

“I won’t.”

“...So bashful! Don’t fret. It could be fun. Babette has a spidersilk gown in blue that just might fit, if
we let out the seams and used a liberal amount of grease and twine. We could bathe you in scent and wrap you all up for him. Like a little present. Yes - rather like a doll.”

More titters came from the staircase, but Nemain felt nothing. Only numbness, a queer hollow resonance carving out her insides as Astrid continued to talk.

“You should be flattered to do the honors. I wouldn’t trust just anyone with this, but, ah. I know how you feel. Ulfric is quite the example of Nord masculinity, hmm? Those shoulders. That smile. It’d be a shame to kill that without one last go. A waste, really.”

Nemain swallowed, feeling ill. To kill because it was necessary was one thing. But to actually enjoy the act was another matter, entirely.

The woman’s scent lay thickly upon her tongue, making her gag: the sour sweat of excitement. Elation, annoyance and a musky haze lingering that minded Nemain of a rabid beast. A scent that was a rank perversion, a dark caricature of lust.

-And not a shred of remorse tae be had. She be a true sadist.

The knot in her throat swelled. “No. I will no do that. I couldn’t.”

“Very well. I will then, if you haven’t the stomach. Did you know, Listener, that sex with a ligature tightened round the neck can induce a particularly strong type of orgasm?”

Astrid’s booted feet made only the slightest rasp as they slid across mist-dampened stone. The roaring in Nemain’s ears grew louder.

“I have heard it described as...euphoric. A thrilling way to go. Just one, quick tug is all I would need. Maybe I could tighten my thighs as I ride him astride...distracting him as the knot accidentally slips, oops, but I forgot! Of course he doesn’t favor ever being the bottom. Only ever the top.”

"So selfish. Ah...shall I tie him down first, then, Listener? Shall I make him squeal? Mmm, I think so, and then-”

Someone moved. Someone screamed.

It might have been she who struck first, but in the rage-white static that was gripping her, Nemain didn’t really care.

The two women grappled as the twin voices of Cicero and Arnbjorn echoed in bellowing salvos. Filling the Sanctuary with noise. Sliding and shoving, they both ignored the hands that reached forth to part them, as they strove to get the upper hand on the other.

Ignoring magic and weapons in favor of raw, pummeling savagery.

She be goin’ too far this time, Nemain’s last coherent thought stated clearly. Before the heat of her anger soaked through her remaining sobriety. Too far!
The Nord in question must have felt the same way, for she kneed her in the gut. Hard. Driving the very wind from her lungs.

Nemain countered with an elbow that made a satisfying crunch as the woman let out a sharp cry. Something warm spattered against Nemain’s cheek and lip, and with a flicker of tongue she tasted it. Tasted the rich rust of blood.

The murmuring burble of voices fading into the distance as everything blanked out. Astrid was her superior; a better fighter in close quarters, but the Dragonborn was brute force. Reacting from a place of hate, laying about with more fire than finesse, and it wasn’t long before something penetrated her poor defenses. Cold and hard, cracking through her ribcage as Astrid turned the handle.

Seating her dagger home, as with a pop something inside gave way.

Nemain’s mouth opened, but no sound emerged. The force of the blow drove her several staggering steps back as a dull ache turned alternately hot and cold beneath her breastbone. Making her almost dizzy, stupid with pain.

Astrid had knifed her. 
_The bitch had actually knifed her._

So much for the bloody holy tenets.

It hurt, _oh it hurt_, but it was not mortal...and she was going nowhere until justice had been meted out. The dragon that had assumed control within would brook no less...and it wasn’t as though she would bleed out any time soon. Her severed heart did not beat, would not be needed to circulate her unlife’s tenuous balance...and she did not need to breathe.

But Astrid did.

Ignoring the blade embedded in her chest, Nemain gripped the back of Astrid’s neck and marched them both towards the pool that took up the majority of the sanctuary cavern. The Nord was swearing, clawing at her hands, but the Dragonborn was strong.

Inhumanly strong.

This undeath had taken nearly everything away from her, but for once she was grateful: happy to possess such deadly preternatural strength, and the woman’s surprised scream cut off suddenly as Nemain forced Astrid’s pretty little head down under the water and held it there.

_Down, down, down_, until she could feel all that lovely hair floating to the surface. The fear thuaidh’s nails scored bloody furrows down the Dragonborn’s wrists as Nemain’s power licked away at Astrid’s life force itself. Small furtive little tastes of life, _licklicklick_, a little death each and every time they touched. Skin to skin.

The Nord’s previous boldness was giving way to panic, and Nemain continued to duck her repetitively, mindless. As though it were not real, but some sort of morbid dream.

Up. _Clench_. Downward, she plunged...the ache in her chest alleviated bit by bit the longer Astrid struggled.

Up. Down.
Up. Down.
And every time Astrid’s head broke free from the water, her gargling breaths held that much more of a shriek as she inhaled. Laced with terror.

_**Wait. Not yet. Just...a bit more.**_

Holding her for the space of five breaths as Astrid kicked feebly beneath the surface, Nemain curled her lip. And at last, estimating that the fight had completely abandoned the woman in her arms, she yanked her head up. Lifting her high out of the water with her, as Nemain stood up soaking wet. Furious to Oblivion that this, any of this, had been necessary.

That she had been forced to make such a crude point.

Astrid gasped like a beached whale, blowing and snotting as Nemain shook her. Shook her good and hard, until her teeth rattled like steel castanets. "Be _this_ what we spend our time pursuing, Astrid? Leadership? Power? The right tae determine which contracts we do and do nae pursue?"

"Tis shite. All of it. I doon want yer job, but I sure as blazes dinnae want me hide scraped clean for each and every honest mistake. And you’ll no be killing Ulfric. Trust me, I’ve dealt death tae a former lover, and though he would hae done me in first, tis not something that rests easy on the soul. I be doing ye a favor."

A long, dragging gasp. "...Lis-s-tener. _T-t-traitor! K-k-k_"

“Fuck that, an’ fuck you, ye croddy cunt. You stabbed me first.”

There was no response to that.

A more practical part of her told Nemain to simply end it. It would solve so many problems, to simply push the wretched woman back underwater. To hold her down a wee bit more, to ignore her husband’s growls that much longer, but...she did not want her death. _Not really._

The lack of Astrid would create a whole slew of new problems. And, she reminded herself sternly, Nemain had not a shred of interest in the day to day running of the Dark Brotherhood.

So she hauled the woman up and tossed her, like a sodden mass of pondweed, to flop upon the uneven, pebble strewn ground. Then she turned to address the other assassins who had gathered silently. Hiding in plain sight to weigh the outcome.

...And the Night Mother took that inimical moment, of course, to speak.

**Listener, listen. Ask for the tale of Francois Motierre.**

“Unfair! Unjust? _Traitor!?_ Cicero saw all!”

The Jester was practically wheezing as he raced up to them both. Kicking Astrid in her side with one pointy boot as she gagged and rolled over. Dry-heaving as she tried to escape his flurry of kicks and punches. “Finish it, Listener, kill her! This whore broke the Tenets, hee hee hee, _yes_, she stabbed you! Such restitution would surely please the Night Mother. And the rest of you, you...why, you
were no help at all! Watching, always watching, hee-hee, ho ho hoo. In silence! *Deafening silence!*

“Enough, Cicero. Stop.”

Pulling the Jester away from Astrid, Nemain held his spindly wrists with both hands. Expending a surprising amount of strength to keep the wiry little man from lunging at the defeated woman as he tried to beat her, to hurt her. Her boot hit something long and hard, and she heard her staff roll away, clattering over the ground.

She had nearly forgotten about it. “Anyone else have summat tae say about my contribution? Anyone?”

The other assassins merely shuffled their feet. *Good.*

“Now, this all be quite enough.” Nemain waved a hand over Astrid, casting a weak but sustaining healing spell. “Lay off of her, for our differences have been settled. I bear her no ill will, for she be my Sister before Sithis. And we all make mistakes, do we not? Surely no more of these shenanigans be necessary fer further accord. *Cicero. Stop it, Cicero - now, that be enough. Enough!*”

Dragging a giggling Cicero away with tight impatient jerks, Nemain licked her lips and stepped a few more paces away. She gripped his motley tightly; firm enough so that he could not attempt to make any move. Not even a hiccup that could be construed as an attempt to kill Astrid, for Arnbjorn was a large red blob of hate in her second sight. Shivering with pent up aggression, as the Dunmer -what be her name- spoke low and fast into his ear.

It was a right shame. Any fellow feeling between herself and Astrid’s spouse was now spoiled...she could practically *feel* the white were glowering at her as Veezara and Babette held him back.

So she cast another healing spell again, wincing at the pain in her chest as the Night Mother’s powdery voice whispered to her. Spider-thin with approval.

*Ask them. Ask, and they will tell. Not all contracts are meant to be bound in blood, Daughter, and you amuse me. Sithis accepts a life for a life. Or death, if you will.*

*Ask.*

She would ask. “Now, I havenae got all day tae sort out this clarty mess what ye’ve ended all up with. But I can tell ye that the Thalmor be several pots short of a pie tae piss in. You do this? You kill Ulfric? Hah! Och, well...doon count on receiving e’en a pouch of septims back in fair pay.”

“But we use dead drops.” Babette spoke, her voice small and uncertain. “We change them every time, especially for big clients. There’s no way they could trace us, and our reputation is good, Listener. Good enough that anyone thinking of double crossing us thinks twice.”

“If couriers can find yer dead drops well enough tae continue tae be drained and turn up missing, Babette, then others will follow. Others not so innocent.”

Nemain shook her head. “I summoned a daedra to escort me here, ye ken. That being had nae trouble at all finding the Dark Brotherhood’s Sanctuary, so who’s t’say others with less scruples will
no do the same, should ye grow careless? Those elves be not the kind tae honor their agreements. An’ that would be a waste of your time n’ talents, Babette, ending up on the payroll of the Thalmor. Have ye never heard aboot Valenwood? Of the Battle of the Red Ring? Of Corinthe and Orcrest?”

The idea of being cheated of their due certainly grasped their attention. Nemain could overhear several of them muttering sullenly, and she raised her voice. “Hardly grand bedfellows tae throw in your lot with, I can tell ye that. They’d continue demanding favors, one after another, until all yer pride be dross and yer resources be spent. And you’d be left with little choice but to comply, for they hae bought an’ paid for ye. Aye. T’would be a pity...losing your independent contracts tae end up a cog in the machine.”

“But I digress. Let’s start over. But first, ye’ll be telling me a wee story. Tis one I havenae heard before, but I have it on good authority from the Night Mother that one, at least one of you miserable shits knows yer histories.”

The Imperial gurgled with laughter as the Dragonborn’s hands tightened around his neck. Stranglingly close, then releasing as she thrust him away...drawing out the dagger from her chest in one great sucking pull.

She pointed it at Astrid, who so far had not moved an inch. Her Thu’um shook the cavernous sanctuary like thunder.

“So someone. Anyone mind telling me the tale o’ Francois Motierre, and what the fucker has tae do with sodding Ulfric Stormcloak!!”

A life for a life.

The words circled like a mating pair of felsaad terns in her troubled thoughts. Revolving like some sort of evil ouroborous. A life for a life. Life fer a death, a death fer a life.

It was impossible.

After a quick wash and an offer of supper, Nemain walked away from the longhouse holding Rhys’ oracle bones. Trailing a silent Farkas in tow, as she walked towards the cave Rhys had appointed as a temple of sorts, with a shrine to Hircine. All the while trying to ignore the baiting taunts of her very own thoughts.

Yer useless, unneeded here. You cannae even save one man. Not one, unless ye plan tae murder another, one of similar renown and interest. Who? Who could replace Bear? Who could ye possibly
kill tae nullify his contract? Why did ye even bother tae come back here?

Her staff dug into the snow, squeaking as she pulled it back up and stabbed it viciously back in. Gravel crunched underfoot as she kicked at it, keeping to the path as she felt the coolness of the cave surrounding her, stealing the very warmth from her body away.

And still Farkas did not speak, though she could hear him shifting his bulk as he walked. No armor today. Likely he be looking at her in disgust, now that he knew the truth.

That she was dead. That he had married a dead woman, with all her best years and deeds behind her. And she had nothing, now...nothing to look forward to but even more rot and ruin. Death after death after death, as more prayed to the Night Mother to ease their trials.

It was all she was good for. All she could expect.

Too weak tae bear up an’ ask him what he be all aboot hanging around, eh? Aye, too weak tae just end it already? That really be something, 'Dovahkiin'.

She didn't bother trying to parse out which taunts belonged to her own mind and which belonged to the nightmares. She couldn't blame Orphan’s Rock on the former. Hour upon hour, day after day the voices whispered, redefining her reclusive existence by shutting out the world while she sightlessly felt it move past her.

Almost living, but not quite.

Those fell demons spoke with her own voice, born from the dark she had harbored inside and held close until Farkas had come along. Knocking at the shell she had built up like a wall all around her. Letting the sun into the Void. Cracking her reserve, and as much as the Void had become a familiar friend she wanted to let it go, now.

She wanted to let it all go, all of her nurtured fear and self loathing, but it was hard. And she was so very tired.

He should hae never brought ye here. You be not needed. You are not wanted!

Sitting down with an inward curse, Nemain pulled the oracle bones from her robes and clasped them in both hands. Pressing them against her forehead as she rocked.

Willing her brooding thoughts to simply disappear.

Somewhere behind her, Farkas made a slight groan as he slid to the ground. Taking a seat, as she rubbed the bones between her palms and flung them onto the ground where they clattered. Spilling into a tangled nest, as her fingers stalked amongst them. Feeling for what secrets they might keep.
That's it. Keep wallowing. Things may no get worse, lass, but they certainly willnae get better.

And that's what terrified her most, she mused. More than the phantom pain in her healed chest, more than the hunger, more than the hateful monologues inside her head or even the fear of dying slowly. Rotting away by degrees, until she was a mindless thrall. Spent of anything save the craving for flesh.

What terrified her was this. Sitting here. Sitting here and thinking that this was all that was left and all that was ever going to exist for her.

That she would just continue to be; that the presence of her friends would give her just enough motivation to walk the thin line between lost and found. But she would never find a way to feel better about this. To feel good enough.

There's nothing left tae feel good about! Ye should leave. Leave without a word nor a trace, and ne'er return tae darken their door.

As she picked up and summarily discarded bone after bone, Nemain thought about her cousin. How she had overheard Rhys whisper something low and fervent to Baz upon their return, and for a brief, sharp moment? She had despised them both.

She couldn't get the sound of Rhys peppering kisses over Baz's tusked face out of her head. Be that how everyone had expected Farkas and I tae behave? That once she'd finally come clean about her unlife they'd be all over each other, deliriously happy, and that all would be perfect and wonderful forever?

Like some sort o' folk tale. Werewolf saves Dovahkiin. Werewolf weds Dovahkiin, she saves Skyrim's fledgling monarchy an' it all finishes with the devoted lover, what tups her three ways tae High Rock after they ride off intae the sunset. The end.

It was a ridiculous notion. She knew she was ruined inside -damaged goods- and Farkas was being altogether too young and blithe about all of this. He was still here, wasn't he, and she couldn't imagine why.

It was impossible for them to be happy the way Rhys and Baz were.

But the tiniest part of Nemain, the morsel that flickered around the edges of the wounds in her chest as though it wanted to knit them back together, wondered what it would feel like, if she tried that. If she lowered her guard, letting some of Farkas's sweet optimism in and...and...

She shook her head. It was all theory, of course. Nemain had known love, more than once: the infatuation of youth, the ease of casual companionship...and finally an all-engrossing, impossible passion.

No. She knew it could never feel like that again. That was a once-in-a-lifetime sensation -perhaps
several lifetimes, depending on how one looked at it.

But...most folk...they could love more than one person, aye? She picked up the bones and threw them again, her head mired in a tangle of confusion, misery and the faintest breath of hope. Nae the same way, o’ course, but...

An automatic, instinctive pain lashed through her at the very thought, but Nemain forced herself to think rationally. It happened. Unimaginable as it might have been, people did it all the time. Astrid had been enthralled with Ulfric once (and nearly every man east of the Throat of the World, to hear her brag of it) but she was blissfully happy with Arnbjorn. The tool.

Nemain sucked at her cheek and thought of Barenziah.

What would the Dunmer Queen have done if Talos -Tiber Septim- had cast her off, not because she had conceived, but because he had lost interest? Surely, she would not have gone back to her old life, not really. Even if she had lived hundreds upon hundreds of years, even after all the cruelty and political tomfoolery....until she was old and gray, every time she'd closed her eyes it would have been Talos's face she saw behind her lids.

Surely.

Nemain wondered if Barenziah had married Symmachus out of a broken heart. But then, the tale Nelacar told hadn't said much about Symmachus.

He was just a statue - a place holder, a threat...an alternate that was better than nothing. A means to an end that resulted in security for Barenziah. Giving her the seat to her rightful throne in Morrowind.

Nemain’s stomach turned, and she scrabbled around the dirt covered ground, searching for the bones. Farkas was no placeholder. What a horrid comparison! It was hardly his fault that they'd been caught up together in Sanguine's mischief.

Finding one bone that felt promising, she fingered it. A rib bone, short and curved. Another example, then. Were there any tales sung by bards that did not end in tragedy?

Not many. Not even Markynaz had sung much of love that lasted, that endured the test of time. Fjori and Holfgheir didn't survive their passion. The Shieldmaiden Mathilda beheaded Ragnar when she couldn't stand to hear him boast any further...though that hardly qualified as a love ballad, Nemain thought moodily. And Morihaus and Alessia had laid waste to everyone and everything around them...

...but Barenziah didn't die.

Barenziah had found happiness with Symmachus after Tiber Septim nearly destroyed her; conducting a torrid love affair with the thief known as Nightingale. Marrying Eadwyre of High Rock
after the Mournhold revolt...surviving to wield power and influence long after her detractors had passed on, their writings faded into obsolescence and dust.

The Dragonborn pondered this for awhile, the bone held forgotten in her hands.

She had not read The Real Barenziah for months; not since she had languished -bored and brooding- in the Palace of Kings in Windhelm that long and fateful winter. But she certainly remembered the plot...and she recalled what Nelacar had not thought worthy of relating during his lecture.

Barenziah and Tiber Septim were a perfect political match, made for each other in every way. She had loved him with an all consuming ardor. Then he learnt of her pregnancy -she didn't have enough to offer him, to stay his wrath- and Barenziah fled to her homeland after a forced abortion, filled with grief and shame. Horrible, crippling shame, that the love she had thought so impervious to trial and gossip had cracked beneath the pressure.

Nemain snorted softly. She was no Queen, but she could sympathize. Not a month...barely three weeks had passed! Since Bear had not found her. Had accepted the hand of a noble woman, born and bred for the crown...a beautiful, fertile fear thuaidh who could complement him in every way. Not three weeks after sharing Nemain’s bed.

But Symmachus had been there for Barenziah, Tiber’s general... and he had saved her as a child. Loved her, upon reacquaintance as a sorrow-struck adult. He had cared for her before and had loved her after; and in the end, she had come to care deeply for him too. The Nightingale be damned. Hadn't they begat and raised a son and daughter together?

Barenziah had endured disappointment and heartbreak. She had grown up and moved on.

Twisting her fingers around the bones, Nemain’s mind continued to wander. It could never be like it had been with Ulfric. With Bear. Never again.

But maybe with Farkas, uncomplicated, cheerful Farkas...well.

Nemain cast the rib bone aside. It would be different of course. Not the restless, combative passion that had branded her and Bear’s up and down courtship, but...comfortable. Soothing. Perhaps different wasn't so bad; it was different for Barenziah with King Symmachus, but she truly had been happy.

Different didn't have to mean less, did it? Could her life possibly be like that? Not 'could it be like that,' Nemain corrected herself sharply, cutting off her thoughts before it took her any further down the path of impossibility. Could have been like that. Whatever could have happened, the chance was gone. Thanks to her lich status and their past, things would never be simple between her and Farkas. Not now. Not ever.

The thought settled in a dark gloom over her heart and mind.

Her husband’s mild voice penetrated her woolgathering. “Watcha doing now?”
"Praying. Thinking. Casting the bones."

She heard a movement, and knew it was him. Doing something. Damn, what she wouldn’t give for just five minutes with full sight once again. "Dead men's bones. They tell you things?"

The deep resonance of his voice went right through her chest. Making her feel frail, somehow.

Weak. He made her weak.

_You be getting a divorce_, she thought to herself. _Nae yours to keep. Hands off._ "Sometimes. But be careful when ye pray, Farkas. Be verrah careful. For the gods...sometimes, they answer. And those answers be not what ye may seek at all."

Nemain pressed the smooth cool surfaces of the bones against her forehead, focused, then opened her palms. The bones fell like rattling sticks. Extending her forefinger, she sifted through them...searching. Concentrating hard upon her will.

_Et'Ada grant me Sight. Hircine, help me hunt. Dibe, give me courage. An' a woman's bravery, tae find a way. The way to save him._

_Gods above, let me save Bear from death._

"And what do the dead men tell you, now?"

Nemain appreciated the lack of condescension in his voice. Most other Nords would not have been so open minded. "Tis no’ a dead man’s remains I be holding. Not right now, methinks."

Yes. She grasped upon one bone, smaller than the others. This one was different.

_Special._

She twisted the bone round and round in her hands as Farkas sat down beside her. Placing it in her mouth, tasting it, she touched it. This bone was important.

"Tis something wild. It be..." She smacked her lips and allowed her mind to empty.

_fur flying, quick feet scatter-patter dead leaves...running, had to keep going! Runrun jumpfindeat. Must eat, had to eat -hunt, sleep-run-eat for the kits, the vixen, white fur and black bushy tail, cold salt blood in snow, famine/feast-

The Sight called. Her mind started to flicker with images of stories, bright pinpoint flashes of the Dark Brotherhood’s history refracted and reflected over and over in a thousand variations. Permutations and alternatives and choices and substitutions of Ulfric’s past, present and possible futures buffeted her.

It was chaos, and by the time it faded away Nemain was gasping: struggling to pick them apart, let alone find the thread that would unravel the tapestry. The solution to the problem.
There was...a fox. Her head hurt.

Summat about a fox?

“Why’s a fox bone important?”

Had she spoken aloud?

She slumped against Farkas, too tired to fight the pull of his embrace. “Perhaps it be nothing. Perhaps everything.”

Nemain shivered, suddenly spooked. Leaning forward away from him, she began feeling around her for the bones; scooping them up and bundling them into the bag, all too aware of Farkas’ fingers pressing into the curved ridge of her hip. “Tis nought but a faint hope of a dream, now. I will meditate upon it. Later.”

A warm hand took the bag of bones away, and she heard them clatter as Farkas placed them further away on the stone floor.

“So. If dead bones tell you truth, what do living ones say?”

What a strange question. One that she was almost certainly misinterpreting. What’re ye playing at, Companion?

She tried for lightness. Playing stupid. “Be you asking me tae rattle yer bones, Farkas? I just put that leg back intae place. Doon undo all me work.”

“Nah, not a bone. Got something hard that needs your attention, though.”

Lust - for the Dragonborn was not one to quibble over terms if the proper word presented itself - was proving to be an overwhelming sensation. She could imagine that fleeting touch of his hand down every limb, and in many places between.

And she definitely could imagine which parts of him were long and hard.

“Farkas…!” She bit off a curse as his fingers wandered from her hips to dance upon the straps of her smalls covered by her robes. Dangerously close. “Tis hardly logical. You be injured. Remember?”

“I think sex is better than logic. Can solve a number of things. Can’t prove it, though.”

“Logic be far from yer best attribute, Companion.”

Farkas was quiet. Then he spoke. “You can be a real bitch sometimes, Dragonborn.”

Nemain hung her head, silently wishing she could take that one back. She was tired, and this was shit...but Farkas didn’t deserve her rancor. “Gaun yerself, Companion, you only learning this now?”

“Hmph. Have to wonder if you gave Ulfric even half this much trouble.”

She laughed desperately. Of all the things tae bring up now. “So much more. I kept trying tae kill
him, y’ken, but he always came back alive and fighting. Like a bad septim that wouldnae go away.”

Farkas readjusted his leg, a muffled groan the only indication that it was giving him any pain. “Yeah. He’s a sucker for punishment, and so am I. What are you so goddamn afraid of, Nemain? What? You’ve done nothing but drive me away from the moment you woke up in my arms in the Ragged Flagon.”

Seconds ticked past as she tried desperately not to hyperventilate.

“Please. Talk to me.”

Nemain licked her lips nervously. It had come down to it, at last. *It was time to talk.*

The thought made her stomach pitch, but she welcomed the faint queasiness. It was a call to reason. It had to be done. *Didn’t he already know? Why in Dibe’s mercy was he still here?*

Almost as though Farkas could read her mind, he beat her to the punch. “Rhys told me.”

“Told ye what?”

Somewhere in the vast space beside her, the big man shifted his good leg. “Said you couldn't carry a babe.”

Nemain swallowed, attempting to move the cold lump of ice that had lodged deep down in her chest since she had discovered the true nature of their bond. “Farkas. Why are ye here? I do understand if ye wish-”

“-Know about the rest of it too.”

The sound of cloth brushing the floor came closer, and before she could grasp what was happening, Nemain found herself sitting upon his lap.

Huge thighs, arms like tree limbs...she had never felt more like a babe herself then at that moment. But the smooth, persistent way Farkas was stroking her side indicated that he was not thinking of anything remotely childlike.

Her breathing came in short, sudden spurts. Growing ragged, as he continued to touch her. And speak.

“Back outside of Riften, you smelled like rot. It went away, though, so I didn't think about the why of it 'til later, when I carried you. Found out you had no heartbeat. Fucking scared me half to death, that first night. Had to keep checking you for breathing, for some kind of response...thought you had died for real.”

His laughter puffed against her face. “Guess you're some sorta vampire, huh?”

*Vampire indeed.* “And people say ye be thick in the head.”

“About some things,” Farkas agreed. “So, yeah. I know what Rhys told me, but I want to hear you say it. I’m not going anywhere until the truth - the whole truth - comes out. What are you?”

Almost of their own volition, her fingers began to play with the embroidery on his sleeves.
“A lich.”

“Never fought one of those before,” He spoke slowly. Thoughtfully. “Something to do with necromancy, yeah?”

“Quite a bit.”

His skin was smooth and hot under her fingers. She let her hands wander under his shirt: up his broad back to his shoulders, back down again, up his front. *Perfection.*

Apart from some twitching, he let her do as she wished. “I must...I need tae consume life, Farkas. Animal, man, mer...I must needs eat them. Suck their life away, else my body decays and I lose all mental faculty.”

“Ah, like the elk. Always wondered why you killed so many of them on our way here. You damn near thinned the herd, bringing back so many for the cookfire.”

“Perhaps I thought ye were hungry.”

“Usually am. How’s that work anyhow? My leg feels near good as new, but you didn't use anything but restoration spells, right? Never figured a death mage would put much stock into healing.”

“Necromancy be essential tae the learnin’ of restoration!”

Gratefully she took the opening and ran with it, happy to talk of something other than her unlife. Relieved that the discussion was going so well.

“Other schools of magic be of use too. Like Illusion, tae calm a struggling patient. Alchemy fer potions tae cleanse the wounds and cure sepsis, bring doon fevers and keep a patient free o’ pain. Alteration may be used tae transfuse poison in the blood, restoration tae mend broken bones and reknit torn flesh. And necromancy...aye...knowledge of what tissue has died off and what yet be viable tae save can be priceless, in pursuit of-”

Callused fingers pinched her lips shut. "Gonna stop ya right there."

He didn’t sound upset, *thank the gods.* Just amused. “Lotta big words but yeah. Think I got the concept. Magic good. Yep.”

She touched his beard-soft cheek, light as a sigh, and her fingertips tingled at the contact. His thumb traced the edges of her hands, tipped up her chin. She could feel his eyes on her.

“Nemain.” he said.

*Oh, bollocks.*

“We cannae do this,” She insisted, feeling her torn heart snarl up with every word. “Why by the Et’Ada would ye want me? Why’d ye stay? You had the chance t’get out when you could, and I’m trying hard but I dinnae understand ye, Stout. You were told. Ye know. I’m not getting any better from this-”
He put a finger over her lips. “No, but you’re not dying either. Put a good meal in you and you can
survive a fucking avalanche. You ask me? That’s pretty special.”

“But I still am. Dying, I mean. So I think the question isn’t why would I want ya. It should be, why
would you bother with me?”

He cleared his throat gruffly. “That’s if you want to stay married to someone who can’t keep up with
all your fancy talk, of course. Icebrain here. Remember?”

Oh, this hurt. Her heart hurt.

Squinching her eyes shut, she opened them and stared at him, transfixed by the glow in his form.
Flaring softly, then brighter than the auroras she remembered dancing in the star dotted skies. She
was caught by the emotion flooding out of him, unexpressed, but all the more real for it.

His deep voice changed. Becoming warm and tender, as his hand cupped the side of her face.
“Nemain.”

And that was all.

She was in his arms, and his lips came down on hers. She accepted this, for who was she to deny
something they both wanted?

She accepted him.

For an unending moment they simply explored one another: a bit tentatively, with gentle kisses. A
sip and a taste, for this was still so new and delicate. Fraught with risk.

But then his arms tightened and she tilted her head just so, and the kiss changed. It became more. It
took. Their lips opened and her breath stopped and he was there, tangling with her as his grip became
bruising. As she was held fast by his tongue and his taste and his touch.

Farkas was here. He wasn’t going away, and it wasn’t disgust she felt searing her mouth with
desperate, scalding need.

She spared a hot hazy moment to reflect that the werewolf was practically devouring her, trapping
her head between his hands like a vise, and the way it felt? It burst like a summer rainshower inside
her. Making her happy. Filling her with hope. Lucky, lucky Barenziah!

She burrowed closer, reveling in the strong arms around her, the dark, spicy, masculine smell of his
chest, the steel of his body...the hard nudge against her stomach that told her without words that he
wanted her, as his head dipped down and his teeth worried the soft skin of her neck.

Somehow, she knew with her Thu’um, by his very breath that he wanted her; that he thought every
inch of her scarred breasts and stomach and hips were worth kissing, and it froze her yet again.
Surprising her utterly...receiving such a shock not once, but twice in a single week.

Blinking back tears, she did what she had wanted to do ever since she had first met him. Naked and
nonchalant; scaring her shitless in the forests east of Whiterun.

She fisted her hands in his long, beautiful dark hair. Pulling it tight, luxuriating in its weight...tugging until he made a needy, painful sound.

He nudged her head up, kissed her wet eyes free of moisture. Then his mouth came down on hers. And his hands were everywhere: possessive, almost rough. Claiming and branding her for his own.

Nemain melted against him as if she had always belonged there. Her husband's kiss was sweet, but under it was a hard demand, a man’s onslaught. Her arms curled around his neck and she clung to him, opening her mouth, inviting him in. Her head reeled from the smoky male smell of him, the way he tasted like snow and tundra grass and something else. *Something intrinsically Farkas.*

The kiss made her feel wild. Made her feel deeply alive. He had his hand on her cheek, tilting her head back, kissing her like there was no tomorrow and this was it. This was the only chance they had.

*This was intimacy,* she realized suddenly. It had been so long, and she had nearly forgot, what with how spotty her previous encounters had been, but now-

Farkas nipped her lower lip, demanding all of her attention, and Nemain shivered against him involuntarily; as if she’d been struck by a cold wind.

He gave a little growl in response and tilted her head even further back. Pulling...taking his turn to lace his fingers through the short ruff of her hair. Exposing her throat to his gaze to the point where she could barely swallow.

*Once. Twice,* he licked her there...on the jugular where a large vein would have beat, had she possessed a heart still living.

Then his mouth slid from her throat to the curve of her jaw, leaving her to move restlessly against him. His arms ran more slowly, more surely down her back.

Pulling her closer.

Nemain whimpered, practically kneeling on his thigh, so intent she was on the intoxicating warmth of his arms and his lips that-

“Keep yer eyes closed,” she ordered, feeling a flash of courage. If his eyes remained closed the entire time, it would put them on equal footing.

And she could pretend, at least for a while, that they were equal in other respects as well.

She managed to pull his shirt over his head, discovering with her fingers that his torso was beautiful; with a narrow, taut waist.

She caressed every bit of his chest and then -touching his eyelids to ensure he was following her dictum- Nemain leaned in close and placed her mouth where her hands had been.

A low noise broke from his lips. “No peeking,” she warned. “And dinnae move. Dinnae do so much
as blink.”

His lips tightened against her thumb, but he nodded.

She bent to him again, kissing him, tasting him. Dusting little kisses over his entire chest, enjoying
the springy texture of his chest hair as he sat stock still, so obediently. And she kept coming back to
his nipples because every time she rubbed her lips across them he responded. It was like brandy, that
little sound he made. Almost a whine. Nearly canine.

It was power, and his submission was a heady brew. She was fair drunk on it.

She forgot to touch his eyelids, reassuring herself that he wasn’t watching. Instead she came closer,
squirming onto his lap so that she could rub more than her mouth against him. She wanted to feel
more of this. She wanted to touch everything.

“I like the way you look when you’re happy.” His voice came out strangled. Almost more vibration
than sound.

“You were tae keep yer eyes closed,” Nemain grumbled, giving in to temptation and running a
fingertip along his lashes. Long and thick, the envy of any lass. Surprising, on a man’s face.

She wished more than anything to see him. “You’re sae beautiful, Farkas. Too bonny a man fer the
likes of me.”

He laughed at that. “You’re blind, remember? And I think we suit each other just fine.”

She trailed her finger down, across his full bottom lip, leaned forward and carefully followed that line
with her tongue.

“Can I move now?” he murmured against her lips.

“Mmm,” she whispered back, loving the taste of him.

Big hands came to her back and pulled her against his naked chest. One hand held her against him
while another slid down her back, slow and sensuous. “You gonna take off your clothes, or do you
want me to do it?” He said it low and soft, like a dare he knew she couldn’t resist.

She almost tumbled off his lap, but caught herself in the nick of time. “Unh. Actually, Farkas,
perhaps we should return-”

“No.”

It came out more like a command than a negation, but she laid her hands on his cheeks, his eyes, his
lips. Wishing to see just how he looked, right then as he kneeled there so patiently. His hands quiet at
her back as she felt for the telltale signs of emotion she could taste on her tongue. Because she could
sense it; this leashed power coiled and waiting within him.

Barely held in check, waiting to spring free.
“If you go back to the longhouse and leave me here like this, I swear to Shor...I will put you over my knee and I will spank the living daylights out of you, woman.”

She chuckled despite herself at the threat. “But tis probably close tae dinner, Farkas. Do ye want to miss din-”

“Yes. Please. Take off my pants. Don’t think I can manage them so well with my sore knee.”

“Still healing? It be doing well, if ye be able tae walk upon it as ye were earlier.”

He grunted again. “Just...undo them. Meet me halfway. I’ll do the rest.”

A massive hand cupped her rear and squeezed. Wringing a gasp from her as his forefinger slid down, down deep. Brushing against her softness, her curls.

She was already sopping wet, and when she rubbed her thighs together, she knew that he knew it too. “Gods almighty, I love these easy-access robes. You should wear them all the time.”

Pulling away from what his hand was doing in that oh-so-sensitive spot was a struggle, but she managed it. “Aye. I think so, too.”

Nemain leaned a little closer and found the top of his pants. She fumbled, her fingers trying to manipulate the buttons, aware that his self control (like hers) was fraying fast.

Once she noticed how he trembled at her touch, she slowed down...caressing just inside the upper band. Loving his swift intake of breath as her fingers dipped inside, lower.

Slowly, slowly, she eased the pants over his lean hips, down powerful thighs. Once they were at his ankles, he moved -swiftly kicking them off to the side. Now he wore nothing but smalls, which did very little to conceal what lay underneath from her questing hands.

She was careful working Farkas free, trying not to show too much awe at the size of him. He threw the smalls after the breeches and came back to her.

“My turn.”

A wave of anxiety flooded through her again and sent her hands skittering back to push her across the ground. Away from all that perfection, only to find that her blasted robes had been caught up against her elbows and now revealed her ugly flesh. Emphasizing the scars, jagged tooth marks and rough patches all laid bare.

There in the open, framed with her robe...out for him and all of Mundus to see.

Anguish prickled the small hairs on her arms as she plucked at the folds of cloth. Covering up, as she felt something akin to shame. He had seen her naked before. Plenty of times. *Why be this different?*

He said not a word. Merely reaching out to push away her hands, undoing the hitch tie so gently that she cringed. “Doon you dare pity me,” she snapped. “Doon you dare!”
“I don’t.” Farkas replied. “I’ve got scars, too.”

And as she digested that matter-of-fact statement, Farkas’s hands divested her of her robes and began shucking off her leggings. Ripping them from each leg with quick, jerky tugs. She heard a soft _fwap_ as they hit the ground somewhere, further out of reach, and then?

She was lost to him. Lost in him.

Gods, those hands were everywhere as he bid her lay down to lie flat. Touching her, smoothing down the arches of her calves...sliding underneath her arse as he bit into the meat of her thigh, his beard alternately tickling; then warm and wet as he soothed the little pain with a press of his mouth.

She went limp, hardly minding the icy cold of the cave floor as hot fingers cupped her sex. Making it clear that every silky inch met with his satisfaction. Finally inching up, parting her folds, one finger going...there.

Nemain stiffened, nearly kicking him as a broken moan erupted from her lips.

“Easy, there. _Easy_. You’re so goddamn tight,” Farkas muttered. “That’s it, wife.”

Elocution escaped her. There were many things she could have said, things she wanted to say, to heap praise upon his clever, _wonderful_ fingers, but all she could manage was a breathy “oh. Oh _gods_!” and “Doon stop!”

She bowed against him like a bowstring as his mouth gathered up as much of one breast as would fit. Nearly enveloping her entirely. She squirmed as his tongue swirled around one peak, doing things to her nipple as his hand cradled her most private of places.

“Ugh. I...I really like it when ye growl like that. Mmph.”

“You make me sound like a rabid dog.” He said, his words muffled against her chest.

She threw her hands over her head in a happy stretch that signaled pure pleasure. “I don’t mean tae compare ye to a dog, Farkas. You’re- tis as though you’re sae happy tae be here. With me.”

“You’re mine,” He said roughly. As though it were an indisputable point. “Of course I’m happy you’re here.”

He nudged her legs apart. “And I think you’re happy to be here too, doll. Or you very soon will be.”

One last rough lick, one more twist of that talented hand...

It had been so long, so _very_ long since anyone had touched her outside of intent to do violence that she...she simply fell apart. The side of her that was Nemain -wry, pessimistic, and calculating- was swallowed up by a wave of pleasure so acute that her body twisted. Arching in a silent scream that...
matched the one pouring from her lips.

The cave walls rumbled, a fine dust sifting from the ceiling. Coating her forehead in matter as her echo trebled through the rock and her insides pulsed. Trapping her husband’s hand, as he deftly removed it. She heard him as he licked his fingers clean, waiting as docile as a lamb as he reared over her; pulling her into just the right position as he thrust home.

Holy fuck.

It was the tail end of that red-hot blindness, the utter rending of self, and for a moment Nemain didn’t register the intrusion. And the next moment she did. It was huge, scalding her inner walls with heat. Excruciating.

Still, this was Farkas inside her. He couldn’t possibly grow any bigger, so the pain of accommodating him wouldn’t get worse.

Hopefully.

“You feel so...” His voice was ragged, rough with passion. He didn’t finish the sentence, and Nemain did not intend to wait.

It was as instinctive as breathing. She rocked back, locked her legs around his back and took the last bit of length of him...then changed her mind and wished she hadn’t. Desire was one thing; being gutted with a battering ram was quite another.

His throat worked and he let out a low noise; a growl of male possession and pleasure that turned the rest of her not caught up shrieking silent curses into jelly.

“I dinnae want you tae move again, not backwards or forwards.” She whispered. Oh gods. Oh gods. This was ridiculous. “I was right. Yer far too big.”

A fierce laugh ripped out from his throat, more wolflike than anything she had ever heard from him before.

He dropped his head and gave her a lingering kiss. She tasted what must have been herself on him. Salt and musk. “Huh. Think I’ll stay here forever,” he whispered in her ear. Biting the lobe of it.

“Yep. Think this is my favorite place in the world.”

“They’ll have tae craft ye some huddy strange armor,” Nemain said, half joking -because if she didn’t, she might think too much about what a horrid tragedy this was. They didn’t fit together. He was simply too large.

“This willnae work,” she said, when Farkas didn’t respond to her jest about the armor. He was kissing her cheek and her ear. Which was very sweet, but as every nerve in her body was attuned to the waves of discomfort sweeping from between her legs, she would be thrilled to dispense with the kisses.

He made a little sound of glee and started kissing her eyebrows. Annoying. Very annoying. “Out!” she hissed, giving him a little push. “Get out, get out, get yer monstrous cock outta me hole!”
“Can’t. Monster’s gotta stay put. Someone told me not to move.”

She hit her head against the ground with dejected thud. “This be no time tae develop a sense of humor.” You hypocrite. Ye just named his favorite body part with an epithet that t’will swell his head forevermore.

He rubbed noses with her, such a startling, tender movement that she caught back the tart rejoinder she had been about to make. “Does it feel better now?”

Tensing her inner muscles experimentally, she smiled, triumphant as he bit back a strangled yelp. The hot spiked stretching had eased...becoming a bit more tolerable the longer she thought about it.

It almost felt pleasurable, now -and moving seemed to bring back more of that luscious delirium than staying still. So, she wiggled her hips.

“Wee bit. Maybe.”

“Good. Let’s try a different position, then. Aye?”

Then he was gone and his hands were turning her around, lifting her belly so that she was on all fours. His large hands slowed in their possessive crawl, splaying over her rear as she gasped at the suddenness of movement. Of course she couldn’t see anything, but there was a certain sort of freedom in merely feeling; never knowing what would be coming next. In losing herself to solely sensation.

“Gods, you’re beautiful, Nemain.”

She wanted to interrupt him, to say that no, she wasn’t beautiful. Wasn’t she the blind one? Her hips were too bony and her skin bore the marks of war and her breasts were utterly unimpressive, but there was something in his voice that made the comment die in her throat.

His voice made her beautiful. His hands caressed her, and she felt as if they were her own hands: from him, she learnt the beauty of a woman’s form; basked in his appreciation of a subtle curve, delighted in the scented, mysterious space between a woman’s legs.

They were so in-tune that her body knew what he wanted before her mind did, as that part of him entered her, filling her up. Closing her mind off entirely to anything that resembled rational thought or logic. Then, he was pounding into her and it was all she could do to hold on to the shreds of herself, for she felt both him -almost too large, pulsing with life- and herself.

Soft and velvet, wet to his hardness.

She felt his body as much as hers.

But those delicious heat waves were just starting to spread; to grow from her toes, to rock through her body and everything slid away from her but the feeling of his strong body cradling her from behind. The wildness of his teeth and tongue, the sheer strength he held caged back as he shook in
want? It made her long for more, for the sweet oblivion of her and himself. Together.

She arched back, welcoming him without words. It didn’t hurt. She would have begged for more, even if it still had. No going back now.

His hands encircled her waist and pulled her against him, insistently, making it slow; each stroke a promise to Nemain’s mind. Their life strung forward, days and nights looping with him…no longer alone...

Flowery lines of poetry and exclamations were not enough. There were times when screaming was called for, especially when Farkas slipped a hand in front of her body and began a wicked dance with his fingers.

He rode her until she shattered; then turned her about so he could kiss her again. Lifted her onto a hard surface that she thought might have been the shrine of Hircine, as he angled her so that her legs wrapped around his hips.

And then he whispered hoarsely that he didn’t want to climax without seeing her face. That he didn’t want to miss anything.

She cried out when he said that.

And when he came, filling her deep inside with the hot spurt of creation, of life; she saw it happen. She saw because she had placed her fingers like a web around his face, his lips, his throat. She felt every vibration. Caught every change, greedily drinking in every last gasping sigh and moan. For what be a scream, after all, but a prelude to both joy and pain?

He was so deep within her that she no longer could tell; did not feel like they were two people any longer.

Just one.

Afterwards, they lay there on the cave floor. And the usually-chatty Nemain was curiously silent.

Too silent.

“You all right?” He finally asked, propping himself up on one elbow. They had spread their clothing out to take away some of the soreness from lying flat on the uneven, bare stone. But the Companion didn’t mind. Fact was, he would have put up with great deal more of any discomfort just to continue lying close to her, to his wife. His woman now in truth.

Enjoying the afterglow together. Suffused with the heady knowledge that she was his, now. His in every way that mattered.

“I hae never been so right,” she said a moment later. If it had been anyone else, he would have said

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she sounded thunderstruck. 

Monster cock. Hah...never gonna let her live that one down. Farkas chuckled, then tucked her a bit closer against his side.

She curled up in the crook of his arm like she was meant to be there. Huffing with a tiny, nearly imperceptible sigh that shot right through any last line of defense he might have borne against her wiles. Yep. Idiot that he was, he was a goner.

Not that it had taken much to confirm it. He had fallen for her long before she had opened her legs for him.

Completely.

Shifting restlessly as the light slowly faded from the opening of the cave, Farkas smiled to see a tiny leaf rest upon the smooth knob of her shoulder. It had probably been blown into the cave during the warmer season, stirred up by their erotic exertions. A teeny, tiny, little yellow leaf.

Lifting her arm, he leaned over and kissed her shoulder. Pressing his lips against one of her many, oddly shaped scars. There was a more purplish, fresh looking slice right between her breasts, and it made him frown. Studying it, he rested his head against her arm as she hummed. A catchy song he thought he had heard once before.

Would she tell him what had caused it, if he asked her flat out? Was it painful?

Worse still...had he hurt her?

Farkas was pretty sure she had enjoyed the experience as much as he had, judging by the scream that had nearly brought the cave down on top of them. He had gathered enough lovers over his lifetime to have attained some boastworthy skill at this; to ensure that his partners felt nothing but ecstasy.

But was the Dragonborn one of those women who only pretended to be engaged to make a man pleased?

Hard to say, he thought. Usually he was a fair judge of honesty, but he had been surprised before. Some women were very, very good at pretending, and with that untoward thought, a shadow of doubt crept into his heart.

It would break him if she turned out to be one of those women who for whatever reason couldn’t experience genuine pleasure. Across his travels in the inns, taverns and stables scattered across Skyrim he had found himself in a few beds like that.

He used to do his best -and he knew quite well that his best was about the best there was, thanks to his twin’s advice- and if it didn’t work? It rankled, but he gave up the effort. Took his own pleasure, thanked the woman kindly, and then walked away.

“What be that for?” Her voice drifted up, drowsy.

Better to ask her later. There had better be another ‘later.’
Watching the dying light—and feeling the tug of Secunda, pulling at his second soul—Farkas put aside such dour musings and infused his smile into his voice. Pulling back all the happiness and contentment he had felt before dark thoughts had taken such a hold over his mind.

“You had a leaf on your arm. I can’t not kiss you when you have a leaf on your arm. It’s too cute.”

She yawned, wrinkling her dainty nose. “I be the last woman in the world what I’d be termin’ cute, fear thuaidh.”

“Oh, so it’s come back to the name calling. You can’t help being cute. And hey. I like it.”

Farkas nuzzled her armpit, working his nose in a swooping glide until he reached one pinkish, dusky breast, where he stopped to admire it. *Definitely cute.*

He licked her, making the tip perk up and beg for more. “You’re like a pretty little doll, Dragonborn. Don’t fight it. Just accept your cuteness.”

She scowled down at him. Adorably. “Take it back!”

“Nope.” He popped the ‘p’, turning his attentions to the other breast. It looked lonely.

“I be no ‘doll’, tae be dressed and posed fer your pleasure!” She was growing agitated, as she flapped her arms, half heartedly pushing at him to move. More in denial than was usual...not that her body wasn’t enjoying his attentions.

Farkas decided she must be upset about something else, because her hands were pulling him slowly back down onto her. He tried again to fit an entire breast into his mouth and hummed around it as she writhed beneath him. Nearly tearing his hair out again as he slid down her body and gave her an open-mouthed kiss right *there*, upon the opening of her womanhood.

Right where she was all pink folds, sweet liquor and tight, maddening pulsation.

“I love the way you taste,” He told her, just in case she didn’t know that by now. “You taste like honey and juniper and snowberries—”

“Snowberry soap,” she choked out.

He laved his tongue another few minutes on a particularly delicate spot, just to punish her for having been clear-headed enough to mention soap. He had a mission. He would put her in a good mood, before the night became complete. Any doubts he had about her ability to receive pleasure were long gone now, as her body trembled with the quivering force of her strange vocalizations, her Thu’um.

Giving himself one personal moment, Farkas spread her lips wide open and gave her a single, long and (deliberately torturous) lick.

Then he stopped. “What did you say?” he asked, keeping his tone of voice innocent.

She raised her head, her mouth parted and eyes wild. He knew that look and loved it: *that* was the look of a woman who was about to strike a man.
“Sorry, doll.” His voice was a low rumble. Shit, this was hard staying in control, when everything in him craved being inside of that slick, wet softness. Tighter than a clenched fist.

“You wanted dinner. Right?”

She had her fingers in his hair, and she was panting. Good.

A few minutes later, he raised his head again. “Snowberry soap?”

Nemain flexed her legs, looking dazed and desperate. “…Please…”

“Uh-huh. M’kay.”

So he bent his head again and this time he let his fingers wander everywhere, because his tongue was terrifically busy and there were other parts of her that needed some loving.

And then, he finally took her home.

It took all he had not to slip into her. But he wordlessly coaxed with his mouth and ignored her protests, until she started curling her toes against his legs and began uttering little screams.

The damn cave was shaking again. Oh well.

And finally, he had her…she cried out again and again, and her sweet slender body curled toward him, convulsing with pleasure as her thighs bore down and squeezed. Nearly popping off his head.

She rolled over, bringing him to his back as she slid down his length. Her face was carved in a rictus of some strangely fierce joy. “That be it. Enough silly names, and enough…I can hardly feel my legs! Tis my turn tae do things to you, now.”

Yes! His inner libido exulted.

And damn was he ready, aching and reaching for her with every limb he had, plus one, when all of a sudden her face paled and she stumbled.

Stepping away from him, as he blinked in lust and not a bit of befuddled confusion. “Oh shite. Sorry…should have asked if ye minded bein’ climbed like a tree. Do you-?”

“…Mind if a beautiful woman rides me on top?” Farkas managed to eke out. Weird. Of all the strange hangups to have about sex.

He grabbed her hand and flattened it against his chest, noting how she relaxed the longer he spoke. “Nope. Got no real preferences, but lots of stamina. So go ahead. Ride away.”

She really did have the most lovely smile. “Good tae know.”

And after giving him a coy look that sent inhuman amounts of blood coursing through his abused parts, she dragged herself downwards and put her mouth on him. Creating a suction that felt indescribable. Nearly aedric. Heavenly. He had no words.

Then, Farkas gave up any semblance, any grasp he had left of control. And followed where she led him, trusting her, as he took his turn wringing the hair from her head as he threw his own head back
and screamed for joy.

He followed her.

Straight into the storm.

The sun had gone down completely, casting them both into the blackness of the cave.

Farkas had nodded off in exhaustion, coming awake only when Nemain prodded him none-too-subtly with her pointy witch finger. Ouch.

“Farkas?”

“Hmm? What?”

Her hand reached up, bumped against his chin and then immediately began combing through his hair.

He preened beneath her attentions like a cat, enjoying the grooming of his scalp. It deserved it, after all the yanking and pulling she had delivered earlier that night.

“Farkas, if you could save a friend by doing a deed that be questionable...perhaps homicidal, would ye do it? Would you save them?”

“Sure. Yeah, if it was something in my power to do, I’d jump on the chance to save a friend.”

He squinted in the dark, frowning at the strangely intent look that had come over Nemain’s face. “Just what are ya getting at, exactly? Gonna take off on me again?”

“Hmm.” Her fingernails tapped his head, repetitively. “I was thinkin’ more along the lines of going on an errand with ye...if ye be up fer a bit of an adventure.”

“I’m always down for a road trip.”

He pulled her fingers from his hair and threaded his hand through. Holding her still against him. “Wanna keep up your honest streak and tell me what this is all about?”
She went all stiff and blocky. *Aw, shit. Not again.* “I...I will. I cannae tell ye everything. But what be within my power to reveal, I shall, Farkas. I just pray that you'll not regret the decision ye have made this day...tae throw in your lot with mine. Being lich be not an easy or clean way tae survive.”

Her voice dropped, becoming barely audible. “No regrets, Stout?”

Farkas squeezed her hand gently as he thought about what to say in return.

He had eaten men. Had cracked open ribcages, to rip out and gobble up the heartflesh that he craved as a werewolf. It wasn’t exactly something he was proud of, but being moon-called begat certain needs. She was his to care for, now, so as her husband he would help provide for her supernatural urges, too.

And it was all for the better if taking her hunting was something that they could do together. As a couple - *a family.*

His chest warmed at the thought. “Don’t regret nothing. Still figure you’re getting the raw end of the deal here, dollface-”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Sure, cutie. Anyway…” He grinned as she pulled away her hand and hit him. Not hard enough to hurt, but just enough to make her annoyance known. “Hey. You hit me? I spank you. Trust me...it’s not as sexy as it sounds.”

“I might take ye up on that. Not tonight, of course. I doon mind a bit of pain. But later.”

Farkas took a moment to direct a prayer to Father Shor in Sovngarde. Thanking him most beatifically for a wife that not only *enjoyed* bedroom play, but took an active interest in trying new things.

“Looking forward to it. A life lived alone is no life at all, wife. Now, stop asking if I’m gonna leave you, because it’s not gonna happen.”

“That...actually be rather touching, Farkas. No life at all, alone.”

She aimed a kiss at his lips and fell short, landing on his chin. “...Rather poetic. Fer an icebrain.”

He smiled and kissed her twice. He would have given in and taken advantage of her ready and waiting mouth, to start something up again, but he was starving and they both smelled alot like cave mold and stale, stinky sweat. *Phew.*

“Didn’t write it. It’s part of Mara’s wedding oath. Not that either of us remembers any of that night, being ploughing drunk and all.” Farkas sighed. “I really need to step up the romance in this marriage if it’s gonna work out long term. Don't I. This wasn't exactly the best start.”

“...Romance?”

Her fingers stopped their teasing track down the hairline of his abdomen.

“Yeah. Romance. You've heard of it? Sunset boat rides on Lake Ilinalta, overpriced wine and cheese plates and shit. You know...the stuff bards waste rolls of parchment harping on about. All that stuff? You didn't get it on our wedding night. But you definitely deserve all that, uh, stuff. Tell you what: we'll hit up Whiterun, I may or may not ask Aela for some advice, and maybe then I can make a
headstart on it. On romance.”

“C’mon.” He gripped her wrist and pulled her up to a standing position with him, handing over her clothes. She was looking in his direction with a bemused sort of smirk on her face.

“Stop gawking. I know it’s criminal, covering this all up with clothes, but it’s high time we get moving. Before the food’s run ou- what in Kyne’s name is that?!?”

An odd wheezing screech floated in from the outside. Farkas gritted his teeth. It sounded like an animal being put out of its misery. Like it had been gutted, and was now wailing...crying out in indigestion.

His stomach rippled in sympathy. “Uh. Have Rhys and Baz not killed dinner yet?”

“That’s not dinner,” Nemain chortled, pulling on her leggings. “That be the infamous pipes we were gabbin’ on aboot last time, afore I left. Looks like Rhys is not about tae let us skimp out on music night. Nae matter how pointedly we be not available.”

“Damn.” That is one sodding ugly-sounding instrument. He began dragging his feet as Nemain picked up her staff and bag of bones, laughing as she butted up against him with her hip. “What? Aren’t ye going tae impress me with yer amazing drumming skills, Companion? I’ll admit, I’ve been lookin’ forward to music night fer days. Truly! It’ll be great fun.”

“Fun. Aye. That sounds like fun.”

The skreeing melody was only getting louder, and against his will (and eardrums) Farkas guided Nemain through the cave entrance and out onto the path. Unwilling to let go of her free hand, as she gripped her staff in the other, using it to feel for rocks and trees in her path.

“Hey, uh...did you ever try out that staff? See what it does?”

Her pale face swiveled to his. Almost owl-like in the dark, white teeth glinting as she grinned. “Aye, I did. It be greatly useful. I’ll tell ye all about it, on the path tomorrow as we make fer the doors of Markarth.”

“Markarth?” He nearly tripped in the snow. Her small hand heaved him back up onto his feet, and belatedly he realized that she could probably get around better than he could, out here in the forest dark.

*Even with his wolven sight.* For he kept tripping upon roots hiding beneath the snow, more concerned with the pipes and Nemain’s safety, and she...well, she hardly ever fell.

“Um. Why Markarth, Nemain? Last I heard, it was full of your crazy kin killing anyone who comes within arrow-shooting distance. There’s better options for a honeymoon out there. I promise.”

"Honeymoon? Be this some sort o’ fear thuaidh frivolity? I cannae take a holiday, Farkas. I have a job tae do."
He scratched his head, sniffing the tracery of smoke that hung in the air. *Mmm. Venison and potatoes for dinner.* “Does this have anything to do with that little errand you were talking about earlier?”

“Aye.” Nemain turned her face up to the stars and sighed. “I finally figured it out, while ye were resting. An Sionnach Dubh.”

“Bless you. That sounded like a sneeze. Was that a sneeze?”

Their footsteps crunched in the snow, and now Farkas could hear a raucous collection of flutes, drums and lutes being played wildly out of tune. All at once, with no discernible rhythm or harmony...just the din of good, old fashioned, child-created chaos.

Oddly, he was looking forward to it, to being near the children and Nemain for the rest of the night. Making merry as they ate, drank and sang. Cuddling her close to him on the bench, as the adults talked and the children nodded off into their mugs of tea and hot milk.

*Well.* He'd enjoy it as long as the pipes played a small role in the coming festivities.

He winced as a reed blew apart with a high-pitched craw, followed by some very rough cursing in Orsimer, Reachtalk and what *had* to be some form of Elvish.

*Very small.*

Nemain answered his question while he tried to figure some way to ask Rhys - very politely- to not play his instrument. “...Nay, it means ’The Black Fox.’ Tis a small name, a pet name amongst friends, if ye will.”

“Great. What does this fox have to do with your errand to Markarth, then?”

She stopped, her hand nearly pulling his shoulder from the socket. He turned to look down at her, his warm breath puffing out in clouds.

Nemain’s face had gone smooth - utterly blank. The coldest, most remote look he had ever seen her wear, and the predator inside him noted this. Marked the presence of the dragon in the Dragonborn.

Of the killer, hiding inside his sweet, doll-faced wife.

“What be my errand?” The corners of her lips turned up.

It was not a happy smile. “The Black Fox be the pet name of the Ard-Rí an Ruigsinneachd. One who bears great power an’ respect in the west wold of the Druadach. My old home, if ye didnae ken it already. He be someone I be bound to, in various ways. Bound tae slay, so it turns out, in order tae save a life. A similarly influential life, of one I hold...er. Held dear.”

Taking in his confusion, Nemain shook her head...that smile remaining firmly in place. “*Madanach,* husband. I’m going tae murder Madanach. The King in Rags. The High King of the Reach.”

Something in her filmy eyes made him abruptly alert. Aware, as he never had bothered to be before, of her hands. The conduits to her power...fingers curling and stretching. Readying her magicka to be used.
“...And you’re going tae accompany me there to kill him.”

Her smile brightened. “But only if ye be so inclined.”

Farkas sighed. He still didn’t understand why she felt the need to do something so...odd. Markarth was way off the beaten path, with a well deserved notoriety for danger and...it didn’t sit well with him. This scheme that could only end in more strife. More heartache for his jinx-fettered, mayhem attracting woman.

Trouble followed her like iron pulled towards a magnetic filling in a smithy - inevitably drawn into the center of all the tumult.

_But she could hardly help it, could she..._it wasn’t like she went out of her way to pick fights with dragons, kings and gods. _Right?_

But Farkas would not deny her this. Not if she felt so strongly about it.

He raised his shoulders in a half-shrug, as she cocked her head expectantly. “Course I’ll go.” He smacked his lips, looking even more forward to dinner now that he knew hot meals would soon start becoming scarce.

“-But only if Rhys’s music night doesn’t take my hearing first. I gotta have standards, after all.”

“Farkas. If you help me with this, I’ll play ye sae many bodging songs on the lute that it t’will gladly drown out that boshing clangor Rhys imagines tae be the heartblood of our homeland.”

She blinked, and the predator he had spied hiding behind her eyes disappeared. Leaving only his smiling wife.

It was less awkward, having Nemain and not the dragon tugging insistently at his hand. He didn’t trust that cool distance he smelled and saw. Not as far as he could throw her, which come to think of it was probably still quite a long way...“Come on, Farkas, make haste! Baz said she hae prepared both jazberry and apple pies for us tonight.”

“...Apple is my favorite.”

Her tinkling laughter warmed him almost as much as the promise of a roaring fire would. “Och, I know! Ye tell me of Tilma’s incredible apple pies near every day I be with ye! I’m half-inclined tae make a stop in Whiterun, just to taste all the food you be olagoin’ on aboot! Come on, then. The bairns’ll be scarfing it all doon, leaving us nought but scraps if we doona hurry!”

“Not my pie! Nooo!”

Lifting her over his shoulder, Farkas grabbed that stupid staff and made great time; booking it for the front door.

That same warmth followed them into the longhouse and became reflected; multiplying as the chiming of children welcomed them to the hearth, as Baz tore Rhys away from his bagpipes and ushered him towards their honored guests. Where food and shelter and love prevailed, as in the west
darker things waited. Watching, casting their own bones and splitting entrails, as they read those self-same stars.

...Preparing with solemn prayers, ceremony and sacrifice for Death Herself to arrive, as the planets spun in a tilt-a-whirl around Mundus, and Midwinter drew ever closer.

They waited. Waited with unblinking eyes for the dawn...and a new day that had long ago been prophesied. A day they chanted and prayed for, that they hoped would never come to pass.

Hidden in the night, they waited.

Waited for Death.

Chapter End Notes

So, the reference to Francois Motierre is a real one. He was the main character in the Elder Scrolls Oblivion Dark Brotherhood quest, 'The Assassinated Man', in which he pays the Dark Brotherhood to stage his death in exchange for the life of mummy dearest.

Not the nicest guy in the world. But hey. Gotta love them quests. They are SO much better than the main storyline in the Elder Scrolls games. No doubt about it.

Questions, comments, reviews, flames...write it all down. I usually respond. More chapters coming soon.
“I tell ye, there’s summat there. Or someone.”

Pressed against the ruined remains of a stable, Rhys kept his voice low. Speaking in barely a whisper to Farkas and Nemain who were sprawled in the snow beside him. “I see nothin’, coz. Nought but the walls.”

He bumped her bony hip with his leg. “Sure ye doon need that spell, uh, tested? Fer mistakes?”

She wanted to swat him, he could tell. Showing an uncharacteristic level of restraint, Nemain contented herself with a soft boff to his shoulder, causing a puff of rancid air to rise up from her robes. Seizing his canid nose with an invisible noose of mouldering rot and unwashed bodies. *Echh.*

He noted two new bruises purpling upon her leg as her boots skidded on the hem of her robes, the wind causing them to fly up over her knees. Yet swiftly she recovered herself and the marks became shrouded once again.

“Hardly, ye cloddin’ lump. Detect Life spells be fail proof, an’ enchanted gear even more so. As sure as the sun, there be several someones lying in wait just up ahead. With a largish gap between the mass of them, right…” she pointed directly towards the main gates of Markarth.

“…there.”

She cocked her head to the side; her tufted hair and milky unblinking eyes minding him of an owl. *If wee foofy owls cuid be bloody terrifying.* “But perhaps these strangers be underground in one o’ the many Dwemer tunnels. Hmph. It be too difficult to tell, this far off.”

He sighed. She stunk. Et Ada, they all stank unbearably after their hard slog, running on four legs without rest, but she smelled worse than they if possible. They had made the sojourn to Markarth’s border in a mere few days from Falkreath, in record time, and even he (who was used to pitched runs, after years spent hunting in the rough fells of the southern wild) was winded from taking turns with Farkas to carry Nemain and their supplies.

Bearing her on their furry backs with neither saddle nor bridle, no cushion to soften the blow of her skinny rump slamming upon one’s spine. Never knowing when the Stormcloaks Nemain was so sure were following them would catch up, even at this breakneck pace...fearing that the Forsworn, the Ragged King’s spies would get to them first, and-
But that part of this madcap journey was over. The difficult part, he reckoned, was about to begin.

It was still dark. Dawn was still barely a blush on the eastern horizon and the weres’ exceptional eyesight saw nothing but white: brilliant white snow all around, untroubled by footprints nearly all the way up the slope to Markarth’s gates. Bounded by craggy rock and frozen moss on every side. But he was not fooled by its idyllic appearance. He knew what Markarth was, what it represented despite many of his kinsmans claims to the contrary.

A cage. Nought more than a mass grave.

He exhaled, his breath fogging as his nostrils sealed shut from the cold. No. If there were warriors lying in wait, they must have been Dwemer ghosts from ages past. Nord or Forsworn, he could neither smell or see any hint of man.

There was only the uphill path...and the city gates. Looking pitifully small amidst the bulk of the Druadach mountain range. A histcarp flanked by slaughterfish on every side.

“You needn’t have come, ye ken.” Nemain remanded him, her ever smirking mouth serious for once. “Ye have a family, Rhys. A darling one. You could have stayed with them. Stayed safe. Consider yer honor satisfied fer accompanying us this far, cousin, and go home.”

“No,” He murmured, eyes fixed upon the silent monolith ahead. After confidences shared before their departure he knew; knew the truth of her parentage and for whom Nemain had urged them forward to slay. Even if she had not deigned to inform her man...or him of her purpose in doing so, for that matter.

...And the knowledge had snarled his insides into even more of a choleric mess. All this travel, this pain, wasted. A hunt to kill one of their own.

Madanach, Ardrí an Ruigsinneachd. The one who had held the Reach, safe from the fear thuaidh...and then had lost it. And then taken it again under the distraction of yet another war. A clever, incisive move. Yet a move that was not enough to prevent his enemies, nay, even his own flesh and blood from pursuing his head.

Madanach, the Black Fox, the King in Rags. A good man. One who had been a good king, for the brief window of time Rhys remembered of peace during his childhood. A time of plenty, rare and delicate as the first budding wildflowers of spring.

Why?

Peering out of the corner of his eyes, Rhys noted the subtle hints of activity beyond Markarth’s wall. Small pebbles clattering down, muffled by the mossy rocks. Smoke from pine pitch, from torches. Wind; and a silence more profound than the usual muted tones that a winter night usually bore.
Nothing a human could hear. Farkas shifted, his head swivelling. Aye. He heard it too. Felt the warning Hircine’s breath brought on the wind.

Could the High King even be slain? The man be Hircine’s High Priest! Much less by a lone blind woman and her daft dog, trapped on all sides by eaters of men. Surrounded by traitors and sellswords, all of whom would leap for a chance tae catch the Dragonborn. Tae enslave her; make her intae a thrall. Gods, I never want tae see a sight like Orphans Rock e’er again.

Rhys forced his thoughts back into the present. “Nay. I couldn’t let ye take sich a journey alone. Blind an’ hurt as ye are.”

Farkas coughed. “S’not like she’s alone.”

“Och, does that be the truth, hmm?” Reaching behind him, Rhys checked to ensure that none of his arrows had been stirred or had fallen from their quiver during their creeping progress. Skulking like skeevers from cover to cover; hiding in abandoned mines. Farmholds. Bits of broken wall that provided shelter from the elements.

And now at the stables, they were finally in sight of this hated place. The source, the crux of his nightmares.

Ugh, and now this stonebrain, this idealistic fool wished for Rhys to provide a sop to his bruised pride. To acknowledge his place at her side.

She might as well hae been alone. “Really? Think you that our people with welcome ye gladly inter the city? Give ye salt an’ bread fer a welcome and treat ye like blood, just coz ye handfasted with Nemain in some outlander temple while dead drunk?”

“Rhys.” Nemain tugged upon his tunic, trying to get his attention.

But he pushed her away. “Perhaps tis you should hae stayed home, pup. Stayed home and left us to deal with our own business. Reachfolk business.”

The knot in his guts tightened. “Nought fer you tae interfere.” What be I doin’ here? What’s cracked in her nog, that we be attemptin’ this fool’s errand?

The massive werewolf scratched his head, looking puzzled. “Look, if you’re still mad about your bagpipes, I said I was sor-”

He wasn’t sorry. Rhys tasted bile on his tongue. “You sat. On me pipes. Deliberately!”

Nemain began to snicker as the Nord placidly returned his glare, unmoved. Causing his blood to boil even further. “House was crowded. Dark and noisy. Couldn’t find a place to sit, and-”

“-and yer fat fear thuaidh arse squashed me pride an’ joy, me pipes, ter bits!”

“Three songs in a row and my ears were starting to hurt from all that, uh, joy. Thought you must be done anyhow. Were you gonna play more? Think I did ya a favor.”
Rhys scowled at Nemains’ husband. *Fellow shapeshifter an’ blessed of the Moon. Mustn’t...must not kill.* “-not another word, ye blitherin’ monstrous cockamamie! Ye wrecked me bagpipes! Irreplaceable they were, crafted by the Dark Witness shaman Othaccar Hissel in High Rock! Blunderin’, clarty trolldung lickin!’”

A stifled gagging sound was coming from where his cousin was hunched over. It took Rhys a moment through the veil of his rage to realize that she was laughing.

Choking on her laughter. Near scarlet with it.

“M-monstrous…” she continued to whisper-choke, gagging as Farkas began to pat her back, none too softly. Grinning like the idiot he was.

Proud as pie. “...cock. Cockamamie! Pwfwaha-hah ha!”

“Aw, stoppit doll. I’m blushing.” The gleam in the man’s eye bespoke rather the opposite. *Ugh. New love.*

“Stop. Talking. I doon even wish tae know.” Rhys flatly said.

Crawling away as Nemain began to comport herself into some semblance of readiness, he craned his neck and saw light, stealing across the dark like fingers from the east. Casting a rosy glow that lit up the rocks around them.

*Enough banter.* “Tis time to go. If we can see the gates, then they can see us. Soft and quiet we must go, so if yer quite done havin’ the piss, Nemain, let us be off.”

The couple were whispering to one another. At his pointed rejoinder they broke apart, looking only slightly guilty. “Yeah, let’s go. Gettin’ tired of sitting around.”

“Mmhmm. Tis Midwinter morn, after all.”

Wrapping her staff in quick sharp knots against the flat of her back, Nemain paused as the big hands of her (fool idiot) husband danced around the straps. Checking and adjusting as needed, pinching her flesh until she pushed him away with pursed lips and a throaty giggle.

“Hoy, that’s enough prodding, Stout. No time tae waste.”

Her lively features settled, looking serious once again. “Huh. I almost wish ye were turning about, Rhys, despite yer ram-heided stubborness. I dinnae wish fer your death tae be on my hands. To be sure, the Ragged King and his kith are aware that we be here already. Though I cannae say if it be Reachmen and friends who be before us, underground. Or summat else. We be headed intae this with no telling what be comin’. Cor, I hate being blind.”

Farkas frowned. “Uh. If they all know we’re coming, then why are we sneaking like this?”
Nemain sighed. “Farkas. Rhys and I will be sneaking. You will be clattering behind us as boggin’ noisy as a tinker’s wagon o’ pots an’ pans...there be no possible way tae silence yer footsteps in such armor as that. But there be no help fer it. Unless...”

Her voice rose in a hopeful lilt. “Ye wish tae change once more? T’would actually be easier fer ya, entering the city as a werewolf rather than a Nord.”

Farkas shuddered. “Nah. Done too many changes. It’s bad to go wolf for too long.”

"Bah. Suppose I'll have ter cast another Muffle spell again. Those be a pain."

Rhys felt a twinge of sympathy as the bigger man stretched out his hands, kneading his fingers as though they still bore dagger sharp claws. The fool was right. Every change hurt, and this last juttering transition from beast to man had been worse than usual.

_Think o’ the daedra, an’ he shall appear._ His wolf spirit made its presence known, the churning in his guts flaring into a fire. Straining to be let loose. He mentally clamped down on the desire to bite, rend, to tear, and focused on the conversation at hand.

“Aye, Nemain. Do that. We’ll need our tongues tae speak our peace.”

The woman looked resigned. “And thumbs to bear yer blades. Huh. Welp...s’pose we’ve lost the element of surprise anyhow.”

“Hmph,” Rhys muttered in agreement. Taking point, they followed him. Ascending towards the city of stone. _Markarth._

Twenty seven years ago, it had been, and he could still recall with perfect clarity the feeling; the brew of terror and anticipation...standing with the other warriors in protection of their city, _their_ homeland, as the Bear of Markarth with his militia had stormed the gates.

Stealing the Hold back from Madanach, from the Reachmen with his catapults and his forces. With his Voice. The Thu’um, in the name of some god that had once been a man. _Huh._ Puny god, to require mortals to fight his battles for him.

Et’Ada were distant, holy beings who only hearkened to pain. But the Daedra on the other hand...

Rhys cut off that errant thought before he could think overlong upon Lord Hircine and gritted his teeth as, true to form, Farkas clattered and banged along behind Nemain like some Khajiit peddler, a dopey grin stretched upon his face.

Rhys comforted himself that he wasn’t one of them. Companions - those tame wolves turned hound who hailed from Jorrvaskr, a creaky upturned boat in tundra (and not a proper forest for leagues), nay, he was _Forsworn!_ One whose kin had been unable to take back what the Gods had given, always searching. Ever hunting for the means to regain their ancestral lands, their home.

Promised, and then stolen. By blade and by bow.
Rhys remembered:

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“...here. Dip the tips in poison.”

Hunched over, Rhys and Galan were sheltered between a rampart and a wall which had already been broken by wind and weather. One large block of stone that had settled at an angle, creating a natural windbreak and shield. Safe enough...for now.

They had the perfect birds eye view of the Nord forces wearing the chainmail link insignia of the bear, and the more shiny, twitching lot in metal skirts what were decorated with the serpent of the Empire.

Galan tapped his pestle against the wall of the mortar, humming tunelessly as he finished mixing the black powders into an oily paste.

No time like the present to ask. “How fast does it kill?” The older boy whispered.

Galan smiled coldly. “Fast. Verrah fast.” He shrugged. “Ruins the meat, but from what the High King was sayin’, we gotta kill ‘em quick. Far too many men tae make a proper feast of it.”

His dark hair whipped about in the breeze as they both turned to look at their own warriors. Spread thinly along the ridgeline and the walltops -barely enough to note even if one knew where to look. “Aye. We gotta hold the wall.”

“By Hircine’s Bow, we’ve lasted two years, and none hae breached it yet.” Rhys moistened his lips and carefully ground his last arrowtip into the poison. It glistened wetly, smelling to the high skies of deathbell and nightshade. “Aye. That’ll do. Let’s hunt.”

“Not yet.” Galan cocked his ear, his pupils nearly disappearing as they both froze in place. “Listen!”

A rippling susurrus, and then-

BOOM.

There was a loud whistling sound. Like a pine thrush calling during the spring mating, thousands of them, whirling like twigs caught up in a storm; the whistling becoming a gnashing, rending gale, and then Galan was dragging him away. Forcing him down, as he moved sluggishly. Stupid with
shock.

“Duck! Get doon!”

Arrows peppered the rocks around them, clattering like harmless twigs. Solid rock became scree as the part of the wall they had been hiding behind blew apart, leaving behind a thick haze of dust. Dust from what were surely catapults!

His head was ringing from the impact, and Rhys nearly lost his quiver-and his lunch-then and there as he jerked away; another booming roil of noise erupting from the yawning torch-lit space beyond. Forcing him to clap his hands over his ears in self defense as the voices of men rose and fell. Laughing.

-Cheering. Calling out praises over and over, yelling names...da-los, or was it Talos?!

Talos! Talos! TALOS!! Beating like a drunken drummer in his ears, layered over with calls for someone called the Bear as something struck the walls, curving them. They bowed inward like a great beast breathing; crumbling bits of rock falling as the detritus falls from a predators jaws.

Rhys watched as the walls took on life. Watched in horror as they seemed to take one final breath, and Galan ceased to tug at his arm.

“-Galan? Galan!”

More booms, explosions, couldn’t hear, he could not hear! and then there arose a tinny whine that shredded his thoughts. Siphoning his will to fight; to do anything but sit wedged in a tight ball and pray and hope that the Voice, the Voice did not hear him.

Did not see.

He hid. Grey dust coated his arms, clogged his noisy sobs. The high humming waned, becoming whistling, screams of men. TALOS! TALOS! To the Bear, the Bear! Horns wailed, pitiless. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Blood bloomed in this mouth, and the taste tore him away. Woke him up from paralysis.

Galan was suddenly on top of him, his mouth gaping open and shut like a fish. Words slowly registered that he had not noticed before.

“-must move, damn ye! We must go! Rhys, come on!”

Looking around wildly, Rhys gasped once again as he saw the stringy back muscles of the other boy bunch as he turned. Contracting, they loosed as the arrows he strung found marks in horseflesh; between helmet slits and chainmail. The sounds of war were there to be heard once again - the hissing thunks of arrows, the heavier thuds of rockfall and slashing, gut-spilling edged weapons,
screams of the dying - all blended together into some sort of chorus to Oblivion.

Rhys was dizzy with it. He did not want to hear.

But he could see, and he saw the moment the heaving walls finally bent open and cracked.

And he saw, when the young man he later would know as the Bear of Markarth strode up to the outer walls. The torch light haloed his head like golden fire, glittering in the eyes of the Bear and all the men surrounding him. Painting him a spectre; more monstrous than a mere man.

He had to do something. Clumsily he strung his arrow, knocking it to the bow.

Rhys pulled; tried loosing it four times before realizing that his string had been cut. Broken no doubt when he had rolled upon it during that first wave of attack.

He was helpless to do anything but watch, now, and so he saw the moment that it happened. The Bear’s mouth opened like a black hole, tendons in his jaw and neck bulging from the strain. The pressure of inhalation.

Of words.

“...FUS ROH DAAAH!!”

Rumbling; prising his head apart. An invisible gale force thundered forth, and Rhys was caught, helpless. Stuck on such insignificant details as the invidious blue of the youth’s eyes, the yellowed cage of teeth as helmeted fear thuaidh bayed in victory. He inhaled the traces of tarry pitch and loosened bowels, and realized the warmth running down his legs was his own piss, added to the mix, but the terror; the sheer primal panic had robbed him. Taken away all feelings of shame.

It was coming down! Stone buckled and cracked, a gaping breach. Torn asunder beneath the force of the Thu’um, the Voice of the Tongues, as Words finished what the catapults had begun.

What could the High King do, what could even Madanach - High Priest of Hircine, wisest of all, do against such might?

Sudden, popping pressure shot through the soles of his feet, and Galan was suddenly there. Pulling him into a dead run with eyes wide as his own, nearly yanking his arm out of his socket as the world broke and every one of his twelve years flashed before his eyes.

“Ta-los! Ta-los! Kill! Kill! Kill!”

They did not linger to watch any further.
Rhys was pulled from reliving his last harrowing memory of the war by a queer whistling sound.

Nearly like that of a bird; he almost looked up from his plodding progress to spy for the creature; to see what had made such a sudden noise...until reason informed him of its unlikelihood. Birds did not linger during midwinter in the Druadach mountains.

That sound was no bird.

Farkas scratched his nose. “Was that what I thought it was?”

He turned to check upon Nemain and Farkas. “Something be wrong. Make ready.” They clustered together, looking for the source of the dread now humming through him, the noise coming again further to the west: making Rhys’ head jerk about comically as he searched with eyes and ears for the maker of that damned sound.

-hhsssstttthhzethph!-

Lowering the hand he had raised to unsheath his sword, Farkas frowned at the arrow that now pierced the flesh of his palm. “Oww...”

Nemain stiffened. Then, her palms raised. Sent out blasts of lightning that pockmarked the wide field of white and caused the snowbanks to quiver.

Rhys had his own arrow nocked to the bow, the lump in his gut solidifying into something hot and alive as their collective breaths became a harsh panting. Filling the air with hot mist.

It moved. The rocks and snow moved.

-Becoming lumps that were men! Nord men and women wearing patchwork furs dappled white and grey, with branches of juniper and hanks of moss fastened to hoods and gauntlets. Their faces were blackened, as were their swords. Breaking up their outlines into shadows that slithered; that blurred in his stunned sight...those same hard blue eyes, the sharp smiles taking him back. Making him feel like a powerless stripling of twelve once again.

They moved.
Swiftly, deftly, the giant fear thuaidh moved closer to the three of them. Ready for the kill...pulling out their grease stained swords. Knocking arrows to bows: gull feathers that matched the fletch that stuck out from Farkas’ paw. Stormcloaks! What were they waiting for?!

And out of nowhere a baffled feeling of admiration made itself known. Who’d hae kent that they’d be quite sae clever, tae hide ’neath the snow. In the earth itself tae cover their scent?

A thin voice warbled over the walls. Rhys watched as a tattooed face popped over the broken ramparts of the wall.

“Hssst! You! You lot! Git in ‘ere, quick! Afore they nab ye!”

“...that bastard. A runsearc, you ruddy, canny bastard! We make for the gates!” Nemain rasped. “Run! I’ll cast a ward tae shield yer backs! Go now!”

Rhys was making ready to do just that when another warrior popped out from the snow. A red headed she-Nord, hardly wearing enough clothing to justify the expression.

Her olive-daubed face was desperate. “Shield Brother. Get over here quick, Farkas you idiot! Get over here now!”

Farkas coughed, looking shocked. “Aela?! Y-”

Putting two and two together, for the quiver of arrows she bore on her back matched his new piercing, Farkas glared at her. “Hey! You shot me!”

“I’ll do more than that if you don’t haul your fat ass away from those two, ice-brain!”

Rhys stepped away from the warrior, retreating closer to the mage as the fear thuaidh -no, his nose never lied, the were woman growled at him and began to haul Farkas off. Away from him and Nemain.

The big man began to struggle, even as the smaller female yanked at his arm repeatedly. Leading him into the ditches where more Stormcloaks were silently creeping forth. But he was not so subservient as Rhys fancied. His uninjured hand struck out and slapped at the redhead, nearly causing her to faceplant into the snow.

“Aela, stop! I got something to do here. Lay off me! And leave ‘em alone!”

A stony shield encased Rhys and Nemain both as his cousin looked about, her stricken expression rippling with the rocklike cast of Stoneflesh.

“Where be Farkas.”

At the sound of her voice Farkas began to fight in earnest. Struggling to break free. “Aela you don’t know what you’re doing! Let me go!”

“Sod it. This is for your own damn good.”

Pulling a tiny dart of a knife free from some hidden patch of scanty clothing, the one called Aela reaching up and pricked Farkas. Digging the point deep into his neck. “Now shut up and stop fighting me, or they’ll kill you too.”

He stopped. Swaying in place, his grey eyes rolled back into his skull as his mouth and body both went slack.

Aela caught Farkas as he fell, muttering fiercely to herself as a brawny male Stormcloak helped her, taking the bulk of his weight as they dragged the Companion deeper away. Secreting the limp werewolf into a cunningly concealed dugout. Which, Rhys reflected rather forlornly, bore no further meaning to their current predicament. Farkas was fine.

But according to this Aela, he and his cousin were decidedly not.

*Shit.* “Nemain...”

“Where’s Farkas?!” His cousin sounded angry, now.

*Good. Anger was good.*

Anger was better than fear, better for focusing his feet on what they needed to do now. More Stormcloaks were crunching through the crust of the snow; circling them.

They would cut off their path to the wall soon, if they did not go now.

“WHERE’S FARKAS, you rottty bastards?! You...you NORDS! Milk drinkers! Fuckin’ fear thuaidh! *Give him back!* ”

Dropping his half-knocked arrow, he slung the bow back around his shoulders and grabbed her hands before she could cast. The electricity cupped in her palm shocked him. Hissing through him with a frisson that went straight through his arm all the way up to his head; making his hairs prickle on end as the smell of ozone blurred the scent of snow.


Bolting like rabbits, they began to run for the gates of Markarth. For the wall.
He was fast, but she was slow...her movements awkward and unsure, her head bobbing back as she
cantered around them with spells Rhys could neither see nor sense. That damned annoying
staff dragged a line behind them into the snow, tripping Nemain. Causing her to stumble and fall,
right as their pursuers decided to abandon stalking in favor of full out pursuit. Breaking into a full
loping pace the Nords ran slow and unhurried...as if they knew. Knew that it was merely a matter of
time before they caught up with their prey.

If they had to sprint for their lives, then they would make haste. Every beat of his heart felt like
warning drum, beating a tattoo deep within his brain. Run. Run.

Lifting her up, Rhys carried Nemain like one of his bairns as he fairly flew upon the white and
glimmering expanse of snow; strong and fit, yet his breath became ragged when he chanced to look
behind him. To see where the Stormcloaks were, and what they would do.

He blinked. The crafty fear thuaidh had brought a siege weapon.

A ballista.

And not just any battering ram or reinforced ladder, but a feckin’ exploding Dwemer ballista, the
wickedly curved edge gleaming bronze in the cold light. Beautiful and old. Colder than bronze
should be, cold like winter...as pitiless as the blue eyes that were watching.

Waiting to see what they would do.

And in the fraction of the moment he had dared to cast a glance back, one grinning fear thuaidh
hauled back the lever. Cranking it steadily, winding the chain until the ballista was racked and ready.

“What’s wrong? What be that noise?” Nemain’s foul breath washed over his nose.

That, more than anything, brought him back and he began to streak forward again, picking up his
stride. Not far now. “A ballista! A feckin’ dwarven ballista, an’ we cannae outrun it! Open the gates!
Open up!”

The gates cracked and rumbled, like glaciers ponderously sliding apart.

Rhys willed his footsteps to be swifter, faster. Yet he knew, could fairly feel the ballista pointing at
them like a line scratched upon a map, the imaginary point digging into his shoulder blades.
Thudthudthud. He ran until his knees burned and his mouth grew dry; the weight of Nemain small
and tight against his chest. Making herself as easy to carry as she knew, may the Horned God bless
her.

High hissing announced the arrival of more arrows, more to worry about...two twanging into the gate
beyond above his left ear and four finding their marks in stone and snow to his right. He felt a sharp
pain followed by numbness in his left calf, and knew. Damn it all. He had been hit. Could no longer
run.

“Open the bloody..damn...gates!” His ears caught the rustling kch-clunk! as the ballista behind them
was sprung, and he cursed his feet, his leg, his idiocy for their failure. They were *dead*, or soon to be
dead after torture and Dibe knew what those monstrous large barbarians would do, and *gods*, what
he would not have given.

What he would not do, to be elsewhere. To hold Baz and Gar and his children in his arms, to eat and
laugh at table with them again!

She had been right. Rhys’ breath came fast and hard. She was always right. He should never have
left. They had lost Farkas, they were caught, and for what? *What*?! His leg no longer supported him,
and he could not help but fall forward into the deep snow with a despairing groan...Nemain
floundering beside him, tangled in the sinewy rope of her travel pack and her staff.

He wished for paws, wolven paws that were more agile upon rock and ice than human limbs could
ever hope to be. “Open up!” They were but a few paces away, scarce more than a stretch.

“Open UP!”

Several things happened at once.

-A giant emerged from Markarth, his wrinkled face of puzzlement taking up Rhys’ entire vision. A
massive club swung out, flying in ponderous rotations over his head until it landed among the
Stormcloaks. Scattering their bodies like water from a rock hitting a puddle, as two smaller figures
clad in hide rags crept around the giant. Heading towards them.

-Nemain clawed at Rhys’ neck and face, causing him to sputter profanities as he tried to fend her off.
She managed to spread herself atop him, hunching protectively over him with her body as her hands
moved; cast the rippling sheen of another Ward spell. A shimmering one, pearly, strangely pretty
with all those dancing lights...though why he had taken the dear sweet time to notice such things was
an anathema.

“Rhys, dinnae worry, we-”

**BOOM.** The ballista erupted around them.

Inescapable as trying to dodge rain.

He was on *fire*...Oblivion, *the underworld was here*, blooming in red flowers against his retinas.
Screams arose unbidden from his throat, ripping him raw... *or was it her who screamed?*

Unbearable heat.

Nemain jerked stiffly atop him, her flesh sizzling as something wet and warm and rotten slid into his
nose. Leaked into his ears. Filling his open mouth with the taste of muck, of spoiling death as his
kicking, writhing legs burned and his feet burned and his throat dried up...the ward tearing like wet
paper as the world turned white, then black, and then-
Blissful nothingness.

“Can we et ‘im?”

Muzzy-headed and queerly numb, Rhys tried to awaken.

His eyelids were weighted with stones. Every eyelash was a lead weight on a fishing line, drawing him deeper into that peaceful quiet. That abyss of rest, where dark things lurked.

It was a ferlaghin’ battle, but Rhys managed to open his eyes, at last...blinking as the shuffling sounds resolved themselves into small figures. As the whisperers -children, here in Markarth?-gathered round him. Poking at his furs. Whispering further as he groaned, striving to gain some alacrity of thought.

Small teeth needled into his palm. He gasped.

“Oy, enough o’ that, Hemy, shove off or ye’ll ruin yer appetite fer stew. Shush you lot. He be coming to, and I must attend him.”

An old Forsworn face, whorled and tatted with inks on her leathery cheeks, peered upon him from above. He felt her cold fingers prod at his leg and he groaned again as a spark of pain shot through his left shin. Flaring into prickling sunbursts as she nudged him again none-too-gently.

“Ye can feel aught of that? Aye, good. Good. Means yer nerves havenae been seared off completely then. Here. Drink ye this.”

Something solid, cold. A glass bottle. What choice had he but to take it? He swallowed the sour liquid and felt a blooming warmth soothe the worst of pains away, quieting the ceaseless drumming of agony into a dimmer rustle. “Augh. Thank ye. Who-”

“I be Bothela, child o’ the moon. The local herbwife.” Dark appleseed eyes glinted at him, so close he could see his own face in each black iris. “And you be welcome, aye, welcome tae Markarth and well met tae be healed...though I fear I cannae do much fer yer traveling companion o’er there.”

He blinked, for upon the stone bed opposite him was a lump of what looked like raw, bloody meat. Some red smears painted the canvas oilcloth that must have been hastily been lain over the top of it, for the corners were askew.
Surely not. And he looked a bit further around the room, only now noticing that what had seemed like a noisome cavern was indeed an herb shop. A potion store layered in teetering shelves of bottles, drawers filled with smelly bric-a-brac and bins...sheaves of dried leaves, bundled herbs, roots, fungi of many sizes and shapes, stoppered bottles filled with all manner of ingredients colorful and dull. All lined up against ancient stone stacked walls.

Dizzying. He closed his eyes, resting against the swell of panic. That...thing couldn’t be her. Wasn’t what she said.

His eyes opened. Hovering behind the Forsworn hag were several children of middling size and various ages, their only similarity their gaunt frames and hollow eyes. An underfilled cauldron bubbled in the background over a pitiful pile of sticks. Rhys could barely make out the shadows of bones; decomposing skulls, ribcages and what looked like an extremely long femur with some tendon still attached to it; all shoved into the back of what smelled like a refuse pile.

Noting the Stormcloak armor tossed carelessly in the opposite corner, Rhys mentally thanked the gods that he had been recognized as friend and not foe. He had some idea of how this lot had fed themselves throughout this bitter winter, for the nipper who’d had a go at his hand was now gumming his thumb. Quite eagerly.

He cleared his throat and retrieved his hand from the wee one. “There. Ah - in me haversacks. There be some supplies in there. Take it, an’ eat. I’m no hungry.”

Bothela’s lips pursed into a wrinkled knot as the children made hushed squeaks. Quickly silenced by a flap of her wrinkled hand. “...Vittles?”

“Fresh ‘uns?”

“Like sweetrolls?”

“Oooh! Ooh? And taffy?”

“Apples?!”

“Gimme gimme!”

“Some of it be sweet, aye.” With a groan, he managed to sit up. The stone plinth was unforgivingly cold, biting into his arse. But it was wondrous cool on his leg. He enjoyed what he could of his reprieve from pain and managed a wink. “Mostly travel rations, berries n’ meat an’ sich, but...share it out. Mind that this lot take small bites, eh woman? Dinnae let ‘em hork it doon.”

He took a gander at the desperate faces surrounding him and sighed. “Arrah. Better yet, put it in that stew o’er there an’ wait a while for it tae dissolve. Let ‘em sup it slow...’t’will make ‘em sick if they scarf the lot now.”
“There be wisdom in what ye say. Back! Back ye wee heathens!”

The old herbwife laid about her with her wooden spoon as the children began to cheep in excitation, for all the world like a nestful of thrush hatchlings.

“All will have their turn tae sup in time! Back, an’ let me tae my work!”

He laid back and rested as the woman -Bothela- retrieved the contents of his travelling bag and began slicing and stirring. Ugh. It stank. He thought the room had stunk earlier, with his own unwashed self and the ripe aroma from Nemain’s corpse-(dinnaethinkit) combined with the potion ingredients steadily assaulting his nose, but no. This room reeked to aetherium and beyond. Unwillingly he returned his gaze to the lump lying oh-so still upon the stone slab.

Her staff, hastily wiped clean, was the only telltale sign that the thing upon the bed had once been Nemain. “My friend...alive?”

“Nay, I fear not.” Bothela dipped a ladle into the stew, sipped at it, then returned to her stirring. “Hmm, needs more salt. Alas, yer friend be beyond my means tae heal. I could no make out a heartbeat, nor any signs o’ life. But,” -and here she raised her ladle once more, as if in warning. “...Ye’ll no begrudge me the use o’ that carcass fer cooking, eh? I’ve this lot ter feed, an’ I tell ye, it be no small task ter keep ‘em alive an’ safe in these ruinous times! War orphans, unwanted. All of ‘em. And what with Namira’s crowd gainin’ popularity an’ faffing aboot, making a stink of eating, och, an’ how they have eaten…”

The woman’s voice lowered darkly. The children clustered around her cookpot hardly raised their eyes to meet his, yet...he knew. Could gather the threads to knit together the course of her trailing plea.

The Daedric Prince Namira and her followers dined upon sentient flesh. Old, young, rotten, it mattered little. Small wonder they had made ecumenical progress amongst the People in this time of hunger, and Rhys did not wonder at the traps he now spied. Cunningly laid around the low-ceilinged door, snare-wire trailing around the entrance to their sleeping quarters. The Mistress of Decay and her cannibals would not hesitate to dine upon the children of war, and he smiled at the good herbwife as she attended to her cooking.

Only good folk would be bound and determined to prevent such actions. He and Nemain could have landed in far worse hands.

He cricked his neck. Not that he would do anything akin to giving in to her demand. Nemain was his to protect, now - she could hardly be a goner, if half of what Farkas had told him about her recent adventures were true.

And Rhys was a provider. His leg would heal. He could always hunt in the mountains, if there were no more Nords to be had for eating to feed this lot.

...And didn’t that thought turn the potion in his stomach into so much vinegar. Eating men as a werewolf was one thing, the beast spirit craved what it craved; but killing and eating someone who
could scream your name as you cut into them was...well, a level beyond what Rhys cared to contemplate.

“Enough. I ken yer meaning, marm.”

Forcing himself to sit up once more, for every muscle seemed to shriek anew as he did so, Rhys reached for Nemain’s packs and staff. *O’ course the staff made it. Not the woman, no - but the staff remains bloody feckin’ intact after a solid hit with a ballista. Wonder wot it be made of, an’ by whom.*

Rolling the length of it between his palms, Rhys looked it over with a critical eye. Not a scratch on its ugly stalk, or the spiked top with its crown of thorns. *And tae think those ancient Dwemer created sich deathly weapons. Mopped us up right quick, but it couldnae mar this? Right touched, it is.*

And a bud of an idea blossomed, even as his rational mind rejected the notion.

“Have ye any prisoners here, auld one?” Rhys asked. “Any un’ will do.”

“Nay, but what do I look like, ‘sides a nursemaid ‘ere?” Bothela cackled. “The warriors used ter bring me bodies from beyond the wall in exchange fer healing draughts. And those hae grown fewer an’ far between as this winter hath carried on. An’ such a winter!” The hag shook her head, stirring more vigorously. “No. No prisoners. We consume them all, and pray tae last ‘til spring thaw.”

“The reason I ask,” Rhys said cautiously, “is because my...uh...friend ‘ere. She be undead.”

“Och, really?”

“Aye. Er...a lich.”

Bothela dropped the lade back into the cauldron with a thunk. “Those be rare. A blessing she hasnae kilt ye yet, wolf, those necromancers rarely leave them that associate with ‘em alive. So’s ye think she still be with us, then. Ochone, man! I would hardly hae known that unless ye had informed me!”

“Hard tae get a word in edgewise, marm.”

Her aged face crumpled inwards. “Arrah! Tis well and good I did no cut it up fer the stew, then.” She threw in another handful of chopped dried meat into her cauldron. “Came good and close, I tell ya.”

“Can’t imagine she’d hae done much fer your digestion. She be a prickly sort.”

Rhys shook his head. “I tell ya, it looks fair bad. Aye.” Continuing to play with the staff his cousin had dragged for days upon days, he pondered just what would happen if he tried triggering it with his latent magic. Wondered what it would summon.

Conjuration had that feel; that miasmic vapor about it. This was no elemental power, but a summoning stick.

He was warrior, true, but like most of his kind he had an untapped affinity for the arcane. He could feel magicka humming beneath his palms, stroking against his fingers like an eager thing. Wanting to
be used. “She looks past hope. But this woman, Bothela? She’s survived dragons. Avalanches. All sorts o’ mischief an’ pain an’ tomfoolery. I dinnae think she be sae easy ter kill as this. I think we can bring her back.”

Bothela’s voice slid upwards, sugar and venom heaped upon every word. “Och, ye do, do ye? Think you be Arkay, laddie-boy? The Dark One Sithis ‘imself?”

Rhys scoffed. “Hardly. But since ye have no bodies fer her tae drain and revive herself, I fear I shall be havin’ ter summon whatever comes out o’ this.” Scraping together the last bits of his bravery, he pointed the hideous staff at the wall.

Releasing some inner barrier he hardly knew he owned, Rhys pushed inside his mind.

“What’re ye doin’!” Cried the old woman, as a blue cloud of smoke coalesced into a figure, horribly tall and sharp. Rhys stared. Spiky as the staff, the blurred lines solidified as right before his eyes appeared a daedric being. A Dremora.

He wondered if Nemain had known what she had carried all along.

Red and black zig zagged over the flesh of its face like lightning, sinking into the horned head and short black hair that bristled behind. Its red slotted pupils glowed from night-black sclera. Alien armor, curved and gleaming like ebony and the fire from heartstones, decorated it from pauldron to greaves.

It finally spoke, after releasing a rather put-upon sigh. The gravelly voice had a queer accent, as though it spoke with marbles held in its mouth. “I am Markynaz, mortal. For the next hour of time in Mundus I am yours to command. What is your desire?”

Gathering his wits, Rhys planted his feet firmly upon the ground and kept a good hold upon the staff. Cuid ne’er tell what these conjured types be up to.

“Er. I be called Rhys.”

He gestured with the staff towards the still form of his cousin, aware that Bothela was watching bug-eyed from the corner. “And this be Nemain, yer master I reckon. Be ye able tae restore her, Daedra?”

“Nemain!” Yelped Bothela.

Her cry was washed out by the wet slurry of scraping spoons as the stew was dished out. She managed the children with deft alacrity, catching bowls of stew before they could topple as the bairns scattered to bits and bobs of furniture to eat. “Now jist hold on one dim moment, young thing. That be Nemain?”

“Aye, how d’ye know her?” Shaking his head, Rhys returned to the business at hand. “Bloody bawbags. Dremora.”

“Markynaz.” The daedra inspected his talon-like nails, his nostrils flaring.

The brimstone cloud the being had arrived in was doing no favors for the tenor of the room. Rhys huffed. Like he/it had any room tae complain.
“Right. Well, Markynaz, can ye bring her back tae life? I figure she cannae be truly dead.”

Something flickered in those bottomless eyes. “Mostly dead.”

“But not all the way dead!” Bothela protested, elbowing her way into the conversation. “Ye said it yerself, werewolf. She be a survivor!”

Glaring imperiously at them both, Bothela stomped over to the stone plinth. “You! Dremora! Do what ye must fer yer mistress! Make her live again! By Dibe and all that be holy, child, I cannae believe it...surely it cannae be true...”

Pulling off the oilcloth that covered Nemain’s remains, Bothela doubled over and retched. And all three of them involuntarily recoiled as the full extent of the damage done was revealed.

She had been placed upon her side, and from the front Nemain looked nearly peaceful, if unrecognizably blackened and blistered. Her chest did not rise or fall. Rhys growled as he tried his utmost to listen for a heartbeat that would not come. He could hardly remember if he’d bothered to listen for one before.

But the back...he nearly joined Bothela where she was throwing up into a basin. The back of Nemain’s body had been entirely laid waste by the ballista. The stench of burnt hair grew stronger as he leaned over to inspect the skull, which had been blasted open to reveal the greyish pink of exposed brain. Her spine and hips had been hollowed, as though a giant had gutted her out with a spoon and then had stirred. Vigorously.

And strangely enough, what remained within appeared to be a full three weeks rotten. Sweetish sour and revolting. Rhys clapped hands over his nose, unable to bear it any longer.

“Well?” He spoke through his fingers. Praying that ought could be done. This...this was much worse than he had expected.

And for a split second, he wondered just what would have happened had it been he and not Nemain who had been on the receiving end of that blast.

He wouldn’t be standing there talking. That much was assured. “Aye? Look alive, daemon. Be there anything you may do fer her?”

The daedra stepped forward and placed a single, metal girded finger upon Nemain’s face. He did not speak, and for several long moments that seemed like an eternity as Rhys fidgeted and Bothela wiped her face, the being lingered.

“Yes,” Markynaz finally answered. “I am capable of restoring her life force.”

“Och, grand!” Bothela clasped her hands.
“And what will it take?” Rhys asked bluntly. “What d’ye need in order tae accomplish this?”

The being looked at him, and to his surprise there was amusement clear in that strange face. “Tell her, when she awakens, that the Dragonborn owes me a song.”

Rhys echoed him flatly. “...A song.”

Bothela screeched. “The Dragonborn?!”

“Yes.”

Markynaz bent over Nemain once again, and there was tension, now, where there had not been any before. It appeared almost as though he was bracing himself for something. “Have her sing me a song upon my next summons from my Lord Sanguine’s side.”

“Something new. My body will renew itself in the service of my betters, but immortality...it grows stale. Do not forget to deliver my request, mortal. A life for a life. A song for my death.”

And as Rhys digested that odd request, the Daedra lifted his hands and gently placed them upon his cousin’s ruined face. Pushing her over until she lay upon the ruins of her back. “Now stand back,” Markynaz directed. “For it is not wise to linger between a dragon and its prey.”

And no sooner had his slurring lisp finished speaking those words did Nemain woodenly raise her charred arms. Seizing the daedra by his ears, causing Rhys to jump back as Bothela began to shriek.

“She be aliive! Nemain! Really...the ruddy feckin’ Dragonborn?! What in the Goddess’ green grassy fields hae ye been up tae these last coupla years, girl?!”

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

She was floating.

Adrift on an eternal sea of obsolescence when something happened.

Not much. Just a spark, at first. The dimmest of stars, alighting like a speckled snowflake upon the void of her conscience. Melting, spreading into an awareness. An awakening...that the veil between life and death was tremulously close. That she was frozen.

Something wonderfully smoky-sweet hovered close nearby, ripe for the taking. Blazing with life just beyond her grasp.

She reached for it.
And it surrendered to her, warmth and dark savory richness pouring into her mouth as she eagerly latched upon the source; the taste of satisfaction. Hot dry lips pressed against hers willingly, submitting as she feasted. Heat roared into her, sparking every nerve with an almost euphoric haze of bliss.

And with this surge of health came that old friend, pain.

Bones widened and grafted together, tendons snapping as limbs regrew and her innards knitted back, returning to their murky places. Nemain whimpered and panted and tried not to scream, all the while clinging tightly to whoever was feeding her so well. Hard hands pressed against her cheek, her throat, squeezing once as if in farewell as suddenly the heat and food vanished; and then something happened with a white-hot stab of pure agony. An overloud *snap*, as what must have been her broken skull crackled and locked back into place.

Nemain rolled over and screamed into what felt like rock, and couldn’t stop until the heavy ripples of sheer misery began to subside.

She kept on shuddering and whimpering, and a heavy warmth dropped over her - a fur pelt, smelling of frost mirriam and wet dog. She didn’t care what it smelled like.

Anything helped.

“Gods, it looks like a slaughterhouse o’er here.” A female voice echoed through what sounded like well water. Deep and distant. “The children be safe an’ hid in the tunnels like ye asked. Be she well? Is it safe tae come closer?”

“Aye. Soon.”

And the voices were familiar. Nemain panted through the last twinges and snaps as the tiny rootless bones of her feet and hands healed last, biting her lip furiously. Trying to force her sluggish brain back to action.

“Nemain? Nemain, d’you be with us? Can ye understand me?”

*Oh.* She knew her.


The old woman laughed. “Aye, lass. Nobody should be here. Least of which you. Oh hush now...hush. I ken that it hurts.” From the edge of panic clear in Bothela’s voice, Nemain garnered that she wasn’t looking very good. “I spread a poultice o’er the worst of yer burns, darlin’. Ye’ll feel better soon. And I’ve got a bath heatin’ up on the stove, and some new robes. We’ll get ye cleaned up, right as rain.”

“She cannæ wait fer that,” the man said, his brogue rough with exhaustion. Nemain wrinkled her nose, for she knew him, too. *Rhys.* Cousin Rhys, whom she had thrown herself atop of, to save him from the Nords and their weapons of war.
She was glad he had survived.

And the errant realization that it was Midwinter; that Farkas was gone, that she was wanted in Markarth, that Bear’s marriage and life depended on her deliverance of the death of Madanach in the space of the next few hours...it rang through her healed skull like a bell. Obliterating all other thoughts.

She forced herself to worry about Rhys instead. “You were shot,” Nemain croaked.

“How be yer leg?”

Rhys laughed, but it sounded all wrong. She reached out and placed her hand upon his face, and felt the tension he hid from her; muscles jumping in his tight jawline. Stubble pricked the pad of her thumb. “Ach, well, I be fine. The good herbwife cleaned me up and got me sorted.”

He winced under her questing fingers. “Ouch. Steady on. I’m no supposed ter be getting intae any more scraps fer a while. Bothela’s orders, sae doon go a’kicking me arse like ye always do.”

The man sounded like the old Rhys, but his Thu’um brushing against her skin with every breath was haunted and worried. Not for himself, Nemain realized. But for her.

Et’Ada, how bad had she been hurt?

Worse than she’d thought. The forge-hammer headache banging away at her head had blessedly died down a bit, but when Rhys gripped her hands and moved them away from his face, she felt how blistered in dead skin they were, how…inhuman.

“We havetae move,” Rhys said. “They know that we be here, coz. You dinnae have much time left.”

He helped raise her from the bed and Nemain complied, trying not to groan. “How bad’s it going tae be?”

“Just some Briarhearts outside the door, sayin’ that High King Madanach of the Reach requests yer presence. Nought much tae worry aboot.” he said wryly. “How be yer throat? Think ye can Shout?”

Briarhearts. Grand. They were expecting her to run, then, from her father’s summons. Fat chance of that. She cleared her throat experimentally. “Nae too horrid. I can speak. But I sound like a skooma smoker.”

“Hmph, some folk find that sexy.”

A breeze of rancid air blew past as Bothela and Rhys whisked away what scraps of robe remained upon her, tugging painfully in places where cloth had burned into her skin, and a familiar roughness rasped over her face as a linen robe was pulled over her head. “I’m sure yer husband will adore it.”

Oh, Stout. Where are you? “If I ever see Farkas again.”
A slow tapping sounded on a wooden surface.

“Off with our heads,” Rhys muttered. “Anything ye need afore we go?”

Nemain mentally ran through a quick list of things to request that could prove useful. Soul gems, potions, anything enchanted at all, and she considered. “Where be my staff?”

She jerked in surprise when the other two Forsworn laughed long and loud. “Ach, yer savior! Darlin’, you never told me you were a conjurer?”

“I’m not.”

Rhys snorted. “Aye, I’ve got yer portable demon stick right here. T’was an interesting story aboot yer Markynaz that I’ll tell ye later. You’ve much tae thank him for, if’n we survive this.”

Rhys handed her the staff. She gripped it tightly, checking the charge of the soul gem; relieved when she discovered it was mostly full. The wood was still warm.

“...*When* ye survive this,” Bothela corrected as she slid what felt like leather mules upon Nemain’s feet, “…you will sit doon fer a spell an’ tell me all the crazy galumpin’ things ye’ve been up tae these last long years. Dib’s sake, child! Had I known ye’d boil Betrid Silver-Blood’s head an’ take off tae gods know where and ne’er return, I’d hae stopped Nepos from asking fer ya an’ give ye a right scolding. Things hae gone only downhill ever since the Silver-Blood clan was murdered.”

“I had my reasons,” Nemain said cautiously.

“Tis not as though Madanach did not take advantage of the opportunity.” Rhys said. “I thought The People were pleased by regainin’ the Reach from the Nords placed in charge. No more halved wages, no more bowing their heads and hiding their true tongue; their traditions. I thought they were proud. Certainly acted like it at the gathering, all puffed up with grand plans.”

“Aye, and jawin’ and daydreaming be all they’ve done ever since.” Bothela snarled. “The King’s done his best, but he be old. And the city’s been a right shambles since they drummed out the Nords an’ cut off all trade. Caused a right blood-bath, they did, an’ fer what? Now we be starving, in need of medicines an’ everything else, besides, an’ what does the Council do? They dither! Fighting o’er land rights an’ stolen cattle, airing old grievances clan against clan when we should rightly be thinkin’ of caring for our own! Not watching the border walls, eagerly awaiting fer the next Stormcloak fist tae whet their bloodlust!”

“So everything’s the same as it allus was, then.” Rhys grumbled. “Gods, I hate Markarth.”

“Aye, lad. Silver an’ blood, though now it just mostly be blood what runs through our streets. Cidna Mine was abandoned long ago, without the fear thuaidh sword hangin’ o’er one’s head tae swing a pickaxe fer a song.”

Bothela sounded defeated. “Truly, I dinnae ken what we will do when all this hashes out. I’m too set in me ways tae move. Tae tell the truth, I almost hope the Nords come and take the city back. They
be unfair masters, oddly infatuated with their man-god Talos, but they kept the cannibals from stalking the streets for the sickly an’ weak. Kept the smelters hot and the forges afire.”

The old woman blew out a sigh. “Aye. Ne’er thought I’d think of life under Nord rule as the good ole days, but I do, now. Crivvens, what be this world coming to?”

Nemain listened intently. She had the sinking feeling that her actions so long ago had been the cause, or at least a precursor, to Markarth’s current troubles. Now she had come full circle; wearing threadbare rags and hanging around the riverside slums. Dealing with the same people, the same problems.

And, she reminded herself bitterly, she was still engaged in her old profession of delivering things. Albeit in a more deadly fashion.

It mattered little. Nemain would go; she would leave Bothela safe in her shop and confront Madanach. She would ask him questions (which he would answer, she reassured herself) about her past, and about Melka, and then she would kill him. Paying her dues. Righting a wrong in a most permanent way, for hadn’t Madanach been the cause of all her grief and problems? It was her resemblance to the King in Rags that had started this cascade of events in the first place.

*But Bear would ne’er have kidnapped ye and fallen in love if you’d been a nobody’s daughter,* a small voice whispered amongst the snarl of her thoughts. Likely she’d have died a lonely death in the cold; that night in Helgen Keep. Buried amidst the rubble with the Jarl of Windhelm long gone...no one to mourn her, to know where she lay. Nor care.

Yet things were different now.

Batting the thought away, Nemain sighed as another knock sounded at the door. They were growing impatient. “Sorry tae cause ye so much trouble, Bothela. I’ll be on my way.”

“I’m coming with ye. Can’t have ye falling off the steps. Tis undignified.” Rhys stepped up beside her. “Though I swear, coz, when I get back home tae my longhouse I’ll be transforming it intae a bloody feckin’ fortress. Moat an’ all. And I’m never going tae leave Falkreath ever again.” He huffed. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

Nemain turned and hugged Rhys, impulsively, and her cousin hugged her back.

“Ach, ye smell like dead people,” he whispered into her ear. “In truth, tis probably why Farkas didnae put up sich a fight in leavin’ ya.”

“You be such a bastard.”

She felt his mouth against her shoulder pull into a grin. “Nae judgement here. I stink like yer smelly daedra meself.” Rhys patted her back and released her from his hold. Falling in step behind her, his footsteps were a steadying presence as they approached the door to Bothela’s shop. “Do I even need
tae remind ye how futile this whole errand be? How terrifically foolish?"

“Ehh. Nope.” She felt better now. Rhys might be paranoid and overly protective at times, but he was an anchor to her past, to the good parts of her family, and Nemain needed something steady right now. More than ever.

The bittersap stink of Briarhearts assaulted her nose, whipped away by the cold winds. “This way,” One of the undead warriors said.

And though she knew these streets as she had once known the back of her hand, Nemain allowed Rhys to guide her, carefully steering her by the elbow as her feet took the same steps they had once trod every day for years. Up and down and through the City of Stone, towards their final destination.

The dim green forms of people lit up by the Detect Life enchantment (still on her finger, what a lucky ring!) were all around them. She could hear their whispers follow as she kept her chin stubbornly high, ignoring their caustic remarks as best she could. Leaving them trailing behind her like so much smoke; the whispers becoming a rush as more folk gathered to see what was going on.

"Tis the fuasgladh woman from Orphan’s Rock. The outcast."

"Forsaken one. Traitor!"

"Warra does she’m want?"

"Outcast!” One man spit at her back. “Ye ken better than tae come back here!”

Let them jeer. It wasn’t as though she’d linger once she finished her task, anyhow. She tasted the spray from the great waterfall, fresh and cold upon her face, and licked her lips. Before her, the Briarhearts moved as one to open the great bounded doors. Understone Keep opened with a deafening groan, and her undead heart did a butterfly-soft skip.

She was about to meet her father for the first time. And the last.

She wondered if he would die better than she had.

“Enter,” one of the Briarhearts said in a low monotone.

“The Ard-Rí an Ruigsinneachd awaits you.” The other said, barring Rhys from following her inside.

“I’ll be fine, Rhys,” she replied automatically, preparing mentally for what would surely be a fight fraught with danger. Anticipation spurred her to hurry on inside, though she kept her gait steady. And though she could not tell where stone walls and openings stood, the glowing green form of the man who stepped towards her could be none other than the King in Rags, for at a gesture from him the others who populated the room quietly cleared out. Closing the doors behind them, until they were alone.
“Nemain. Daughter...Welcome.”

“Father.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks, sorry about the super-long wait. I promise I haven’t fallen off the face of the earth...I've just been dangling at the edge. That was a joke for all you flat-earthers, har harr.

No really. I'm alive.

**edited to take out extra spaces that Fanfiction likes to add when I port it over from my documents. STAAAAHP IT.
Midwinter: High Noon

Chapter Notes

Only the strongest will survive
Lead me to heaven, when we die
I am a shadow on the wall
I'll be the one to save us all

- "Blow Me Away", Breaking Benjamin

Theme music for the chapter: "The King of the Highlands."

(For Rhys, and for my husband...who is five times more Scottish than I, will not wear kilts and hates the bagpipes. With a passion.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tzE98pQH08&index=27&list=RDsTPDmZx3gKk

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Madanach was...strange. His Thu’um didn’t feel like anyone she’d ever met before.

His voice was surprisingly hearty, for one so aged. And less accented by the tongue of the People than she would have thought, with a distinctly Nord inflection. She heard the soft shushing of his footsteps move against the stone of the floor, and she readied herself for whatever would come.

“Well met, Nemain, and welcome back home. My hagraven seers foresaw your coming, and I have looked forward to your arrival with much gladness.”

The glowing green figure of Madanach casually waved an arm towards what she assumed were chairs laid near a firepit, for in that direction was heat and the smell of smoke. “Come, sit. There is much to be discussed.”

Right. Let’s just nip that in the bud.

“Y’know, I think not. Máthair thought tae use me as well, fer her own purposes and desires.” Nemain promptly replied, not about to lower her guard. “How do I ken that yer not cut from the same cloth, Daddy dear? Considering that all I know of you could fit in a thimble, with space tae spare. You’ve been more king than father; aye, though a better parent than Máthair turned out to be.”

Nemain shrugged. Pointedly. “Before I slew her for her sins.”
“So. Melka is dead, then.”

A long sigh followed, and his voice, when it spoke again, was a touch less happy. “I gather she told you little of the reasons why she kept you from me.”

“Reasons?” Nemain had a hard time keeping the incredulity out of her tone. “Did ye need a reason tae have Nepos send me after Ulfric Stormcloak, ‘Father?’ A guttersnipe with nae reason tae live or succeed in killing a war hero, save tae fight fer the memories of a golden age which your lot have painstakingly nurtured? Paid for in blood and souls?”

“Even now, when everyone kens that the Forsworn have won and be no longer needfully called ‘Forsworn’; what with Markarth retaken, do ye not understand that we have still lost? Where be this grand future? Eh? Where's our glorious return! When have ye ever needed more reasons, Father, tae fuck up my life?!”

Nemain gritted her teeth. “You have caused me more grief than you can know.”

The man stood still for a space, then gracefully sat down. It looked uncommonly peculiar without her ability to see the chair...rather, it looked with her spellsight as though he was hovering assback. Floating in mid air.

She could not help but huff at the idea. *Perched. Like a bloody raven at a battlefield.*

*How auspicious.*

Madanach moved, and his hand patted something that made a metallic slosh. She smelled alcohol. “Sit ye awhile.” His tone was mild. “I will nae bite.”

A cork popped wetly from an invisible bottle, and the aroma of brandy wafted into the air. The good stuff, like what she used to steal from Galmar; smelling like peaceful days spent reading while cocooned in furs. Like witty banter with Ulfric over apples and cheese, like fishing with Aventus and lessons with Sofie. The brandy smelled like the best of her memories at Windhelm.

She swallowed.

“Sit, daughter. No doubt you have many questions that I can answer before this day is done.”

Perhaps she could allow Madanach this much, at least. Chalk it up to all that time spent with Nords and their pucklesome feelings about honor, but she had no taste for killing in cold blood without a settling of accounts. Not without giving him a fair chance, at least, to air any grievances he had. To clear the air.

*Well. Her conscience prodded her to be honest, at least with herself. Not unless there be a better strategy.*
Striding briskly over to where Madanach sat, she nearly upended the table upon which the brandy was, until a sticklike arm barred her path. Hands hard-callused as horn gripped her forearms, and she stiffly sat down at their behest.

“There. Have something to drink, will ye?”

She accepted the horn with a sharp nod and drank. The fumes pricked at her nose, and she coughed. “How do ye know that I favor Cyrodiilic brandy, Ard-Rí an Ruigsinneachd?”

“Hmm. No titles today, please.”

A pause, in which they both took sips of what must have been an exceptional year. She tried to drink it as slowly as possible. “I have been following your travels ever since you were unceremoniously booted from Deepwood Redoubt, Nemain. I know many things about you.”

And here his hale voice turned sly. “...such as your exquisite taste in men, for example. Though I must say, I never imagined that some of the decisions you’ve made in your dire straits would bear such...chaotic fruit. Yes. I gather that congratulations are in order for your recent marriage?”

Nemain tried to bury her face inside the bowl of the drinking horn. It didn’t work. “Mmph.”

“Come now! Nay need to be so bashful! Will I be afforded the chance to meet this hulking son-in-law? I hear from my spies that he be quite the Nord brute. A Companion, no less! Hah! Not the Reach-raised husband I imagined I’d be giving my blessing, to be honest.”

“My spouse be otherwise occupied at the mo’, actually.” she managed to choke out, finishing the horn and upending it upon the table to show that she was done. Chat with Stout indeed. As though they’d have teatime together in Understone Keep. Complete with sweetcakes and cream, with a lacing of jarrin root for that robust taste of closure.

Zounds, she didn’t even know where the man was, much less what Madanach was getting at. And she was gradually becoming rather terrified that he knew more than he was letting on about her other, more charismatic liaisons.

Enough. The drink had been good. More than good, but she had work to do. And the downright odd, near friendly mannerisms of the King were starting to unnerve her. “So ye’ve been followin’ my every move. Fancy that. Couldnnae be ‘coz I be the feckin’ Dragonborn, aye? Did ye see aught o’ that in yer crystal ball?”

“Crystal spheres are terribly imprecise objects to scry within. I prefer a silver mirror, myself.”

“Well, la-di-dah. Water from a pure source works just as well. But I s’pose if one can afford silver...”

Her words trailed into silence, awkward as the inference of what that metal meant to Markarth’s
history lay heavy upon them both, and they sat there quietly for a time. Listening to the firepit spark and pop.

Rankled at all this ridiculous small talk, Nemain decided to steer the conversation towards more pertinent shores. “Right. So...why be this the first time we be on speaking terms? Tis not as though ye did no have scads of opportunities tae arrange such a meeting years before. Like when I lived in Markarth, declared an outcast an’ fit tae be killed by any who saw me try tae return home. Starvin’ tae death by meself in the warrens. Living off o’ measly messenger fees an’ skeever droppings. Freezing in some hole. Why did ye no come tae me then?”

“I was not as free as I am now to arrange my affairs, Nemain.”

She heard him swallow, slowly. One savory sip at a time, and she itched to ask for more of that brandy. “My arrangement with the Silver-Blood Clan bought me time. Time to prepare for an eventual escape and retaking of Markarth, and much besides, but the price was dear. Cidna Mine was no luxury manse, any more than Nepos the Nose was guileless in his use of you as catapult fodder.”

“And I was not as sure as I am now that my attempts to reach out to you would not have been...well, firmly rebuffed, thanks to the tutelage of your dear, dear Máthair. Am I not wrong?”

“She was not most complimentary in her descriptions of you, nay.”

“I imagine not.” Madanach sounded rueful. “Still. Did she ever...speak to you of me? Tell you stories, when you were a child out in the wilds?”

This entire situation was growing stranger and stranger. Any moment, now, and a bard would pop out of a side chamber. Singing of sunbeams and apple dumplings and families that could be together forever. “No, actually. Wasn’t e’en aware that you were me Da until certain, uh, events took place.”

Please, please PLEASE dinnae say that ye be aware of Bear an’ meself. I think I’d die fer real. Sink down here right intae the stones.

“Ah. I see.” The King’s voice lamented. “Ach, well. Melka was...aye, she was something to behold, when we were young and bright-eyed. Hot with hate and high hopes.”

“I wish you’d have known her the way I remembered her, Nemain. How she could dance! And such a smile! I wish you could see what I saw, before her sweetness was leached by the pains she endured, inflicted upon her by the Nords. Before fear got the better of her sensibility.”

Madanach reached out to her. She instinctively shied away.

“But.” He seemed not to notice. “...as luck would have it, you have inherited the greater portion of her beauty.”

“Right,” Nemain managed. “Beauty.” Be he stone-cold stupid?
Covered with the detritus of her rude revival, Nemain knew she smelled like a cesspool and looked like a beggar. What hair she’d had left had been burnt completely off in the back by the ballista blast, unevenly, and dried bits of skin flaked away even as she shifted in discomfort. *Pfft. Beauty.*

“Folk say we look much alike, you ken. Be that true?” She would not share the nostalgic tidbits that involved Melka despairing long and loud of ever having her daughter grow into anything other than a wee reedy imp.

She did have her pride.

“Aye. That we do.” Reaching out again, slower this time, Madanach took both of her hands. And she let him. “Here. Nothing quite like first hand experience. Feel, and tell me what you think.”

When he pressed her hands against his cheeks, Nemain was tempted for a split second to gouge out his eyes, let him see how nonchalantly he could behave after that...but she resisted. Her thumbs spread over his sharp cheekbones and chin, measuring. Finding that she and he shared the same upturned nose, the similarly blade-angled features, though his were finely milled in wisp-fine wrinkles and covered in the wiry strands of his knotted beard.

“What color were your eyes, daughter? Before Orphan’s Rock happened?”

She moved her fingers to sink them into the length of his hair and nearly laughed to find they even had the same coarse texture. *How she missed her long hair!*

“Grey.”

“Ach. Just like mine. We are tarred by the same brush, you and I.”

She released him and sat back in her chair. “So...naught much of a fair beauty after all, then, aye?” *Old flatterer.* She wouldn’t give him what he thought he wanted from her.

No matter what it was.

He chuckled. “Point to you, daughter. Yours is a...uniquely striking appearance. I would not bandy words to gain your favor if I did not in part mean them.”

“And yet you waste them in delaying what I wish most tae know.”

Again, Madanach sighed. “I delay for good reason. There is little joy in what must be said.”

“Then say it, and be done with it.”

“Yes,” Madanach spoke, and this time his voice was as sorrowful as it was raw. “I now see much of your Máthair in you.”

Before she could think to be offended by such an obviously untrue statement, the High King of the Reach launched into a recital that made her lean forward despite herself.
“And now we have come to the thick of it, you and I. You see, I know your purpose in coming here. I know you have come to bring an end to my life.”

Quietly, Nemain asked, “Do ye also ken the reason why?”

“No. The reason matters not. And I will give it up to you, daughter. Give up my life willingly, in fact. I am old, and my time here in this plane is over. But there are, as I stated before, things that must be said.”

“And words, words that must be passed down before we go out from this hall and make an end of this. Where we will display our violence nature for the world to see, and judge.”

“What think you of this so far, child?”

Knowing that her father was expecting her was one thing. Hearing that he fully expected her to murder him (and greeted it with gladness) was another entirely, stealing some of the vigor from her will to fight, and Nemain cleared her throat.

Uncertain.

“You said ye had things that must be said. Words...such as?”

He sighed. "Such as prophecy. You will never know, Nemain, what sacrifices must be made as a parent for the tutelage of a beloved child. And why our reasons for dealing death and pain are often far better than what might have been, had we but stayed our hands.”

“I doon understand you.” She shook her head, stubbornly resisting the urge to scream, to shout. To cry. “I dinnae ken any of this at all.”

*How hard can it be? Just kill him an’ be done with it!*

“I know. Listen, then, and learn the reasons why your Mother hurt you, out of love. Learn why all this has come to pass.”

Her father’s voice paused, then rang out with sudden strength.

“When the Bear lieth with the Fox and the Eye wakes from sleep

Then Mundus in peril will be!

Bairn born of a Dragon will give cause for all to weep

And nevermore will The People live free.”
She comes! A Hero battles her foe; the First of Akatosh to be destroyed!

Fair and Foul be both her hex and charm to keep

Magna Ge, Una and Mnemoli!

Hid away in Padomaic’s thunderous deep,

Savior of the West; Beloved of the Void.

Madanach chuckled. “I believe that be the whole of it, though I may have butchered the execution. I will repeat it again, if you like. Your mother recited it for me so many times during your conception that I could not forget it, even when I dearly wanted to.”

Conception?

Her thoughts blurred into a incogent mess.

Bears? Foxes?! Och! The Eye of Magnus! Oh Ancano, what have ye wrought, up there in yer tower in Winterhold?

A great urgency gripped her, and she vowed to find the sneaky bastard and grill him at the soonest opportunity. The Great Eye disappear off the face of Mundus, ugh. Not tae worry, Nemain! Truly...the Psijics have it all under control!

Cor, it cannae have been that simple.

Nemain recentered herself. “If that tripe be supposedly aboot myself, I gather that the First that I have battled probably is the World-Eater. Alduin.”

"Likely so." Her father's resonant voice was proud.

She blew out in frustration. “That part be over and done, no thanks tae you. But the rest…” her shoulders lifted in a shrug. “...that be collopy gibberish. Why did Melk-why do you care sae much? Prophecy be notoriously double-edged! It could mean anything!” Nemain finally flung out her arms, punctuating her point with wide swings.

“Tis just words!”

“And mere words never did any harm, did they, hmm?” Madanach’s glowing green form steepled his fingers together, and she could almost imagine her face laid atop his. Aged with the grinding decay of decades. Worn in a masculine, albeit exasperated slant.

She tended to have that effect upon men.

“For words are weapons, as your peculiar power the Thu’um aptly demonstrates. Have you lost all
faith in your destiny, child? Shall you scold the remains of my warriors, buried deep beneath the Druadach in the west wold? Scattered to the winds? Shall you speak of how harmless words are, even as your kin cry out from the dust to be avenged against their murderer?"

“Aye, their destroyer...your little secret. That ambitious upstart Ulfric, the rebel Jarl of Windhelm?”

*Shite.* If her heart had possessed a beat, it would have stopped at his tart syllables. “You knew aboot all that? With Bear and, er, meself?”

His voice was no longer pleasant, but angry. “Of course I know! Prophecy cannot be fought, anymore than fate can be changed! You, the child of a Fox, and he...the literal Bear of Markarth! Bound together by twisted chance! Et’Ada, how lost you must be, Dragonborn, to deny the very existence of your being! To fight the very cause for which you were made! The duality for which the die has already been cast!”

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Duality? You be crazed, auld man. Someone else's prophecy be one thing, but I doon believe in destiny. That malarkey said nothin’ of this grand cause, aside from slaying Alduin, and ye can thank Ulfric Stormcloak for that. He was a damn sight more useful in leading me tae defeat the Time-Eater than you.”

“No. I dinnae believe in destiny, anymore.” The vision she had borne upon the Throat of the World flashed through her mind, and she shook her head. Remembering the death of her babe, Ulfric’s babe, at her own hands. The triumph of the Thalmor in their victory, the rule of magic over all. The silent ruin of Skyrim, the holocaust of the race of Nords. And the black-thorn crib rocking ominously by the fire. Empty.

“The Sight can only reveal sae much, til our own agency affords us other options. No, Madanach. I doon believe in your prophecy. I believe that we choose our own paths.” Bear’s upside-down face wreathed in mist from the sauna flashed before her mind's eye, and she smiled. Just a little.

“We be responsible for our own fates. Our actions alone; an' for none other shall we accept the blame.”

“Melka chose!” The King lifted his arm, and she heard the swishing of cloth as he pointed at her. “She chose to lay with me one Beltane night in hopes of bearing you, a hero. A savior to our people! To serve a greater purpose, to give all the lost ones cast adrift a homeland! Our rightful lands, those that were stolen by the fear thuaidh! You were to be the one who would bring back the Forsworn to all our rightful glory!”

“...And then the hagravens revealed what you’d do, when you were born. The other part of prophecy, the woman you’d become! Born with the soul of a dragon, bound to save and to damn us for all time! Condemning the People to a future of diminishing, as we lessen into stories and fireside tales.” There was a thud as his fist hit the wooden arm of his chair. “Never to rise again...all our work. My work, the work of years! Ruined!”

“Well, which be it then? Am I yer savior, or your destroyer, Madanach?”
Her sarcasm seemed to pass unnoticed. The older Forsworn spoke over her, his speech gaining speed. “...and who you would lie with; the very enemy of all we are! Truly? Ulfric Stormcloak, Nemain?! To give him the Jagged Crown? To open to him your body, you very heart?? Was the seed of hatred not planted deeply enough? Did Melka not give you enough reason to defy, to turn away from the one who brought such misery upon us all?”

“And the child…”

Nemain shivered at the loathing in Madanach’s voice. “-the daedra that would spring from your loins from such a union! Better that you had perished in the womb! Better that you had never been born at all! It would not have been merely the death of our culture, oh no, not merely that, though that would have been a sore grievance. In spreading your legs, you would have invited a catastrophe beyond your dim imaginings! An ending of life that would rival the end times Alduin would have brought on tenfold!”

“You. You would have brought on the chainfire of events that would unravel of the fabric of Oblivion, of Aetherium and Time itself!!! Can I speak more clearly? Shall I reveal more words, more reasons why you have been such a hope and a disappointment to me?!”

Nemain listened numbly. Waiting for his rant to finally end.

“I lashed out.” Madanach’s cultured voice was weary, now. “I overreacted at such news. Spoke of killing you, quietly. Mercifully as you slept, and Melka? My woman, my High Priestess...she ran from me.”

“-With you, a squalling babe in tow. And you both disappeared. And I could not find you, not until years later, when the distraction of the Great War provided the chance to regain Markarth.”

“I then spied you from afar, though Melka was careful to keep all mention of you from me. No matter how I apologized. No matter how I begged, I could not gain access to you. How was I to ken that she had determined to change the stars? To make you only the hero, and never the villain? She was resolute that if only you were taught rightly, if only she had enough power to make you obey...she could keep you safe. Safe and free of such a fate, of bringing such doom upon us all.”

Fool. Tears pricked at her eyes, and Nemain bit her tongue; striving to rein them in. She wiped her cheeks with short, furious swipes, hating that he saw. Hating that she cared. What a fool you be, lass, tae imagine that you were ever more than a pawn tae him, or tae Melka. A tool to be used and discarded; born for the fulfillment of some bloody star-sighted game.

She’d heard enough.

“And what now, of yer ominous foretellings?” Nemain stood. Fists clenched at her side, fire already glowing within them. “What of yer prophecy? This, this be why such troubles be my lot, ye say? Hah! Destiny be damned, aye, an’ you be damned too, Father! Be ye happy with the way things hae turned out? Are ye? Do ye even ken what lengths Melka sank to, tae gain this fabled power that
would avert our certain annihilation?"

He was resigned. “She did what had to be done, in the end.”

“She blinded me! The end doesnae justify the means if the means be sore foul! Melka murdered my foster daughter, stole my son and tortured me. Tortured us, ‘til I would hae done anything...anything to kill her in return. Even slay Galan! Did yer spies report that?! Did they tell ye how I came tae be returned to life in such a state? Do you even care?!” She was breathing heavily at that point, her Thu’um rumbling in the back of her throat. Ready to be unleashed. “Gods, you an’ Melka might as well hae pushed me intae the jaws of the God of Destruction himself!”

Nemain cupped the flat expanse of her belly. Ignoring the Voice of the dragon inside that told her to kill him. *Kill Madanach now. Killkillkill.*

“...And well, now you’ve won. And may yer victory be empty, as barren an’ hollow as this! No fruit will e’er be born from *this* womb, thanks tae her, and you. And regarding the future of our people? Hah, *that* will not lie in my power! Not ever! I already have several impossible jobs! I dinnae need more!”

She pointed a finger at him; the tip flared bright hot with her temper. “This? This all be your failing, King. Yer People be starved and in need thanks tae your lack of power. Your inability tae control the bloodlust an’ hecklin’ of the clans. Yer mistakes alone. Nae mine!”

“Oh, these concerns are yours indeed, Daughter.”

And didn’t *that* sound ominous.

Nemain cast a quick Warding spell and boosted one of her most devastating elemental attacks, even as Madanach laughed sharply at her reaction. “Think you that ye can just walk away from what you were born to be? You came here, of your own will and accord…making it past my spies and even the Stormcloaks whom I allowed to malinger outside my gates, tae end me.”

“...And I? I, the magnanimous King, will grant you your wish. I shall die. But you must pay the price. You must take your rightful place and rule over our clans.”

"Be High Queen; Ard-Banriona an Ruigsinneachd. Lead our People into prosperity once again, into the future that was foretold to be glorious. Where no child of the valleys and hills will ever hunger, nor pocket remain empty for the wealth that you will bring, once the Council accepts your wisdom.” Madanach's voice was resolute, righteous. His every breath revealed the fulness of conviction he held in every word he had uttered.

...which was ludicrous. Her, a Queen?
She was the queen of shite luck, and that was all she’d ever be. The Dragonborn was dead and gone, eaten, with the Listener who had replaced her needed only once in a blue moon for rote recitation of prayers.

Nemain wiped the last of the blood-tinged tears from her eyes and sat up straight. *No.* She was nothing. If she had earned any name, then she was Melancholy; the Mistress of Mouldering Decay, if not outright Apathy as her lowly title. And she could not help but laugh in disbelief at Madanach’s faith that she would simply go along with all this rot.

Aye, she laughed, though it was not humorous. Not funny at all. “Lead ‘em?! Lead our folk where? Intae their graves? Straight towards the axes of the Nords who wait tae take back all you have regained?”

"Nay, Madanach. I'll ne'er be whom ye wish me tae be."

Nemain shook her head. She watched with her magical sight, clicking her finger ring against her staff as Madanach ignored her. His green form rose from his chair, and he walked past her towards the entrance doors...all the while she waited with bated breath for him to attack. To make the first move.

How long had she wasted precious time drinking brandy and jawing about delusional fantasies as Midwinter toiled onward? She prayed for end of this painful monologue that she could not help but absorb, memorizing every word to be digested and rehearsed later...much later. She could hardly wait for him to unleash all the devastating force she hoped he was capable of; so she could finally kill the man she had agreed to kill, in lieu of the Black Sacrament’s original intended target.

All so that Ulfric would be safe. So that she could be finished with this debt; this burden she felt towards the man, much good it did her. He had not come for her at Orphan’s Rock. Likely he did not know that she even had survived. The thought rankled her mood.

*Why do I still care sae damn much?!* Why couldn't she move on with her unlife in peace!

Fortunately for her, a distraction was already well in place. Curing her from thinking overmuch upon those nasty, tremulous thoughts. Nemain popped her knuckles with grim eagerness, stretching her fingers in preparation for spellcasting.

So her father had wanted to slay her to prevent some goddamn prophecy?

*I'll drain him doon tae his bones before the man dares lift a finger.*

And if she died the true death in the process? So much the better. The world would be safe from whatever apocalypse the Eye would bring (if she even believed in such stupidity. *Damn* that Ancano), and Farkas.

Farkas would be free…

...and if Bear happened to be so unfortunate as to die from the assassin sent after him should she fail, well. Nemain sucked in a long, quavering breath. *Well.* They’d find one another in the afterlife...and
she’d drub him about that, too. And more besides.

She snorted. *As though having a bairn would bring on the end of the world.*

And as though she had said nothing of note, her father spoke once again. “It is time, I think, to tell the People the good news.”

Madanach bowed to her, his form dipping in a courtly manner as he held the door ajar.

She stepped gingerly towards him. The roar of the waterfall barely masked the noise from all those who had gathered outside on the stone veranda, no doubt curious about what was coming to pass. “Good news for you, or fer me? We can handle this inside, Madanach. If you truly wish tae die so sorely.”

“Ah-ah-ah.” Madanach clucked as the Briarhearts who had escorted her assisted in opening both stone doors more fully. She could hear their heft scraping against the mossy walls; hear the murmurs of the bystanders as they both stepped out onto the wide slab step that topped the stairs leading to Understone Keep. “Nothing be for free, Dragonborn, or have you not discovered that yet in all your travels?”

“You have challenged my rule, and so this challenge must be faced in the public eye. For all to see.”

Distantly, Nemain was aware that the crowd outside is screaming her father’s name, but her attention is elsewhere in that seething froth of humanity. The green outlines of people mesh and blur, punctuated by the redder, more altered crabbed figures that could be nothing less than hagravens...followed by queer blank spots which are resolved as she casts Detect Undead surreptitiously. *More Briarhearts. I dinnae ken how I feel about that. Being surrounded by more of 'em, an' nowhere tae run but off a cliff.*

She wonders where Rhys has gotten off to. Sending a swift mental prayer that he might stay safely out of the way, Nemain deeply inhaled the mist-laden air of Markarth, for it looked as though this murder would be taking place in broad daylight. Rhys’ goodwife was first and foremost an Orsimer. She hoped he would stay with Bothela in her little shop, for Nemain had no desire to deliver any sort of news to Baz that included the words ‘Rhys’ and ‘dead’ in the same sentence.

She rather liked her limbs connected where they were.

- Though it would have been nice not to be completely lacking in support, as she blinked at some of the wildly inventive expletives that some in the crowd were using in mixed tongues. Shouting for her blood. Crying out for her final death.

“Good folk!” Madanach roared, his voice suddenly taking on all the backhills brogue it had lacked before. “My daughter has challenged me fer my crown!”

Cheers and mocking laughter greeted his statement, as he raises his hand in salute. She stood there
mutely, waiting for him to get on with it. She could be patient. She could wait.

He would taste all the sweeter for his conceit.

“Sae much fer filial love, but me only child’s got a problem. She hasnae hearkened tae her ole’ mum nor her pa. Nay, she’s been bandyin’ her nights wid’ fear thuaidh! So ye can ken that she hath much tae relearn in the ways o’ the People, aye? Tell ‘er what ye think o’ that, good folk!”

Boos and jeers rose in volume, undulating in waves.

Someone even threw a rotten cabbage. Nemain bared her teeth and sidestepped the disgusting vegetable, quietly building up the charge for her spells. Madanach indulgently waved for the crowd to be quiet. “Och, dinnae be sae hard on her! Tis our own fault fer sending sich a one as the Dragonborn away as a mere lass. What can be expected, livin’ sae lang amongst them fear thuaidh heathens?”

There was a rumble of agreement. “Now, accordin’ tae our laws, this challenge fer rule o’ law must be aired before the People. Held in fair combat. Our individual might judged by the Council and Reachfolk tae showcase raw, pure power. The power tae hold the rule o’ leadership upon victory!”

Applause rippled around them, and the excitement escalated with palpable tension. Nemain felt her skin prickle with gooseflesh from the ozone as several warding spells were raised in the forefront of their audience. Preparations; likely being made for the advantage of a front-seat view. To better enjoy the carnage.

And yet she was not afraid.

“Mages prepare!” A hagraven hissed from nearby.

“You are belligerent even to the last,” Madanach whispers pleasantly, stepping further away upon the stone veranda.

Mind yer surroundings. Twelve pillars, the waterfall and a landing width the length of a horsecart, Nemain mentally calculates.

She could not afford to fall. “Ye underestimate me, Father.”

“I have no reverence for the alleged powers of the Nord’s Dragonborn,” Madanach responds. “I suppose it be possible. You are of my blood, after all. Be on your guard, child, for I intend to sell myself dearly. The gods will not save you this time.”

“How banjaxed lucky that I dinnae intend tae rely on them.”

“They be ready! By the gods Hircine an’ Dibe, by Et’Ada and the rights our People hath invested in their representatives, th’ High Council, I declare-”

He laughs, low and amused.

“-that this duel be now ready tae-”

Magicka flares as she tightens her fists, echoing the thrum of magicka she feels from him, and a thrill crests within her. In this, at least, they were of one mind.
None would leave this match alive.

“BEGIN!”

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

After being thrust from the audience that the Dragonborn had attained with the High King, Rhys wandered back to the Hag’s Cure to check upon Bothela. She had insisted upon accompanying him back to Understone Keep, and he felt obligated to guard her...even if he disagreed on the rational sense of the notion.

Elbowing his way through the crush of Reachfolk, Orcs and a smattering of Mer, he and the old woman found a spot of high ground. A cleared area hid behind the stairwell to Dibella’s Temple; all crumbling wall covered in gorse bush and moss. It provided a clear view of the two small figures facing off upon the grand staircase straight below.

He squinted, the better to see them. The resemblance between father and daughter was uncanny. And their expressions...

“Hold tight tae something,” he muttered to Bothela. “Things be comin’ tae a head.”

And so, they did not fall over as some others did when a concussive blast shook the air and the ground rippled; stone crackling like an ill-tanned pelt as the two mages faced off. Bound together in mortal combat.

Snow and dirt whipped all in its path into a frenzied cloud. Madanach threw himself sideways as the Dragonborn’s magic shrieked by in a froth of spillage; ice freezing upon the pillars and stones of Understone Keep’s ancient facade. Creating a wall of icicles that stretched horizontally: hair thin. Needle sharp.

Several broke away, flung into the walls and the air as the battle continued.

Even from such a distance, Rhys could see that the High King’s veneer of amiability had shattered. Exposing a wrathful face, lips peeled back in a nearly beastlike rictus of savagery as he cast and recast several spells that sheared on either side of Nemain. Blocked like a forking river as with both fists she summoned a Ward that grew tree-tall; forcing the gouts of fire and electricity to spill away.

She pulled a tornado of wind from the skies, howling like a storm atronach. Madanach shielded himself in an orb of shimmering opal; he yanks stone from the very ground beneath her feet and she retaliates by rooting her feet into a thick well of ice.

They trade aetherial blows for several minutes, neither landing one on the other...blobs of fire and ice and rock ricocheting out into the thick crowd to screams of both delight and pain from the spectators. Rhys watched as some of them threw objects at Nemain; rotten potatoes, cabbages and even a few rocks which bounced harmlessly away.
But Nemain must have gained some of her own supporters, somehow. For others in the seethe aimed their ire at Madanach, and the High King was forced to turn away to shield himself.

A loud, angry buzzing grew, and Madanach’s hands perform a complicated series of gestures.

At first, Rhys thought he had summoned a Spriggan. Clouds of phosphorescent green insects hummed in widdershins around the Dragonborn, and she jerked away in confusion. Twisting as she flings fire forward and around in a circular arc. Ridding herself of the pests as they ping away in black sparks, caught by the flames. Skittering into soot as they make contact with her Ward.

Madanach follows with a scythe of crackling purple; she counters with a scream that Rhys cannot understand. Something that seems to slow time to a crawl, his own inhale coming draggingly slow, as she steps quickly forward.

Rearing her arm back, the Dragonborn punches the King in the jaw.

“A solid hit!” Rhys crows, forgetting he was intending to hide. “Yer doin’ grand, lass! Keep it up!”

Madanach stumbles, cradling his face in his hands. But it is a ruse, and he kicks up and out; forcing Nemain to fall back with a grunt and land hard upon the icy stones.

Rhys bites his knuckle and watches intently as she hauls herself up to a standing position with her staff and lifts one hand. The waterfall shears away from its proper course and careens into a curving, twisted living thing: aimed straight at Madanach. Guided by the Dragonborn as she drops her staff and lifts both hands in a dance; leading the thunderous falls towards her foe in a masterful display of aethric control.

He disappears beneath the deluge. Rhys holds his breath as the crowd loses its mind.

Reappearing beneath a cloak of flaring blue-white flame, smoke smolders from Madanach’s robes as several gleaming swords, translucent and sharp, careen through the air towards Nemain. She Shouts words that are clearly enunciated, Fo Krah Diün, and the blast of frost stops the magical weapons in midair. They fall useless to the ground.

“Strun Bah Qo!” Rhys claps hands over his ears as the skies suddenly darken. Thunderclouds gather in roiling volume; lightning spews into the mash of trodden snow and life underneath.

Madanach screams, and this time all hear his words. Though they cannot rival the gut-wrenching reverberations of the Dragonborn’s Voice.

“Órdaich na mairbh! Stop, I command you! I command the dead!”
Nemain freezes in place, her arms contorted in the motions of a prematurely cast spell. Nearby, Bothela groans in horror, and Rhys reaches out clumsily to hold her hand.

The crowd immediately falls silent to watch in anticipation, only the injured and their moans breaking the peace. Rhys can hear worn banners slapping against their metal poles as the wind whips and stirs in the wake of the storm.

Somewhere, a hawk cries.

Once. Twice; its forlorn keen the only cry any present dare to make.

“Come now, my Daughter,” Madanach speaks, his rough voice gentle chiding. He walks towards her, his steps unhurried as he spins his hands into an intricate pattern. Dark winding threads of magicka follow him, like a trailing bed of snakes. ‘Did ye really think tae fight me an’ win?’

“Ye havenae...beaten...me,” the Dragonborn croaks out, obviously struggling against the iron-bound constrictions of the spell. “…yet. Yer...no the first...tae use Obedience...against me…you bloody....prick...”

Even from such a distance, Rhys can see Madanach’s eyebrows lift nearly into his hairline.

“Am I not? Then obey me.”

His arms lift, and the coiled snakes of power crawl down his hands. “Die.”

Shards of rock shake; veins stand out like ropes from his gnarled hands as he casts. Slivers of red criss-cross Nemain’s face and arms as the spell cloud fraught with shrapnel arcs around her, deep enough to scrape bone, and Rhys winces in sympathy. Blood gushes from rents torn into her robes.

And she screams as the cloud of rock continues to spin in a cyclone around her, awkwardly clutching at herself. One large stone the size of an ingot thuds into her middle hard enough to knock the wind out of her, then another smashes her knee, and again to her thigh and her shoulder and the swell of her leg and hip, until it is obvious that the Dragonborn cannot stand any longer. Collapsing, tendons pop from the hard line of her throat as she struggles. Unable or unwilling to accept what was happening.

More likely unwilling, Rhys thought, and he mentally prepared a speech of what he would say when he eventually found Farkas to give him the bad news.

He had a feeling it would not be his bagpipes the enormous Nord would crush. I knew we should hae never come back here.

“Surrender.”

Lit by an umbra of black, Madanach looks more akin to an apparition from Oblivion than a mage. His grey eyes glow white, and he stalks toward the woman pinned down by the deluge of wind and stone. Her mouth is agape, and Rhys numbly wonders if she can breath, from inside such a storm.
'Hircine guides me, the People deny you. How could you hope tae defeat me, child? Surrender and live. Surrender and accept yer failure.'

She lifts her head slightly. Whispering something -nonsense, an answer that is lost to the wind and the gouting flame. Still burning on the bodies of those unfortunates who did not remove themselves quickly enough from peril.

Madanach leans closer. “Say that again, lass. Fer all to hear.”

Nemain shudders, her tattered robes more red than dun, now, and it is clear to see: every movement pains her.

Her wind-burned lips move.

“I said,” she breathes out, loud enough for all to hear, “...shut yer gob!”

And she seizes the ugly, spiked daedric staff and smashes the end of it against her father’s mouth.

Madanach lets out a broken, hitching gasp and jerks away from the Dragonborn, pulled like a string from a spool. Nemain rolls away in the other direction and steadily regains her feet, the dripping staff held across herself with more apparent strength than anyone could have known.

“You think to use Obedience against me, Father? Y’think tae hold me like Máthair? Take me tae task? I will not be controlled, no, not by anyone! Least of all you!”

He snarls in response.

She throws a ball of sickly green light at him, blank shock painting his face in the same hue as the crowd bellows and stirs into a frenzy around them, and Nemain draws herself even further upward. Looking like the grim visage of Sithis himself, she walks towards Madanach. A ruin of charred robes, marred flesh and determined jaw.

Unhurried. Undaunted, as the king stands petrified. Stiff as a board, all parts of him frozen save for the wild rolling of his eyes as they dart back and forth.

“How could she break such a spell?!” Bothela screams into Rhys’ ear. “She’s undead! Command the Dead cannae be counteracted by the thrall, unless the caster recants it!”

“She’s a necromancer! A lich, an’ the Dragonborn besides! I told ye she be strong!” Rhys yelled back. “Now hauld yer bloody wheesht, woman, an’ watch!”

They both watched as the Paralyze spell wears away. Madanach staggers; looking as if he cannot decide whether to kill or to be sick.
“What is this foolishness?” He spits between torn and swollen lips. “What have ye done? It be impossible!”

Nemain smiles, and it is not a happy smile. “Obedience may only hold one who cannae bring tae task the willpower tae counter it. I dinnae believe in yer ability tae command me, and so, I be not subject to it.”

"How does it feel...tae be so helpless, old man? How does it feel tae have one’s own power tae move be taken away. As if it be nothing? Be it pleasant?"

She takes two quick steps forward and rests her hand over the beating pulse of Madanach’s throat. “Now,” she tells the King softly. “Surrender.”

The entire city holds its breath.

He lifts his hands weakly, a thin wavering trail of smoke all he can summon. It vanishes into the breeze as Nemain’s smile grows sharper teeth.

“Sapped of magicka, are ye? I be fair hollow myself.” She gestures towards her injuries. “Fortunately there be an antidote fer that.” Her chin sets into a stubborn line.

“Goodbye, Father.”

And she attacks.

This is not the careful testing of her earlier blows; this is not the measured strength of woman against man, of a challenger seeking victory against the challenged. Nemain’s magic bears down into Madanach like a red hammer, like a swollen tide eating away at stone. Inexorable. Unrelenting. Deadly.

An umbilical of power glows between them, white and searingly hot. It bursts like an explosion, bright enough to blind even through Rhys’ tightly clenched eyelids. The crowd screams and stomps, deafening in their numbers. He covers his face with his hands as Bothela whimpers nearby, at once uneager and desperate to see what is happening.

Snapping like broken twigs, a crackling is all Rhys can hear. He blinks repeatedly as his vision returns. Praying, hoping...he watches the ominous glow coalesce into a single, straight figure and a stooped one.

-And he sucks in one, quick breath as the dessicated, drained body of Madanach is dropped from the hands of the Dragonborn. The people gasp and mutter, pointing fingers as some run away. Others draw closer, among those several hagravens and Briarhearts. Watching as closely as he; to see what the victor will do.
The woman closed her eyes and stood at ease, with her arms and legs spread apart. Thin slices meld together, healing until nothing but unblemished flesh is left to show beneath the torn cloth of her robes.

She sighs: a contented sound, and her head lolls to the side as a shimmering aura envelops her. Skin that had been pale and wan now glows with health and vibrancy as she lazily lifts one hand in a spiraling motion. And in a slow, swift-creeping shadow, her hair begins to grow.

Lengthening from short tufts into a spill of ash-black; a river of hair that caresses her hips as she stretches.

“Mmm.” The Dragonborn groans. “That be ever so much better.”

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It was over.

She had won.

It had been a damned difficult battle, a hard kill, and her nerves were still singing from where they had channeled all the power Madanach had given her. A last gift from father to daughter; this life. This energy sizzling through her undead frame, healing bits and pieces of her...even bringing vitality and restoration to parts long thought unharmed. The limp she had retained from her injuries prior to Orphan’s Rock was gone, as was some of the constant tenderness in her shoulders.

*Shame about me eyes, though. Still...one cannae have everything.*

She had never felt so refreshed. So alive.

There was so much of it; so much strength that Madanach had left inside him to give that she funneled the last of it into the whispering roots of her hair. Wondering if it would work, and nearly clapping with joy when she managed to make it grow. Gaining back one of the more insignificant things she had lost; this last summer in the fells of Orphan Rock.

And how she had lost, thanks to Madanach and to Melka. She’d been through so goddamn much, lost so many people and hopes and things that surely, *surely* she could not begrudge the power needed to regain this one vanity. A trifle, really.

Still yet, the power swirled within her. A coriolis force that fed itself, an infinite ring with no end. She felt like...like taking on Melka single-handed, or Madanach or even Alduin. As though she could leap up and fly away, if she but flapped her arms hard enough.

Holy Et’Ada, with such strength she felt like she could win against the Dark God Sithis Himself, if he should perchance ask her for a duel.

Feeling the familiar weight of her mane tug and pull against her scalp, Nemain turned her head this
way and that. “Mmm, that be ever so much better.” Savoring the feel of long hair once again, she blanked her mind against the implications of her actions thus far.

A red-tinged hagraven crept forward in her magical sight, its beaked face lowered as it approached.

“Ard-Bannion an Ruigsinneachd! Nemain of the Stone-Talon Clan, our new Queen...what be yer command?”

Reluctantly Nemain turned to the half-bird, half-woman. She did not want this...this millstone around her neck that Madanach was so sure she was destined for. This crown: though she was not actually sure the ruler of the Reach actually wore such a thing.

If anyone had bothered to ask her what she wanted, she would have told them that she did not like crowns, or earrings, or any sort of fussy headgear for that matter. She wanted a hot bath and a cold drink. She wanted her old robes, enchanted and purchased in Riften with the warm, happy bulk of Farkas pressed beside her, and a lute in her hands.

She wanted things she couldn’t have, and that had always been her ill-luck, was it not: to wish for things, only to be granted them for a short space. Family, love, wealth...all of them swiftly taken away before she could treasure what had been hers to possess.

_Barenziah wept._ Poor lucky, cursed Barenziah! Was she fated to mimic the Dunmer Queen in all her griefs? Wouldn’t this last throw of the die be similarly jinxed? Did she care enough, love her people enough to set herself to the grand task of reforming a broken land?

She didn’t want to be Queen. Nemain blew out an exasperated breath as the hagraven shuffled upon its taloned feet beside her, waiting for her response.

_But what could be done? _Could she simply walk away?

No. There was no triumph in this. No honorable way to escape it. Nemain felt her shoulders sag. There was only exhaustion, hard work, and the pressing knowledge of a thousand hungry bellies. Of souls that needed direction, and a people that had shunned her. Had indeed done more damage to her person than any Nord could ever have hoped to manage.

Yet it was done.

The price had been paid, and Bear was now able to live out his own life without fear of assassination by the dark blades of the Brotherhood of Sithis. Her tongue felt sour, and she swallowed away the bitterness she felt at such a notion. _Much joy may he take in the accomplishment of his goals. Cor, I almost hope we ne’er meet again, though my heart does dearly wish it._

Obstinately she hoped someday that he would know what she had done for him. Her mind detoured down a narrow fantasy of that thought; of how grateful and properly amazed he would be, and then she blanched at the realism of how _that_ particular conversation would likely pan out.
On second thought, she could live out the rest of her life without him knowing. *Nothing be free,* Madanach’s words whispered in her mind, and she decided to take it.

Nemain would take this chance, take it, and make what she would of it. She’d already conquered one impossible job; that of defeating Alduin and crowning a rebel King.

*How hard could this be?*

She cleared her throat. “My first order as Queen be…”

Looking over at where the corpse of Madanach lay, curled up and forgotten, Nemain realized that she knew exactly what the first order of business was.

“-be this. Take his body, hagraven. Gather yer sisters, and take him away. Preserve his head in cedar oil; make something beautiful from his bones. And treat him with reverence, mind. He was a wise king, even it he wasnae a verrah good one.”

The hagraven nodded, a quick dip of acknowledgement, and Nemain bent over. Reaching with the hand that did not hold her staff to caress her father’s still face. A single, solitary farewell.

“He tried tae make this easy fer me, y’ken.” She spoke softly, to no one in particular. “Told me the truth, aye, an’ told it in such a way that it would enrage my ire.”

Something stung her. Nemain stood up again, and this time she held a torque that Madanach had worn around his neck. *This.*

*This be his crown.*

She held it up for all to see; the silver burning like a brand against the skin of her hand, the twin tips of the half moon necklace pressing uncomfortably into her palm. The silver, bane of the undead, reacted to the power that kept her walking and talking. A living dead woman.

*Just another pain that must be borne.*

Holding on tightly to it anyway, Nemain projected her voice to be loud and clear. Her words echoed across the vastness of Markarth. Reverberating with echoes against the ancient stone paths and buildings, ringing with her own syllables back from the mountains so that every sentence seemed akin to a chorus.

She spoke.

“I take this torque, this death, with the knowledge that I sought it out fer other purposes. You must ken that have nae desire tae be your Queen. I only sought tae be left alone...tae live me own life in peace.”
“But here we are, an’ here I be. The Ard-Banríona of a Reach that doesnae believe in its own sovereignty.”

“Yer nae my Queen!” Someone yelled from the stairs below.

“Am I not?”

Bemusement made her response light. “If ye doon like it, come up here an’ face me, then.”

Whoever it was made an ungodly shriek.

The crowds parted, pierced through the middle with a rent that slowly tore upwards on the steps. Nemain placidly watched, secure in her faith of the Detect Life spell as the aural form of her attacker charged, arm held high with a weapon.

-and she parted the head from its shoulders at the exact moment she gauged that the person would strike. Causing the summoned blade to linger just a second longer than necessary...allowing all to see what would happen, should they attempt to try her once again. Just try me.

“Anyone else want tae be Queen?” She coldly inquired. “No one? Good. Perhaps now we can finally get on with the business of cleaning up this radged ferlaughin' mess. Gods...Madanach did love ye, you lot, but you did nae fear him enough.”

"I expect I shall change that, too. Well. Does anyone have any pressing matters tae bring afore we get doon tae the basics of reform, then?"

No one so much as broke wind in response.

Nemain turned to one of the Briarhearts, and instantly was greeted with an odd sense of reverie as the warrior made a leg, kneeling before her.

-Yet another thing that wouldn’t have happened a mere few months ago. “Briarheart, why be everyone sae silent?”

The man’s deep voice said, “They are bowing before you, Ard-Banríona.”

She blinked, registering the truth of it. So they were. Huh. Odd. And then she recalled that she was Queen.

Right. Better get used to it. “Could it have tae do with the one I killed?”

“Possibly.” The Briarhearts atonal cadence was flat. “That was Eola. Leader of Namira’s flock. They hae been the vocal majority in the Council of late.”

Good bloody riddance. “Perhaps it be just as well, for cannibalism be a short term solution tae the long problem of feeding us all. Chew on that, Eola! Aye?”
One of the hagravens coughed.

Nemain sighed. If she was going to live surrounded by humorless besoms, then perhaps a court jester was in order. She tapped her lip, a fertile plan blooming in her mind. *Could she move the Dark Brotherhood here?*

The idea had merit…

...but it would have to wait. “There is much I wish tae discuss, but there are several priorities I wish tae address first. An unfed people be a dead people, and I’ve heard tell that we be sorely low on supplies.”

“Boneshapers,” she called out. “Take yer clan and that of the Rageclaw, and go hunting. We be sorely low on provisions, and now that Eola has quit while she be a-head…” she paused, but still. Not one laugh.

*Fatalistic stodgy wodgers.* “Well, clearly we be in need of red meat. Elk, goat, fishing fer salmon...ugh, even mudcrab at this point t’will do. Anything ye can find. Let the wisewomen direct those that be sickly tae the best spots fer foraging. See what nourishment can be gleaned from the tunnels and caves. Mushrooms, Moss. Anything edible, bring it back. Clear? Aye, good.”

“Bloodthorns, attend tae the cleaning of our homes. The last thing any of us needs is tae bring a plague of illness upon us this winter from slovenly housekeeping, and many be too weak tae assist. So, do what ye can. Change and air the straw bedding, catch the skeevres, rid the yards and animal pens of debris. Dredge the wells and ensure that only clean water, pulled from upriver, be used fer drinking and cooking.”

“Briarhearts, use yer strength tae help them move furniture.” At least that lot wouldn’t grumble at being set to such menial tasks. Recalling some of the more colorful occupants of the Warrens from her time spent down in the muck, she could already hear the ghostly murmur of incoming complaints. *But we have tae start somewhere.*

“And finally, my clan. You Stonetalons,” Nemain finished the end of her orders. “My wish be for you to supervise the sorting of the treasury.”

"We must reopen trade with the Holds of Skyrim and the countries of High Rock, Hammerfell and Cyrodiil poor as we be...and we cannæ do that if there be nae economical enterprise. So, here be a boon. Grant every man, woman and child two hundred septims and a days worth of what dried goods remain so that our stores and stalls may reopen. And ensure that each be paid equally an' treated fair.”

"-Any who seeks tae take advantage of my generosity shall end up like Eola. I trust that we have such wealth retained?"

“Aye,” The hagraven cawed. “Treasuries be full, but the food be on short supply, Ard-Banrifona.”

“Then dole out evenly what be left. Help them in this matter, Hagraven. I want none tae go hungry. I’ve been on the edge o’ starving before. An starvin’ folk cannæ think of aught else but their bellies...and I must have their minds sharp as knives for what be tae come.”

“People of the Reach!” She left off the great many things that she could think of that still needed to
be managed, and addressed the people as a whole. “Whoever finishes these demands and be fit enough tae attempt the task should reopen Cidna Mine. Our lands be rich, and our treasure be in the mountains above and below. All who work tae reap ore will receive a fair wage and a hot meal, as well as a pittance for every ingot smelted.”

“...and all will work. None shall escape their labors. There will be no free ride; no handouts fer those who wish tae laze about.”

Nemain made her voice stern. “Even children must labor at tasks that are suited tae their age, such as tending fires an’ delivering parcels. None be exempt. All will help however they can.”

A sea of green faces, Nemain thought as a great cry went up, hailing the Ard-Banríona, praising her name, and she sucked agitatedly at her inner cheek. Green faces that she could not view save for the assistance of spells. Magic easily taken away, rendering her helpless...and she wondered again if this was a pointless endeavor.

She wondered if she had done the right thing, taking on this rule instead of turning on her heel and making swift tracks towards Falkreath.

And likely this would not be the last time she pondered the wisdom of her course of action.

Let it be enough. Let them see the way things truly are; and not be mired in the darkest of our traditions that hae snared us before. There is good, here, if we can but grasp it. Make it our own.

I believe in us.

“Kinslayer!” A disrespectful soul called out boldly. “What say you about striking out against the fear thuaidh invaders?”

“Aye!” Another called. “They harry us at our very gates! We cannæ get out!”

“Our Forsworn pride demands it!”

“Yer Forsworn pride’ll be spilled all o’er their axes if we dinnae prepare sufficiently, friend,” Nemain responded, earning a smattering of laughter. Almost as though they dinnae ken how tae react, she thought.

Let them wonder. Her first orders had been given. She could work on where to go from there. “We will attack, but on our own terms. When we strike, we’ll do it with cunning and power. Take them in surprise, and then melt away intae the shadows; which be the way of our folk.”

She heard muttered agreements and a few half-hearted war whoops. “But we oughtae focus upon growing our numbers. Making our homeland secure first; and then. Then we may look beyond our borders to the fear thuaidh lands.”

“I do not say never. Just...not now.”

“And I realize I be asking much on verrah short notice,” Nemain continued, hoping against hope that the estimable fear they had of her would translate into a rapid flurry of industry. “...yet I have full
confidence that these tasks shall easily be done, should ye work steadfast and together. Aye, if we resist the temptation tae feud amongst ourselves...if we focus on our lands, on renewing our wealth through proper commerce and not banditry, I know we can rebuild the Reach in the way we have always dreamed it tae be. But we are not there yet.”

She paused. “And dinnae call yerselves Forsworn. You are not. Not any longer.”

“You hear me?” Her resonance echoed across the vale, as she emphasized the words.

They needed to know the truth.

And she needed to hear it, even if it was from her own mouth. “You’re nae longer Forsworn! Swear yourselves again tae loyalty, tae service towards yer homeland, for this debt be paid an' paid again in blood! Our blood, and the blood of Nords, and of Orcs, and Mer! This Reach - these valleys, these peaks and precious redoubts be reclaimed and free! Belonging tae her own People evermore!”

"We're not Forsworn!" She slammed her staff against the stone beneath her with a thudding finality. A resounding clack. "-And we never shall be again! People of the Et'Ada, the Old Gods, the Unspoken Ones!"

"We People of the Reach!"

Roaring cheers went up, rising and swelling to greet her bold statement with affirmation. Nemain felt the Briarheart warriors step up to stand by her side; felt the brush of stiff feathery limbs as hagravens sidled to crouch nearby. Her lips turned up in a smile.

She wasn’t alone. Would never be alone again.

Throwing back her head, the new Ard-Banríona emitted a raw call. Rejoicing in her victory.

Wild cries and trilling echoed back. She kept going, raising her staff into the air; a lump in her throat betraying emotions she never thought she’d feel. A pride in her people. A feeling that she belonged here; at long last.

“We possess Markarth!” There were shouts of agreement. “We hunt the Druadach, and keep the ancient traditions!” More roars.

She heard the drums start to pound, felt the cries sing through her bones and approved. The song matched the fire in her blood. The long paddles of boldas were scraped by lengths of bone, lending an eerie rattle along with ululating cries and shrieks, and she saw with her Thu’um upon her tongue the moment that many threw off their cares and began to dance. Twisting round and round in concentric patterns; stamping the steps and crowding the riverbank with their numbers. Celebrating their freedom. Celebrating -with her.

The silver torque still burned in her hand. Nemain tore off a strip from her ruined robes and hung the torque about her neck. The weight of it felt good against her chest.
It felt right.

“Aye, we be here, and we’re no leaving, are we?”

More thunderous applause as the drums reached a fevered pitch. “For we are the scourge of the Nords. The axe that falls in the dark. The scream before the Old Gods, as the Et'Ada claim our tribute: our enemy’s verrah souls!”

“We be the true sons and daughters of the Reach. The spirits of the Old Gods, the giants and the werewolves...the hagravens and vampires hae lived here from the beginning, and they….” she smiled so widely that her cheeks hurt, for she could not help herself as several werewolf howls erupted. As the hagravens cawed and giants roared.

“-they be on our side! Tell the world! Tell all of Mundus that we Reachfolk do have our own kingdom again! And tell 'em if they wish tae take it back, they can try. For I will stop them!”

Things will be all right. I shall make them so.

And from a not-too distant tower in Markarth, a hawk is released. The bird of prey catches an updraft with a shrill cry, flying towards the rough capped Sea of Ghosts to the north as below, Markarth is afire with jubilation.

But the hawk notices it not. Winging its way, it glides steadily towards its ultimate destination.

Towards Solitude.

Chapter End Notes

I have edited the chapter headings to more accurately reflect the timeline. The times of Midwinter coinciding with the events make for more interesting titles, IMHO.

So. Madanach...

I have to admit that Cidna Mine is one of the more interesting quests to me in Skyrim. It actually is partly responsible for prompting this fic, for it is one of the only quests in game that doesn't feel...ugh (not sure how to word this) FETCHY. As in go here, fetch this, bring it back, profit.
I like the juxtaposition of the Nords and the Forsworn. Both peoples feel wronged by prejudice, and both have had lands and rights taken away by a more powerful neighbor (i.e. the Empire, Thalmor, Skyrim, take your pick).

The interesting thing about prejudice of any kind is that the more one experiences true empathy for one previously deemed inhumane, the less obvious the differences between the two become. Softening one's heart, being open to new ideas may not always bring about a change of thinking, but it certainly widens horizons.

...And our world could use a good deal more kindness just like that. The whole Romeo and Juliet, two households storyline isn't going to go away any time soon. "-From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean," could describe Syria or the Sudan, or even certain neighborhoods in Chicago, Illinois at this point in history.

Makes you think, hmm? 'Dark' Middle Ages indeed.

But perhaps 'we' are the dark ones. That or dark days never really ended (thank you, Enlightenment, for selling us a bill of goods), and people are pretty much the same, no matter where they live or when.

I know I vote for the latter.
No woman ever dressed up to please a man.

At least, not in the Jarl of Haafingar’s select circle of acquaintances. One dressed to dazzle and beget envy in one’s female friends. Or, if one had the means, one dressed to display wealth or make a statement of power...perhaps to invite a seduction, if the wearer was feeling brave.

To, as her late court wizard Sybille Stentor would have said in her beguilingly High Bretonish way, ‘engage in pleasure for pleasure’s sake’.

But men? Men rarely noticed clothes.

They wore them like anyone else, Elisif the Fair thought peevishly. But on the rougher sex they just hung there, like washing put out to dry. Useful; ignored unless there was a lack. And for the garments that draped a woman’s form they cared even less, save to rip them enthusiastically off with little regard for the expense. Or, she reflected, the time spent standing at the mercy of one's tailor, which was often far more costly in retrospect.

That made it all the harder for Elisif to decide what to wear to bring Ulfric Stormcloak to her knees tonight. After all, the obstinate rebel Jarl had been living in the Blue Palace with her for months, and had likely seen every vestment in her arsenal.

True, she silently admitted, they had lived apart. Keeping to separate bedchambers and very separate lives, which she had thought at the time to be a remarkable boon.

Yet the humiliating truth was that Ulfric Stormcloak didn’t seem terribly interested in her or what lay underneath her trappings. And she knew how the servants talked. Could only imagine what gossip had been made; or wagers placed on whether or not the two would anticipate their wedding vows, by the Eight...but now...

Now there was no getting out. Elisif stared blankly at herself in the mirror. She had made her play for peace, the warmonger had accepted...and she was now paying the price for it. Elisif would join hands with the murderer of her husband, unite their people with their vows, and then they’d-

Have a baby. Produce an heir, or at least go through the motions that would sprout one in nine months.

They’d tup.
She tossed her hair and looked away, not wanting to see the flush that would becomingly stain her cheeks a rosy pink. Pink clashed with her red hair. She’d never willingly wear any shade of pink.

*Most likely they’d tup tonight.* And wasn’t that a terrifying, exhilarating thought.

When she had first returned from Whiterun, she had been too angry to contemplate the inevitable marital intimacy. Particularly with such a stoic, ultrafocused boor of a man, and she was still smarting from the beggarly way she had been forced to align her resources, diminishing her power, but then...somehow, the rage had faded away.

Had been replaced with irritation, admiration, and just a tinge of lust.

They had entered into a crude courtship of sorts, Elisif reflected, those first few weeks in Solitude. She had only been trying to help. In order to create a peace offering of sorts, she would foist new clothing on him; in increasingly finer quality and quantity, and he?

He would find new and inventive ways to destroy her gifts.

She delicately winced just thinking about it. Radiant Raiment’s finest costumes - many worth a fortune in metallic thread and imported cloth - and Ulfric Stormcloak managed to tear, crush, stain, and otherwise ruin each and every one. Even going so far as to bathe one of her favorites with gore and blood at Tullius’ beheading. A symbolic jab, if there had ever been anything more crystal clear as that.

The man was wild. Untameable. Insufferable.

But it wasn’t so much the destruction that had bred such fury within her as the look in his eyes. He *knew.* He enjoyed taking this base, underhanded revenge, though why he felt the need was utterly beyond her. He was gaining all he had ever likely dreamed of, the bloodthirsty despot, and she?

All she asked was for him to dress according to his new status. To go along with her sole request, that he not begrudge her this one little thing. Appearances mattered, after all. And what did he do, but repay her favors by playing the petty brute.

*So much for new clothes.*

And the humiliating hum of ever-present anger had steadily been replaced with chagrin at his knowing looks, as he caught her red-handed. Staring at his body like a rude fishmonger as Taarie snipped and cut to measure his new sacrificial clothing...tightening ribbons around arms sculpted from years of wielding sword and shield. Circling shoulders and a back thick as a tree trunk with a stone-hard chest to match; criss-crossed with scars she was shamefully curious about.

The man smelled of sweat, of the outdoors and of hard work...a blend not often found in the perfumed halls she frequented. Torygg, with his wispy beard and jeweled bed slippers, had never looked or smelled anything like Ulfric, and had never fought her on anything. Had never told her no.
In contradiction, Ulfric drew her interest in no small part precisely because of his disdain.

It was a new and rather demoralizing sensation to know that she was more interested in a man than the reverse. She was used to men trying to get under her skirts, had actually grown bored of the opulent compliments showered upon her in Sentinel, Mournhold and Daggerfall on diplomatic tours. It grew tiresome being constantly lauded for her beauty, and if men did not seek her favors for the sheer allure of it, they sought her out for the prestige of bedding a Jarl.

Choosing amongst her jewels, Elisif prodded with a single finger and then pushed away several choices. Thinking of how best to set off her eyes, she finally settled upon a pair of star-sapphire earrings.

_Hmph._

She might not know all the details of how to launch a bevy of warships, or what it took to stalk and kill a mammoth, but she had other skills. Plenty of them.

Elisif the Fair smiled, enticed, laughed, and dismissed with casual ease. She held the reins that every noblewoman of the court learned early to wield...dressing to fancy herself artistically, and to impress foreign leaders who erroneously believed all Nords to be fur draped, club-dragging barbarians. When _she _wore furs, none present imagined anything so primitive as a club. She was Dibella incarnate.

Elisif dressed in finery, and the power and admiration it gave was her weapon. She certainly didn’t dress to entrap men, that byproduct was a known quantity. But the whole process of choosing what equated to battle armor felt rather different in regards to this day.

To this night.

The soon-to-be Queen drew in a wavering breath. She should behave as if there was nothing different about their wedding than any other day. Ulfric had been making snide comments about her touches to the necessary preparations for weeks; but it would mean nothing to her. Her demeanor would be calm.

A fashionable wife in the upper echelons of High Rock society would never even notice the absence of something as insignificant as a husband’s presence. She would guard against such thoughts, and outshine them all…

...And she had just the gown that would credibly do it.

She picked it up and caressed it. It was made of a rich flow of fabric in palest ice blue, caught up here and there with sprinklings of diamonds. Rather than being made of sturdier wool, the silken cloth was thin as a dream. And _horribly unfit for Midwinter._

Which was perfect for her plans.

It would skim her breasts, the cold forcing the tips of her breasts to pebble...the cloth flowing down over them and the rest of her body like a delicate undergarment. Just a shrug, and her shoulders would be bared. A twist of silk, easily shod if she wriggled hard enough. Ah, she would be dressed for her wedding night in one grand rapturous reveal. _And Ulfric?_
She smirked. He would be forced to acknowledge her might at the very ceremony itself. In front of everyone. Yes, it would be his face in the end that would be painted with shame, then. Not hers.

It was a beautiful ploy.

It was desperate.

Elisif nearly threw the gown to the floor, then rethought the action and smoothed the silk between her fingers and thumb. Indeed, she was desperate tonight.

She wanted Ulfric to look at her as she had ogled him, at least once. To punish him; to force him to notice her as a woman, and not the milk drinking spendthrift - Torygg’s woman, she had heard him scoff to Galmar, when he thought her out of earshot- that he believed her to be. She had lost so much; her life had been altered so deeply thanks to this man, that the least she could do was jilt him. Bow him to her control in at least one aspect of married life, though she privately fretted herself ill prepared for such a task.

Oh, Torygg.

Torygg had always been in her life, like the sun and the stars. It had come as little surprise to her when their engagement was announced as a young child, for her family was among the highest in the land. Whom else could the King’s son marry? He was her childhood playmate: educated by the same tutors, sailing the same pleasure crafts and raised in the same social circles as she...a bright spark extinguished by the oncoming storm.

Musing over the way Ulfric tended to saunter in comparison to Torygg’s mincing steps, Elisif closed her eyes and revisited those glimpses stolen from the fitting room. Curiosity coaxed a kind of lassitude from her limbs, a growing heat low in her belly. Which was...not altogether familiar or welcome, this feeling of desire. Shrewd intuition had confirmed (after years of marriage and strange bedplay) that Torygg had as little interest in her as she had in him.

His eager interest in shoes might have been a tipoff, had she but thought of it.

Yet she had no qualms when it came to Ulfric, for even though he was a boor the man had certainly grasped the presence of her best assets. A few cool looks, rapidly redirected when she turned to see, firing that heat that had banked itself deep within her hips, but perhaps…

He was not so oblivious as she might have despaired of. No. The eastern Jarl simply was determined to be offended. To be rebelliously obtuse.

...And yet, Torygg had at least been kind. He had been her friend.

If only they had managed to produce offspring before he...before he had been-

She pulled off the diadem from her brow and massaged her forehead. Murdered. The man who had promised her lavish parties and had smilingly spent more than she on frippery and oddments, uncaring of her vanity, had been killed in cold blood. The very bones of him, Shouted apart.

And she wished to lay with his usurper.
Shame warred with want. Elisif put back on her diadem and held up the blue gown. She must be bold.

She was a true Nord, with a purebred lineage that was every bit as illustrious and titled back to Ysgramor as the Jarl of Windhelm was. She’d take what she wanted, and tonight, what she wanted was him. His attention doted upon her, and nothing else...not the running of the government, not Talos, and definitely not how much she had spent in creating the masterpiece of this grand event.

*If the plates had been hand-hammered from septims, it would have been less costly than the diamonds.* Or the chef she had privately sent for from High Rock, in order to recreate her favorite culinary repasts for this feast. Or the cost of placating the bards; ensuring that there was both skill and variety to entertain the masses, and not some toothless skald beating a war-drum along with an array of canting flutes.

No mournful dirges. Not at her second wedding.

She’d find a way to avoid mention of the expensive beeswax candles.

And the swagged curtains.

Still, Elisif thought resignedly later as her new husband laid a perfunctorily chaste kiss upon her lips, *I cannot think but that this has all been worth the price.*

The priests droned in unison, sealing their union as the twin statues of Talos and Mara stood as silent witnesses behind them. Carefully they stepped off from the raised dais, their hands still formally joined, and the guests stood as well. Clapping. Raising their voices to cheer, their voices gelling into a static wash. Loud. Overbearingly jubilant.

The attention was glorious.

Feeling slightly faint, Elisif righted her crown and chanced a quick look up at the final outfit she had prepared for him. It was her pride and her joy.

Ulfric Stormcloak shimmered in silver and shades of sea and sky blue. Runic embroidery outlined the wide breadth of his shoulders and the trim vee of his waist, belted into a chain mail tunic that brushed the floor and set off the snowfox trimmed cape to perfection. And upon his head the aged ivory of the Jagged Crown lent him an air of dangerous sophistication. The effect was masculine; harsh, and yet proud.

He bore more of a kingly air than Torygg ever had.

Waltzing about the throne room upon his arm, Elisif kept a smile pasted upon her face as he greeted all of the Thanes and nobles who clamped upon the opportunity to chat with their new regent. He treated them all with somber attention, listening to every individual in his staid way and imparting a word, or a gesture of friendship if no help could be imparted.
So far, all was going well.

Only Elisif (who fancied herself expert at reading his moods after months of watching him shred couture masterpieces into unraveled wreckages) could see with a momentary pause that his mask of affability was wearing thin around the edges.

Ulfric, if he had known Elisif’s thoughts, would have agreed with her. The night was wending on, and he felt no joy. Not pride, nor pangs of regret. Nothing so much as an overwhelming sense of relief that the role he had assumed since his arrival months past was now official. The Moot had spoken. It was done.

He was High King of Skyrim.

It felt strangely surreal. As though he were in a dream, and not really here.

Yet it was real. And now that he had been crowned and wed in a surprisingly businesslike fashion, the yawning scope of all he had undertaken in his new reality began to spread before him like an unmapped Elder Scroll.

He saw the rest of his life: a season unending of observing military and naval movements, managing civil projects such as the reconstruction of Hold fortresses and roads, late night meetings and even earlier ones...negotiations with double agents, spies and ambassadors who he wished were neither, appeasement of the Jarls and their counter wishes...all layered with the nerve-twangling tension he was beginning to feel about starting a family of his own.

Ulfric looked down at his woman, a glittering trinket clinging to his arm. They had done something to her hair, weaving the coppery strands into ropes of braids that ended with ribbons tied with bells and gems. He thought distantly that Elisif the Fair looked stunning tonight.

She was elegant, cultured, expensive...the perfect politician’s wife. She would never yell at him in public, disagree on policy to the point of stubbornness, or pull a childish prank.

She wasn’t Nemain.

He looked around himself at the extravagant decorations that had slowly infiltrated the Blue Palace over the past month and his chest tightened. No, Elisif was certainly nothing like Nemain.

He had to strike a bargain with his wife soon that would curb her wastrel activities to an acceptable level. Skyrim was barely recovering from the civil war...how she imagined that the treasury could stand this level of disbursement for their union was beyond him. Hadn’t she dwelt here when Solitude had been under blockade; had she not seen the people of Haafingar boiling grass and scraping skeever hides so that they wouldn’t starve? Didn’t she care?

Feeling her plump curves brush against his wrist, he released a barely audible sigh. Likely not. From their limited interactions Ulfric had garnered some sense of what his wife was truly like, when not
making that ridiculous simpering face she was currently displaying to sundry and all.

He was not a fool. Not entirely, when it came to women, though Galmar might strongly protest the fact. And being only partially foolish meant that if he was right, then Elisif had a narrow, nobly bred view of what was right and acceptable. That she bore certain expectations of his behavior was also certain, though he cared little for manners beyond the niceties that were absolutely necessary.

Catching the reflection of his utterly ostentatious garb in a passing window, Ulfric rolled his shoulders. The doublet tunic was far too tight. And yet...

Losing his temper would likely not achieve any lasting change. He could recall the early battles of their engagement well enough...all politeness and smiles, as she urged upon him finer and more fool-hardy clothing, showing only the most subtle signs of disapproval as he wrecked them all, one after another.

And all with an undercurrent of unspoken distaste on both sides that he still felt ashamed about; rancor that ran counter to all his goals for this regency. For this marriage.

It wasn’t her fault that she had been placed in this predicament, marrying a man she barely knew. Her proposal in Whiterun had been a serendipitous branch that he had latched upon with both hands: eager as he was to see that no more innocent blood was spilled. That he would not be required to raze Whiterun to the ground, to force Balgruuf and his folk to yield.

He remembered all too well young Torygg’s face in this same room two and a half years ago, white with shock as Ulfric made good on his challenge. The memory of the outcome seared through his mind. Quick as a lightning flash.

-Quick as his sword had been, when his Shout did not manage to kill Torygg swiftly, cleanly enough. There had been so much blood.

Blood everywhere. Dripping from his hands, the taste of it like rust. Rank and oily in his mouth.

No. The fault was his.

And he was indeed a fully realized fool for even considering the possibility of wedded bliss. Not with her. Not now. Not when-

“-Are you well, Ulfric?” Elisif’s dulcet tones were a welcome interruption. Insincere as they were.

“Never better. Come.”

He gripped her arm more securely in his. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet. Now, if the plans I have in the offing work, he won’t hold his title for long...but I would be interested in discussing your impression of him.”

“Whatever you say, Your Majesty.” Elisif’s voice was saccharine; her blue eyes hard.

What did it say about his rule insofar, he brooded as he led her over to where Ancano stood, that she likely would never have enough faith to follow what rule of law he felt to be right, merely because the idealism came from him?
Ulfric imagined that she would test him over and over again in their shared lifespan, and he would fail by some unnamed criteria on each and every instance. She would hold the death of her her prior husband over his exposed neck like a headsman’s axe; she would resent him for all of time. Would likely pass down said resentment to any children they would produce.

And he would take it, because she had been wronged. By him; because of him...it mattered little now, what Torygg had or had not done. He would never be right. *Not for her.*

Exhaustion hovered over him like a cloud at the very thought.

“Archmage and Jarl of Winterhold. Ancano, may I present to you my wife? The Jarl of Haafingar and High Queen, Elisif the Fair.”

The Thalmor spy appeared to be entirely occupied by staring at someone, or something. Turning around, the lines bracketing the Altmer’s mouth deepened.

Ancano made the smallest of bows, his amber eyes indifferent. “A pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty.”

Some random servant scurried away, blessedly distracting Ulfric from the graceful dip Elisif gave upon her greeting. Silvery skirts shushed against the polished floors, and the hem of her neckline drooped dangerously low over the mounded breasts put on display; plumped out for anyone to see.

Ulfric scowled. He itched to cover her. Or better yet, remove the damn tease of a dress. More window dressing than a gown was this sheer display Elisif had chosen to wear for their very public - and very official- wedding.

“The pleasure is all mine, Ancano.” That sickly sweet tone Elisif had been using all night now sounded nearly normal. “I must say, I’ve missed my conversations with Altmer now that the Thalmor have all but been banished from the city. Taarie is skilled as ever at her craft, but she hardly has Elenwen’s poise or talent for conversation. And your people always have such interesting stories to tell.”

“I fear I shall disappoint you then, Your Majesty,” Ancano drawled. “For my days are plied by more pressing matters than gossip. Do excuse my theft of your spouse for the swiftest of moments.”

Gratefully slipping away, he held his breath as Ancano guided them to stand apart from the pressing throng. Far enough that Ulfric felt he could properly breathe again, and he did. Filling his lungs with air that tasted like the cold; like the freshly powdered snow falling outside and through the cracks in the windows. Refreshingly clean. The one last pure thing here, in this trap of smoke and mirrors.

The elf pulled something small and square from the depths of his voluminous sleeves. He presented it with little preamble. “Here. I discovered this amongst the wreckage at Orphan’s Rock, when I was tracking the whereabouts of the Dragonborn. Take it. She would have wanted you to have this.”

Ulfric took the package, opened it and stared.

It was filled with pearls.

Freshwater pearls, oddly shaped. Colored like the sunrise in the east, when the spring thaw had come and Windhelm arose with the dawn. Painted in all manner of rosy pinks, glacier blues and greys.
Perfect in their spherical simplicity.

He spilled a few of the pearls upon his palm, rolling them back and forth as he gathered his wits. These were the pearls he had given Nemain so long ago for insurance in her travels. High on the sloping peak of the Monahven, the Throat of the World, whereupon she had become instantly incensed at what she perceived to be his ‘purchase’ of her. She had nearly throttled him with her magicks, then and there...until somehow, the tables had turned.

Ulfric smiled. He had very pleasant memories of the night’s reversal of fortunes. Very pleasant indeed.

Yes. These had been hers.

He blinked away moisture. Damn dry heat, too many candles. Here he was, surrounded by splendor...and a parcel of cheap pearls had given rise to more feeling than the Jagged Crown of Kings, sitting like a weight from atop his head. Dragging him down, wearisome with secrets that he could not share. That few would understand.

Yet he had the feeling the sharp-eyed Mer knew of this, somehow, even as he carefully placed each pearl back into the parcel and closed the flap. Installing the precious pouch into the pocket of his tunic.

“Why?”

“Because she would have wanted you to have them.” Ancano spoke brusquely, his thin lips pressed tightly together. “You are not the only one who mourns her, King of Nords. Skyrim, Tamriel...even Mundus itself has lost a radiant woman to the wiles of her ravening kin. And we are the only ones who bear the remembrance of her as she truly was. We must remember her as Nemain, Ulfric. And not merely as the Dragonborn.”

Long fingers clasped his own. “Keep them, and keep them safe.”

“...King Ulfric Stormcloak!”

He turned, still pricked with emotion as Astrid bore down upon him. Not giving him the chance to regroup, she pressed a kiss upon both of his cheeks and sat back down on her heels, smiling.

“Congratulations on your rise to power, Ulfric. From lowly foot soldier to Jarl, and now finally King. You have moved up in the world.”

“The Moot made me High King. I could not have ascended by any other means.” Ulfric leaned forward and dutifully kissed her inner wrist, coyly given. “You are looking well.”

“Thank you.” She sounded surprised. “And dare I say, you do as well. I can see from your garb that your lady wife has been industrious.”

“Overtly so.” He kept his tone light. Measured. “I will have to discuss that with her, once the Blue Palace has been cleared of guests.”

“Oh, to be a fly on the wall for that conversation.”
Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ancano walk quickly away and was grateful. Ulfric was not publicly known for baseless displays of nostalgia. Temper, perhaps, but never tears. His court would wonder at the intimacy between himself and the sometime Archmage of Winterhold, and inevitably there would be more rumors that he would be forced to stomp out. More mutterings of the hypocrisy the Stormcloaks were ushering by, as a mere conversation would spool into clandestine meetings with the Thalmor and much else. He knew how swiftly the rumor mill spun out its stories.

Inner strife in his court was one of the last things he needed, really. Yet here he was, being presented with another dilemma.

Astrid, fair and becoming as always, wore all white. Snowy leather formed her figure-hugging gown, with a wolven fur stole wrapped high about her throat. She played with it in a not-so-idle fashion, dragging it between her fingers. Dipping the end between her teeth, looking up at him from beneath her pale eyelashes. And from across the room he was aware of the moment that Elisif noticed as well; for she shot the other woman a dangerous look.

He wondered what it was exactly that Astrid wanted from him. Wanted badly enough to put his brand new wife on guard.

Her smile revealed nothing, though it was carefully brilliant. “Ulfric, I never thanked you properly for your interventions in Dragonsreach, when you fought so bravely against those vampires. My business investments there would have been ruined, had it not been for you. I wish to show you how...grateful I am.”

Her finger lightly reached up and touched him.

Tracing the edge of his lower lip. Pressing inward. “How deeply I,” she inhaled, “-feel the honor of it. Do you take my meaning?”

Cool eyes blue as morning glories drifted slowly lower, lingering upon his belt. Undressing him without making so much as a gesture, and Ulfric swallowed. His former lover was making a bold play for him at his very own reception, in full view of his now fuming wife, and he could not extricate himself fast enough. Shit. Fuck it all, I do NOT need this right now.

Where was Galmar? His second in command would gladly take one for the team, if only Ulfric knew where the drunken bastard was hiding.

“Astrid.” He removed her finger from his mouth. “I do not need your gratitude.”

“Oh, but I want to show it.” She pouted winsomely.

“I think that is an ill advised idea-” Ulfric startled, reaching for his axe as somewhere outside a hawk gave out one long, plaintively screeching cry. Repeating its call twice again.

Both Astrid and Ulfric turned, like many others in the palace, to see what had caused such a disturbance. And when he looked back down at her she was adjusting her fur stole with fussy briskness.

...And somehow, that razor edged smile had lost some of its ice. He suddenly noticed fine lines bunching in the corners of her eyes, and felt discomfited. There were dark circles there, as well, and he wondered not for the first time what her life had become; this young farm maiden to whom he had delivered condolences for a dead father so long ago. Who he had once felt a fair amount of infatuation for, and yet now the sight of her brought him no joy. Only pity.
Time makes a mockery of us all, regardless of how we use it.

“I am sorry to bother you, Ulfric. I thought perhaps you might feel...something other than you apparently do. But what is one error amongst such old friends, hmm? Not to fear. I will take my leave.”

“...Astrid. Here, wait-”

Grasping her hand, Ulfric took care to leave a goodly amount of space between their bodies as he escorted Astrid. Leading her across the guest-packed ballroom close to where Elisif stood, holding a horn of mead and actively ignoring them both. “There is no need to make a scene.”

“I doubt your Queen would agree with you.” Astrid cleared her throat, and Ulfric wondered if she was sick.

From the way she tugged at her furs, he garnered it was more an injury than an illness. “Just—you have many friends, Ulfric, and I doubt you realize the full extent of their loyalty and care. Perhaps if Lady Luck smiles on you, someday you will. Ugh, by the gods, I’ve made an error, and I really, truly must go. Please. Excuse me.”

Pulling away from him before he could introduce her to Elisif and smooth the waters, Astrid graced him with a grin. A genuine one this time. “Now, just forget what I said, and go enjoy your night. You deserve it.”

Waving her hand at the people dancing, Astrid gestured at the decorations and the tables of food. Sighing at what was surely the look of puzzled incomprehension plain upon his face. “I meant it, Ulfric. This? This is how it should be. You have worked hard, and deserve all of this and more. I will not stay for any further wedding toasts, but I will say this: live your life, and savor every moment, while it lasts.”

He could not abide such sentiment. “Did you get that sales pitch from a Sanguine shrine worshipper? Or some beggar, proselytizing the good word of Mara’s mercies?”

She winked. “No, silly. That’s an old family motto. Bye now...I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again soon.”

One last pat to his cheek, and Astrid shashayed away. “Farewell.”

For the second time that night, Ulfric watched as a friend swiftly departed from his presence, and it occurred to him that neither the woman nor the Mer had fully voiced whatever it was that had prompted their respective rendezvous. How very cryptic.

And unlike Astrid, to be so terse.

A worrisome concept that he would think upon later, he promised himself as the High Queen smirked, simpered and slid her way through the crowd of well-wishers to engage his attentions. If he had any reserves of stamina left to think with after Elisif was done with him. The woman looked positively feral.

“I think I am ready to retire to the bedchamber. Will you join me, my King?”
He turned to her, aware that all eyes were upon them, and gave a gallant bow. “Nothing would please me more, my Queen.”

Elisif would have stomped to their bedchamber, had her heels not been so delicately embroidered. Instead, she glided her way down the hall...the only sign of her ill temper the stiff hold she had upon the arm of her lecherous husband.

*That trull!* Who did that blonde think she was, making moon-eyes at the newly wed King of all Skyrim?

Elisif ground her teeth as Falk Firebeard formally opened their chamber doors. The gathering crowd, still heavily inebriated and sluiced in mead, gave one last rousing cry. “...h’attend the bride! The groom and the bride are retiring to bed!”

“Bed, but not sleep, hahah!”

“Aye, give us an heir Lady of Haafingar! Do your duty!”

“All hail the King and Queen of Skyrim!”

“-All hail the Queen’s tits!” the last speaker croaked, hiccuping a burp into her left ear.

*Bammm!* Ulfric slammed the door, nearly clipping her admirer’s fingers in the hinge. Bolting it with concise, careful movements that gave her just enough time to regain her calm. To collect herself once again.

It was eventide, and they were in her arena, now. She was in control.

Ignoring all the catcalls and lewdly pointed comments still seeping through the doors, Elisif whisked over to her vanity and swiftly began removing her earrings, her bracelets, and many of the ribbons and bells from her braids. Wrenching at her hair with a bit more force than was necessary. *Twelve thousand septims worth of diamonds, yet I receive more commendation from a drunk than from my own husband.*

Lifting the Jagged Crown from his head, she watched out of the corner of her eye as Ulfric laid it carefully upon its designated pillow...placing a small worn bag beside it with similar reverence, as he emptied out his pockets. Removing the burdensome chainmail next after unclasping his cloak, which he treated with decidedly less care than his armor. Flinging the cloth-of-silver in a tumbled heap upon the flag stoned floor, as she resisted the impulse to snatch it up and put it away. Properly.

*Wonder what that little bag could be. Odd.* And then her mind turned promptly to mush as the man reached back behind himself with both arms and shrugged off his tunic. Exposing a taut waist, ridged up to the swell of his broad shoulders, landscaped in pale skin and freckles. A paleness that dissolved into a near albino white, as the line of his trousers dragged away...leaving Ulfric to stand tall in smalls alone.
Her throat went instantly dry. Forcing herself to continue unbinding her hair, Elisif made her voice sweet. Mild; even a bit uncaring. “Do you not wear nightclothes, Ulfric Stormcloak?”

“I sleep naked,” the man replied, smooth as ever. He walked over to the bed - their bed, she reminded herself, and sat down upon it, clasping his hands between bent knees.

“But you are not naked now.”

“Not yet.”

“Good.” She whispered it to herself, almost like a vulgarity. *Calm. Be serene. Passionless.*

Her mother had once told her that she must begin a relationship as she meant to go on. And Elisif would be damned if she could not extract the upper hand in this situation.

Ignoring the man who was waiting for her to come to him, she turned to her mirror and began brushing her hair. The long, slow strokes soothed her somewhat. “You needn’t have introduced us to Archmage Ancano at the reception, Ulfric. I find I have little to offer in the way of commentary upon his opinions or virtues, for you were so obviously eager to be rid of me that I had no time to make a study of him.”

“Opinions can be formed within mere moments of a first impression.” Ulfric rumbled in that rich voice of his. A bassy growl that touched the deepest, most private parts of her, making the hair on her arms stand on end. “Surely you gained some insight into Ancano, as surely as you formed opinions of me when we first met. For our meetings were of a similar short duration.”

“I never judge men or mer by their appearances alone.”

“You should.”

“And therein we differ yet again.” She put down her brush. “So we come to it. Would you have me lose all friendly companionship in this new government you are forming, Ulfric? Shall I banish my Imperial maidservants, my Breton hairdresser and cook to wherever you have sent my court wizard? Or are Nords the only race you deem worthy of regard, or association?”

“Your court wizard was a vampire, and thus could not be trusted,” was his prompt response. “My trust is given rarely. And on a case-by-case basis.” There was a pause. “Call upon Ancano again, if you wish. I’d hate to further deprive you of the company of elves you so seem to desire...and you could do far worse than he, if you wish to have your head filled with tall tales of elven glory.”

“Only take care that he does not gain you as a conquest. The Mer is still a Thalmor spy, when all is said and done. And I have enough wagging tongues to guard against without having my wife bringing a royal flavor into the mix.”

She opened her mouth and then closed it. “You horrible, rude beast.”

“Truth can be tactless.”

The truth brought out bright red spots high upon her cheeks. She could not do this. She did not want to follow through with this.
Who could seduce such a man? Who’d want to?

And she would not be a slave in her own palace, being told who she could associate with and where she could go. Call upon Ancano, indeed. As if I need his permission. “You wish for truth, Jarl Stormcloak? Here is a truth! I cannot go through with this...this farce of a marriage.”

The thought solidified into firm resolve. “I am leaving.”

He laughed. “You cannot leave.”

She stood, ready to bolt in her slippers. He thought he could bar her way?

“Watch me.”

Before she could run for the bounded door he was on her, catching her about the waist as she kicked and shrieked. She felt his exhalation hot and thick upon her neck and couldn’t help but think of poor Torygg; Torygg and his Thu’um blasted remains. Pasted red upon the casement so thickly that the maids had vomited after cleaning up only a small portion of the walls and windows.

“...Let me go! Let me go, you disgusting, murderous, racist degenerate bastard! Let go now!”

“Peace. Be at peace, Elisif. I will not harm you. I will not harm you.”

The raw timbre of the words he repeated were an anchor, and she seized upon them. Heard them, when everything else dissolved into a dizzy murk. Elisif fought through the fog of her useless rage with shuddering gasps, feeling him hiss with inhaled breath as she elbowed his gut, fighting to be free. As he held her tightly to him, against him.

She rolled within his arms, rearing and snapping her teeth, growling; seeking advantage of any kind...aware of large fingers that slid recklessly beneath her gown to grasp skin, even as she watched the byplay of annoyance, frustration and something else war across his features. Be bold. Be brave. No choice, nothing for it but to accept this.

Accept him. There can be no escape!

She struggled for control; continuing to watch his face as her uncontrollable gasping gradually eased. It was something to look at, if nothing else. And Ulfric seemed lost in his own head, playing and replaying something that made his gaze vacant and his jaw tense. Elisif felt him pat her back awkwardly as her panic finally faded altogether, only to be replaced by a new, crawling unease.

Looking pointedly down, she felt it when his hands retreated from the rents she had torn in her gown in her hasty attempt to depart. It felt strangely cold without them holding her there. Holding her still, for now she felt as though she would burst, or fly away into a million pieces. She was utterly embarrassed.

Begin as you mean to go on. What a crock.

With one final, searching look the Jarl of Windhelm released her and walked over to one of the many side tables, where he began to pour two goblets of wine from a pitcher conveniently left by the low-
banked fire. *Bless Falk Firebeard and his perceptive ways.*

She sank down upon the bed, far too tired to even attempt to cry. After handing her a goblet Ulfric sat next to her, though she noticed he chose the side of the bed closest to the door. *Probably to ensure that I will not try to run away again.* She drained half of the wine in one gulp.

He broke their silence first, with words unexpectedly grim. “Did you think I would rape you?”

*Yes. Or kill me.* “No. But—”

“I can tell when you are lying, Elisif.” Ulfric sounded more weary than she, if possible.

*Damn.* “That must be convenient when dispensing judgement in your court.”

“It can be.”

He seemed to struggle for words. “I would never force you against your will, Elisif, regardless what you may think of me. And I apologize for implying that you cannot leave.”

“But you are right. I cannot.” she replied dully. “We are now wed. The peace we have brokered between your forces and mine would be wrecked had I successfully acted upon the urge to go. I...I thank you for your timely interruption.”

“Do not thank me,” Ulfric said. “Never thank me for that.”

“Yet you seem to be dwelling on unpleasant thoughts.”

“Yes.” Ulfric took a sip of wine, his lips curling as he swallowed. As if the vintage were more bitter than sweet, though the taste of jazbay was pleasant (if a bit tangy) upon her lips.

“Unpleasant, but a necessary burden. There are things that I will not do, no matter how dearly they may cost me or Skyrim. Examining the burden of proof, innocence before guilt - these are standards I aspire to maintain, even though their application may flood my prisons with litigants. Because I know the horrors that come of depriving people of their freedom. I have seen elven inhumanity to man, and I shun it. In all its forms.”

She finished her wine, shaking her head, and then stopping because it hurt. A migraine was coming on, the blood pounding within her temples, and she raised a hand to press where her diadem often rubbed her wrong. “I don’t understand.”

“You know I served in the Great War.” Elisif nodded. “Then, you must know that like many other Nords who went south to fight in the Legion of the Empire that I was captured after the Battle of the Red Ring. Held by Dominion agents in the Imperial City.”

He was silent for a time, and she quelled the urge to ask him just what all this was about. But his reluctant mien stilled her words, and she found herself waiting for what he would say. Fidgeting with her fingers, wrapping a torn bit of dress around her thumb over and over.

“In prison,” he began stiltedly, “the Thalmor tortured us.”

Her hands stopped moving. “Were you defiant?”

“No...there was no rule or reason to the punishment, it was like a game to them. Even the most complacent prisoner did not escape their touch. And it was not just pain with red-hot pincers and
knives, though they used those with relish.”

“They used strange spells. Cut us in half, and laughed as they did it. One Altmer liked to take eyes from us, and collected them. He kept them in jars on his desk in full view of the prisoners, sorted by color. And he was one of the more conservative of their lot, by far…”

“They stole our loyalty to one another by depriving prisoners of basic food, drink, and sanitation...offering them back in return for a whispered confession, or a finger pointed in the direction of a fellow soldier, or less. They robbed us of our sense of self, our honor by leaving us in our own filth to rot. And rape...rape was a favored tool.”

He shivered. “A tool that they wielded often because of how efficient it was, in breaking a Nord’s spirit.”

She felt a welling of compassion for those poor women who had also been prisoners. Who could not escape, like her, those many years ago. “How awful for your female soldiers.”

He looked at her pointedly, and then glanced down at his scarred chest. As if he were ashamed. “They practiced rape as a punishment for both sexes, Elisif.”

What? How did that even work?

"I...never imagined a man could be taken advantage of so," Elisif said uncertainly.

"Then you’ve a limited imagination." Ulfric replied in a flat tone. "Whereas Elenwen..." His eyes drifted half shut, and she trembled, reacting to the fury only barely leashed behind his clipped words. "...had the creativity of a Sheogorathian priest. In spades."

“But enough of this. Elisif. What are your goals for this marriage? Goals.

Such a frightfully dull, pedantic word. Where was the sweeping romance? Where was the wonder?

She had never been overfond of ballads, but now she was convinced that the Bard’s college was selling a short bill of goods. I intend to dock their privileges. Immediately.

“What do you mean?”

He took one of her hands and held it. His hands, she could not help but notice, were large and strong; marked with small slicing scars and thickened knuckles. She swallowed as his thumb rubbed over the delicate bumps of her joints. “Well, for example, I have always wanted children. I met several during the war, and have discovered that I am very fond of them.”

He looked at her sideways. “What say you to that?”

“I like the idea of a child,” she said cautiously. Children were noisy, messy creatures. Rather like dogs...though a dog could be tied to a rope and left in the cellar if it chanced to piddle on the floor.

Something told her that a child would need a bit more supervision than that. “Surely we need not plan on making an heir so soon.”

“Why not? I...we are not getting any younger. And you never got with child from Torygg either, so-“
“Do not mention Torygg.”

He blew out an exasperated breath. “I shouldn’t, but Elisif—”

“No!” She huffed. She was not being unreasonable, she was not. The last thing she wished to ponder (after his absolutely heart wrenching confession, was he even capable of siring an heir? ) was the demise of Torygg. Else she devolve into a blubbing mess yet again.

Shor’s bones. This night was not at all going the way she had planned.

“Do you resent me? For killing your husband?”

“I resent you for changing my life.” She said more honestly than she had planned. If Ulfric could reveal hard truths in this rare period of privacy without falling apart, then she could do no less. “Torygg and I— we were suited for one another in some ways, but not all. He favored men, and I...”

She nearly stumbled over her words at the sympathy she found in his cold blue eyes. “...I favored long cruises to Daggerfall. To visit friends, to meet with relatives and discuss the affairs of our courts, such as they were. We did not see much of one another, yet we...we found our happiness. We each kept mutually tolerable habits.”

“I see. So,” His mouth twitched beneath his red beard. “You think you will go and sail off to High Rock, once Skyrim settles down to the idea of its new king?”

She bristled at the skepticism in his voice, though she had been planning on doing precisely that. Once the upheaval of the new regime had worn away from novelty into the mundane. It wasn’t as though Ulfric needed or valued her opinion.

“I think you have what you wanted all along.”

“No quite.” The hand caressing hers squeezed once, then placed her own hand upon her lap. She put down her goblet upon the floor, noting in a fresh surge of irritation that he was doing likewise.

“I realize that I must seem as ancient as Shor to one such as you. And that my presence thus far has been unwelcome.” Ulfric Stormcloak sighed. “I am not going to pretend to understand your position, Elisif. Your choices are your own, as are mine.”

“But understand this: you have wed me with clear intent, under your own proposal, in order to avert bloodshed. And this marriage will be a true marriage...no sham union in which you will holiday in High Rock and I will manage by taking boat rides every Sundas between Windhelm and Solitude. And—”

She felt mortification stain her cheeks with heat, for she had envisioned almost exactly that outcome. “-you will be my wife in every way. The mother of my sons and daughters. My Queen.”

He reached out and cradled her face in his hands before she could respond, in a move surprisingly tender. “-And I will be your husband. As long as you hold to your vows made before the gods themselves, I will be your shelter and your sword.”

“But how?” She insisted upon asking. Hating the girlish quaver of her voice. “You hate me. And I...I am not overly fond of you, if you have not grasped that fact already.”
The empathy she found in his face nearly undid her. "I think you will find, if you haven't already, Elisif, that the business of leadership is not about what one wishes to do, but rather what one must."

Something changed; shifted in the pressure of his hands, but she did not know what because her mind went completely blank for a moment. As her world narrowed into an intense focus upon one single feeling: the dry, chapped heat of the King’s lips as they pressed firmly against her own. Catching her completely unaware.

Elisif came back to herself and found one of his hands latched into the mass of her hair, pressed so hard she could feel the pulse of her heart beating against it through her back, and she replied in kind. Grasping the thick red gold that had grown nearly to his collar, keeping their mouths together by dint of force.

She gasped as he gripped her closer, his free hand roving higher, tracing the curve of her hips and waist and leaving a trail of heat everywhere he touched. The bed rose up to embrace her back, and her husband hovered over her. Nearly ripping away her dress, even as she butted against his hands, making a wordless noise of complaint. He laughed breathlessly in response.

They kissed desperately, ebbing and flowing control until she caught his bottom lip between her teeth. As she pulled back, she laved her tongue over it, and he groaned. For a moment they were held there...mouths touching but stilled, panting.

Sounds began to make their presence known again. Dimmed noises of revelry from outside the bedchamber door, the muted tones of Falk speaking to someone right outside, how embarrassing: merriment so very far removed from everything coming to pass in this room. In this bed.

“Ulfric?” She whispered against his lips. Too soon.

They had done enough, had made enough progress for one night. It was time to stop.

But the man shifted his weight while she was trying to convince herself to walk away. She slid, thanks to the slick texture of the dress, and he caught her; rolling his hips more tightly into hers. She moaned breathlessly, her grip upon his hair never loosening, and all thoughts of stopping evaporated away as their shared breath mingled.

Sharp blue eyes considered her, as she lay helpless beneath him. He began to undress her, more slow and methodical in his attentions than she would have imagined. Rolling her sleeves back, easing off her gown until it was caught around her waist. Baring her breasts to the air. “I can be patient, wife.”

“Oh? Can you.”

“Yes.”

The gesture of a gentleman, but pointless. Impatiently she helped him slide the fabric down, and writhed as the bundled mass of the dress cleared her hips. His hands had already returned to the placket of his smalls. He paused. “Are those real diamonds?”

“They are.” She repressed a shudder as the dress pooled around her feet. It was cold. She kicked it away.
“Ostentatious. I prefer pearls.” The bass depth of his words rumbled through her. His lips found her neck, and she tilted her head; the better to allow him access. It felt good.

“You must have worn a small fortune in gemstones at our wedding.” He muttered against the skin of her throat. “The more fool, I. You cannot go on as you have before, Elisif. I am not made of money.”

“Perhaps. But you like expensive things.”

“Whatever gave you that notion?” He moves to the other side of her neck, paying attention to the ticklishly thin flesh behind her ear, and she began to pant. There was simply not enough air in this room.

“You are the High King. Why wouldn’t you…” he did something with his tongue, causing her to gasp- “expect the best?”

“Remind me to use that the next time Galmar complains about the labor of docking warships,” Ulfric murmured, his hands increasingly busy. He tilted her head to the side and dragged his lips over her exposed neck as if he could brand himself into the pulse beneath. Going lower, she closed her eyes in raptures as he traced slow circles over her throat, her chest, her breasts...tightening the swell of her nipple with his thumb, as he returned to her mouth.

There wasn’t any chance of communicating with words, not between the pair of them, not now, and she wasn’t going to waste time trying to do so. Not when this chance was before her. Not when she was gasping for more, trying to nip at his ear.

Thought and reason dissolved when her hand slipped beneath the cloth of his smalls, grasping the length of him. Bruising marks into her hip with his weight, he ground them together...trapping her arm between them. It would have been uncomfortable, but the sound -the ragged sound that ghosted from his mouth? It proved to be her undoing.

Strange, a part of her mused as his smalls were lost and forgotten, how in one moment she could be intensely annoyed, and the next her whole body was flushed with lustful heat. It felt as if she faced a slide into some sort of delicious madness, a kind of wild state in which one had no concern for what anyone else thought. No other encounter with a previous lover had ever felt quite so intense.

Ulfric slid his fingers between the heat of her legs and she moaned into his mouth at how wet she was. She bucked against his hand, and there was no chance; no prayer she could make to prevent herself from seizing his shoulders. Mapping the hills and valleys of his taut body with her hands as his thumb sought another prize, buried within her soft folds. And the whole of her world blazed, when he entered into her. Causing her to come undone.

And Elisif the Fair realized, as her pleasure crested a rising peak, exploding into fireworks that burst behind her eyelids, that she had lost.

Hurts she did not know about swelled into a flood, and she let herself drown, dragged under by exhaustion and defeat in a bitter press of sensation. Keeping her head buried in the crook of Ulfric’s shoulder and neck, she pressed her face deeper into his warmth and held on tightly. Curling in upon herself as with several jarring thrusts he found his own climax; a sparking surge of heat.

The migraine that had threatened to appear earlier came back with a vengeance.
“Elisif.” His frayed breathing had slowed, and she felt rather than heard the question in his voice. “Are you...are you well?”

“No,” She whispered, completely and utterly spent. Unable to speak any further to spare Ulfric pain, to give her words more distinct meaning. “I have a headache.”

His hands moved to rub against her head. And she allowed him, moaning a bit as the vise-like pressure began to ease with every pass of those talented, damnable fingers.

She was done. So far past her own limits that she had lost her tether, her pride. And so, fixed in the freefalling afterglow of the most complex orgasm she had ever experienced, Elisif fell fast into a dreamless sleep.

Elisif was unaware that her husband lingered in bed to watch her, long after she had passed into Vaermina’s realm. She was heedless of the internal struggle going on within the newly crowned King, as he paced the lengths of the room, striving and failing to meditate.

He seated himself in the chair provided near his work desk, where he held the small parcel containing a few hundred mediocre quality pearls. Probably the item of least worth in the entire room, if he judged the chambers contents correctly.

Pressing the package tightly against his forehead, Ulfric released the tangled snarl of his thoughts to the Flame and the Void. Trying to remember the practices Arngeir had instilled in him from youth, to release all worries with every exhale into the air. Transforming; reaching that lofty pinnacle when tranquility transcended mortal emotion. He wanted to feel nothing. He sought the anonymity of being numb.

It wasn’t working.

He strove to regain that vast, limitless peace the Goddess Kynareth promised to the Greybeards, if they would but submit themselves. If they would give up their earthly bonds, all ties and obligations. He couldn’t do that, not completely, but he could give up his attachments. He could treat Elisif with compassion, distant and paternal; he could release the branding hold Nemain still bore upon him, if he could but forget these pearls. Replace the pearls with diamonds, and spend them. Place them in a chest, and hide it away...buried until the memory no longer prompted pain, or happiness, or indeed any feeling at all.

He could use the wealth of his emotions to suit his plans, to fuel his ambitions, and he’d take succor in the emptiness that would inevitably come beyond that sacrifice.

It was done. He was King, wedded and bedded.

And that could not be undone.

*I am submitting*, he thought churlishly to himself and to Kynareth. Had he not bent over backwards to accommodate his wife, his people, nay even his nation in the rapid upheaval the cessation of the Civil War had brought? And his wife - she had finally surrendered to him in the subversive battle of their courtship, though he acknowledged that there was little joy to be had in the knowledge of it.
He lingered over his desk for what felt like hours, feeling the pearls dimple his fingers. Hating himself for his lack. His inability to control those damnable feelings; his want.

He had mastered himself in so many ways. Why could he not find victory in this?

And around two in the morning when Elisif began to toss and turn in her sleep, murmuring to herself, Ulfric stiffly arose and got dressed. Leaving the pearls where they lay, sorted by color, shape and size...spread around the Jagged Crown like a peace offering.

He had opened his mouth to apologize to her one last time before departing, even if she would not hear it. Or know how thoroughly he meant it.

Yet something inside - pride perhaps, kept him from doing so.

Unlocking the door, he gave his steward hushed orders to maintain a watch over his wife’s slumber, and taking the back passages that the servants used, Ulfric made his way out. Walking to the portion of the palace where the remaining guests revelled, he could hear skooma pipes clacking as their aquifers were refilled. He breathed in fragrant blue smoke.

After a short search, he found the Redguard known as Razelen. The corsair-turned-merchant was buried deep in the pelt piled couches, both arms occupied with drowsing women.

He gave Ulfric a lazy smile. “High King, nice to see ya,"

“Razelen.”

The Redguard sneezed. “Heh. Thought you’d be cups deep in your good Queen by now, Stormcloak. What brings you here, hmm?”

One black eyebrow raised suggestively. “Got an itch to scratch?”

Ulfric nodded, barely more than a bob. “I find myself craving distraction.”

Razelen’s dissipated face lit up like a man half his age. “Well you’ve come to the right Redguard! Distractions I’ve got aplenty. Lessee, here...I’ve a batch of balmora blue just in from Vvardenfell.”

A pipe was proffered. The blue liquid bubbled from the alembic into a spiced steam; perfume escaping like a tiny curling wisp from the tip. “Care to have a taste?”

Moving to a free cushion, Ulfric sat and took the pipe. “Why not?” Taking a slow drag, he felt the vapor take effect almost instantly. The candles in their sconces wavered; painting circled discs of light upon the stone walls. Causing the tapestries themselves to roll and dance.

It was a kind of funny thing, if he dared to think overlong upon it. Meditation hadn’t worked, but fuck if this skooma hadn’t solved that problem with full marks. The problem, the issue with feeling just so damn much. Tears prickled at the corners of his eyes and he wiped them away, coughing as he choked on a fresh breath of air. Whew.

He wondered how expensive it would be to ship balmora blue to High Hrothgar, and he snorted a bit at the thought of Arngeir managing a very high Borri. If that trickster were given skooma, his schemes would take on a whole new level of creativity, at best.
And at worst would toss him off the mountainside. *Best of luck with that, old Master.*

Ulfric continued sipping at the skooma, feeling his eyelids drift down. A deep lethargy overtook him, and he smiled. Blowing twin streams of smoke out from his nostrils, he dazedly wondered if dragons did something similar when breathing fire. He wondered if the Dragonborn had ever tasted like smoke when they had kissed.

He couldn’t remember. He wanted to remember.

“Good stuff, am I right?” Razelan hiccuped. “Gods, what a funk...hey you. Bring me more Cyrodiilic brandy. Bring two...I’ll betcha the King craves a little libation for his celebration. Haha! Damn, you are packing away that shit. Gonna slow down any time soon?”

“I’ll rest in my grave,” Ulfric blew out, fascinated by the way the vapour swirled and dissolved.

“Alright, alright. Your funeral. This stuff’s like my old lady: toxic in large doses. I’ll keep a sharp eye on ya, though, no need to fear.”

“Don’ feel anything.” Ulfric slurred. The world tilted pleasantly off kilter.

“Hahah hah! Atta boy, my King. You just go ahead and take it easy.”

“Uh-huh.” He splayed his hand, finding the shape of them absolutely fascinating as Razelan continued to talk. Words blurred and faded into Oblivion as all his worries lifted up with the smoke. Drifting away into thin air.

And the numbness he had long sought for finally arrived, as he laid back against the pillowed cushions and thought, without any tangible anxiety, about gemstones. Pretty, shiny gemstones.

He mused upon pearls, diamonds, and the singular women who wore them.

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

Earlier that night in the Blue Palace:

A pocket here. Unprotected.

She picked it.

An unguarded coin purse there, dangling by loose strings.

She stole it.
**Aha!** Someone had taken off their gold and diamond necklace. It lay there upon the side table, shimmering with invitation.

Waiting until she was certain that no one was watching, Solveig seized it and slipped the heavy jewelry into a hidden pocket beneath her apron. Her skirts clattered. *Serves them right for leaving loot out like that in the open. Gods, I love palace toadies. So careless of their finery, as if they cannot fathom how easily it is frittered away.*

The thief scuttled along the corners of the glittering ballroom, feeling plain as a field mouse in her threadbare gown and smocking cap. All around her, women and men in brilliantly patterned silks and velvets danced and chatted, and here she was. Garbed in an outfit that wouldn’t have even made it past her rag bag, back when she had been a wealthy ship merchant’s daughter, and not a Nightingale.

She rather liked the black matte armor that Nocturnal’s cult had provided, particularly the hood, but unfortunately the ensemble would have drawn too much attention. Particularly in such a rainbow colored place, filled with festive lights, music and gaiety. It was smarter to remain in servant’s sackcloth. Better to be invisible; to steal as much loot as she possibly could while she could do it. Her guild was counting on her.

Solveig sighed as a noblewoman minced past, wearing leather shoes that each bore a massive ruby the size of a rock warbler egg on their buckles. *Rubies? On shoes?* It was so deliciously decadent. Ignoring the tables groaning with sweetmeats and desserts, Solveig’s gaze tracked the path of those beguiling slippered heels as they clicked and glinted their way down the ballroom floor. Just one ruby that size could buy her two months worth of the finest fare Solitude had to offer.

*Damn.* Lost track.

Perhaps she’d find the woman later, if the owner of those shoes became overcome with drink. She could poach them for herself, then. Shoes were always going missing at these noble fetes.

Solveig grimaced. Like she’d ever get a chance to wear them outside of the Ratway. Her good mood sank.

*But it would not do,* she censured herself severely, *to covet small things at this point in the venture.* Thanks to that absolute tit Mercer Frey, her guild’s coffers had been cleaned out, and there had been a panic when the thieves realized that they now were completely broke. Prompting a snatch and grab from all members who were available, making this sampling of high society more business than pleasure.

At least, not as pleasurable as she would have liked.

She licked her lips. After supping the swill the Palace had served the temporary laborers, those tables were looking more tempting after all. *Perhaps just one sweetroll. Or a honey nut treat.*
Yes. Solveig would continue under her guise of dimwitted serving girl, eat her fill, and then fleece these filthy rich fetchers dry.

Snatching a sweetroll, she found a hiding spot behind one of the ridiculously sumptuous curtains (dark sapphire blue, fringed with tiny silver tassels) and ate it ravenously. Properly fed, she sucked on her fingers, wishing she had also snagged an ale. Her interest renewed in getting out of this gala intact with maximum profit, Solveig began surveying the royal company for the appropriate characteristics.

Her targets could not be too self aware, nor too inebriated. A blend between the two would do nicely. It was deucedly difficult at times to tell who would realize that they were being pickpocketed, for some could tell immediately, and others not at all.

She rolled her ankles, sighing as she moved her weight from foot to foot. Balancing on the balls of her feet as she prepared to slouch into a sneaking stance. No time like the present. Better get to work.

She spied someone.

Ooh. And hell-o, payday.

“Who is that Mer?” she asked a passing server, a young Nord who had given her a few pitying glances during the evening. She certainly felt pitiable in this dress.

"Which one, miss?” He had a nice smile and looked as if his wool doublet itched.

“The elf in the green robe.”

To call it merely green was to damn it with faint praise: it was a vibrant, emerald green embroidered with white geometric embroidery, winking at her from the hems. The hue set off the Altmer’s skin to perfection, as she stared in fascination at the sunlit yellow of his throat, peeping above the incredible collar of that robe.

It was the most exquisite garment she had ever seen. And the tall Mer who wore it was similarly unique. He moved with the careless grace of one who held great power...and knew it. He wore no furs, unlike the other perspiring men pacing through the current steps of the dance. His hair was a long shock of white, with a few stray hairs floating like eiderdown, and it had been tied at his neck with a silk cord.

He was a dangerous mixture of carelessness and supreme elegance.

Solveig grinned evilly. He was perfect.

The server handed her a bottle of mead in order to disguise the fact that they were speaking. She uncorked it gratefully. “That’s the new Archmage and Jarl of Winterhold, Ancano of Auridon. He’s
taken the old Hold for himself as well as the college, after the accident with the Eye that wiped out nearly the entire city. Ain’t you heard of him, then?”

She shook her head and took a hurried swig of mead. “Nope. Thanks for the mead.”

“Sure, you’re welcome.” The Nord server treated her to a hopeful smile. “Will I see you later on? The servants are having a party of their own. King’s orders...and he’s supplying us with the best. No watered down dregs, like what that skinflint Odar gives us. It’ll be a right feast!”

“Sounds nice. Maybe I’ll see you later.” *And mayhap I won’t.*

Being unburdened as possible would help with this last run of pickpocketing. She ran down the corridor, counting doors...wasn’t one of these the servant’s hall? *You would think they would label them proper.*

Slamming open the door that she had earmarked, for it contained a chest she was using to stash her loot, Solveig ran into a wall of green...and fell backwards. Sprawled with her legs bared before the Archmage of Winterhold himself.

He stared at her with eyes as yellow as a sunrise she had seen once, way off the coast of Blacklight. Years ago, back when she had lived upon a ship - it had been a memorable color. A clear gold, pure and deep.

Then he ruined the effect. Speaking in a haughty voice that made her tremble all over, “You must tell the steward to train you in proper behavior, thrall.”

Rising up, she dropped a careful curtsy, mindful of the bits and pieces stored within her skirts. She was dazed by the unique elven look of him, by his hollowed cheeks and jaded look. He was everything that declared itself a difficult mark; a challenge. There wasn’t an ounce of sentiment in those golden eyes, and she kept her head low. Feeling a thrill rise within her at the thought of stealing from him, an Archmage and a Jarl to boot. Her head whirled with thoughts about managing such a stunt.

Life with her father on the high seas had taught her to be blunt about her own emotions, or risk having them dissected by captain and crew. So she knew instantly what it was she felt: lust. A desire for his robes, for his riches, for the excitement of bilking this snooty Altmer for all he was worth. Her father’s bawdy sea chanty on the subject filtered through her mind, confirming her sense of wonder.

Though, of course, it was his regalia she longed to touch. Not his actual person.

He obviously thought himself a cut above the rest. Was wealthy enough not to miss a trinket, or maybe two or three. Her mouth salivated at the thought of the loot hidden within his chamber, just a few lockpicks away from easy plundering. Soul gems, books, scrolls...mages always collected such an oddment of fascinating things.

*He. Was. Perfect.*
As she dithered, Ancano walked over and then tipped up her chin. She kept her weighted pockets still, so that they would not clash as she stood up. Meeting her eyes with his, refusing to waver under that eagle-like glare. “What astonishing beauty to find in such a dim hole as the servants’ quarters.”

Solveig tried to piece together what exactly the Mer had been up to before running into her. *What would an Altmer be doing away from all the glitz and dazzle?* “Thank you, ah-” she said, trying to think what to say other than a blunt proposal to head back to his rooms.

“Red hair,” he said, rather dreamily. “Extraordinary high arched eyebrows, slightly tilted eyes of ocean blue. And your lower lip…”

His catalog of her virtues raised Solveig’s hackles. *Was he considering her as a stablehand would consider a horse for purchase?*

She made her voice as backwoodsy Nord as possible. “H’apologies, master, but I has work I needs to be getting on to.”

He raised an eyebrow. “An obvious lack of humility, though your words are correct. And the accent that a daughter of a noble born house would not hesitate to call her own. Never mind your last sentence, my dear girl - though I would not recommend you try your hand at the theater. Yes. I fear I have misjudged your station.”

Gah. Change of plans, might as well play the part. She drew herself up, inch for inch as swotty and imperious as he. “As a matter of fact, I am rejoining my parents in the ballroom, if you must know. We were extended a personal invitation from the King, and I-think fast!- was on my way to change from...from caring for our horses.”

“You,” his tones dripped with disbelief, “are a noblewoman who personally takes care of her own horseflesh?”

“One and the same, my Jarl. But as you can see, I am ill attired for the celebration. Will you let me pass?”

His caustic gaze skittered over the plain burlap front of her gown, with its misshapen pleats that looked as if she had tailored them herself. He dropped his hand from her chin. “That makes you an altogether more interesting and forbidden treat, an impoverished noble woman. As a peer of the realm, I consider it my duty to escort you to your mother and father.”

Tucking her arm into his, the Archmage of Winterhold shot her a knowing grin and started for the main chamber of the Blue Palace, passing through the sapphire blue swagged curtains. Dragging her along for the ride. “I imagine they are missing you, dreadfully.”

“You assume a great deal,” Solveig said desperately as her skirts, freed from their restraints began to clash and crash together, making a metallic racket with all the septims and stones she had squirrelled away inside. Her footwraps skidded along the stone, following the more measured cadence of the Mer’s boots. “They will not miss me.”

“Oh, I can assure you, a parent always misses his child.” Ancano pulled Solveig into the central mass of the ballroom and cast his eyes about, dramatically roofing his hand over his eyes. *Like there was a glare to shield away from,* she thought sullenly; though to his credit there were an abnormally large number of candles lit in the chandeliers this evening. “Will I recognize them, if you tell me their names? What are they wearing?”

“Stop it,” she hissed, jerking her arm away without any success. “Stop this and let me go this
“Rather not. I wonder how long you insist upon keeping up this charade.” Still holding tightly to her wrist, Ancano bent over. His breath smelled of rum cake, with a light layer of alto wine. “So indulge me. How much are you planning to steal, and from whom?”

They were surrounded. It would make a dreadful scene if she forcefully ripped herself away from the Mer, and he was not going to let her off so easily, judging by the sardonic glint in those eyes. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Is it maps you are after? Intelligence papers?” He shook her by the arm, hard, and she panicked as one of her coin purses fell out of her apron and rolled away. Becoming swiftly hidden by the dancing legs of the company. “My spellbooks? Are you thieving gold and jewels only, skimming from the cream, or has Elenwen sent you as the latest of her pathetic little sycophants? For I can tell you my answer now, and save you much effort. My position on the matter of Winterhold is firm.”

He shook her one more time, those incredible eyes narrowed. His lips tightly pinched. “You will leave my daughters out of this.” His fingers pressing nearly to the bone, she bit back a cry as he thrust his sharply edged face into hers. “And I grow weary of dispensing with assassins. I imagine you were not trothed with that particular task, as you do not look the sort. But I will defend myself if necessary, and others besides should you choose to make your move this night. Is that clear, little thief?”

She waited for him to withdraw from his threat, her arm aching...noting the sheen of his robe and the featherdown perfection of his hair. “I don’t really give a damn what you believe or not, Elf. I don’t have any idea who this Elenwen is. Lie. I’m not after you.” Lie, lie, so many lies.

“Ah. Honesty. At last.”

“As if you are the arbiter of truth!,” she snapped back, stung. They were standing there, closely, and they were attracting notice for holding up the dance. She would be damned if all her hard work was demoted to a prison guard’s perk. He would release her in the next minute, or she would scream. High and long...the better to get away, before the guards noticed just how loudly she clanked.

She doubted the elven Jarl wished for that sort of attention. “Let me go.”

He looked down his thinly regal nose at her. “I think not. Honesty is expensive. I do not expect it from cheap criminals.”

“You shan’t have it,” Solveig said. “Because I feel precisely the same way about you.” The dance had ended, and they were drawing the ire of those who had been blocked in their promenade down the ballroom path.

...Or was it the crowd parting? She stared, her heart in her mouth.

Oh gods. It was.

High King Ulfric Stormcloak and his newly wedded bride, Elisif the Fair, were rapidly approaching them.

And Ancano showed no signs of releasing her arm.
It was time to take the offensive. Seizing the sleeve of his gorgeous robe, Solveig pulled her face up towards the Mer and whispered viciously, “I give up. You have caught me.”

“Ah.” His voice was shaded in overt tones of triumph.

“But not for the reasons you think.”

“Is that so?”

“It is so.” Solveig used her free hand to pull upon the Mer’s long tail of hair. It was as luxuriantly textured as everything else about him.

Giving in to impulse, she kissed him squarely upon the mouth and was gratified to see his eyes snap wide open. The whites of his eyes were very white indeed.

“I wasn’t after you for your spywork,” she told him after, feeling a bit sorry for the way this had all panned out.

She would have liked to peek through his rooms. And what she could feel of the Altmer was slender, yet corded with muscle. It wouldn’t have been a hardship going to bed with this one. “But you walk about like a peacock from the gardens of Elinhir. So very tempting.”

He looked down at himself, a slight smirk twisting those elegant lips. “By the Eight, I knew green was an ill choice for a color tonight. It attracts just the wrong sort of attention.” His eyes flickered up to catch hers once again, and oh.

She was caught. “You taste sweet.”

“Comes naturally, as my Pa says. Oh, and don’t worry about that.” She tested his grip, and found he was still holding her firmly. Though his gaze had changed from disinterest to a simmering focus that she rather liked.

She tugged once again. “That robe is a beauty. In fact, based on the sheer glory of that robe alone, I was planning to seduce you.”

“Really. You think me to be that simple.”

She nodded. “Yes. And then once you had fallen asleep, I would root through your things and steal everything that was not bolted down.” Solveig paused. “As long as your daughters were not sniffing about. That would make it just a bit harder.”

“I’d imagine so.” Those golden eyes burned into her, as if he could not quite puzzle her out. His nose touched the tip of her nose, with his lips dancing as they spoke.

Distractingly close. “And how would you say your plan is getting on thus far?”

“Oh, just swimmingly.” She breathed into his face, managing to catch the dilation of his pupils before slamming the heel of her foot down. Ripping his robe with a laddering rent, leaving him swearing as she darted away, blending into the thick of the crowd.

-And just in time, for when she dared to glance back at Ancano, she found him speaking with King Ulfric Stormcloak.
Whew.

Her former suitor would have instantly recognized her face. Solveig heaved a relieved sigh, mentally rearranging her plans for the remainder of her evening.

The dinner with the sweet-faced server was out. So was the evening of snooping about an Archmage’s study.

Letting herself in the room where her previous treasures had been stowed, Solveig pushed shut the door and turned the latch. Catching her breath for just a moment, she rested against the wall. There was just a bit of time she could spare, before she made haste and pulled what loot she could out and away from Solitude. The boat waiting to take her back to Dawnstar would wait.

She touched her lips to her fingers, and smiled.

Hmm. Sweet.

Chapter End Notes

Same night, two very different couples. I wasn't quite satisfied in writing Elisif and Ulfric, but I figure this is about as good as it gets. Let me know what you think, and leave a comment below.

Torygg is shown so little in the game that I thought it might be interesting to introduce the idea of him being secretly gay. In my research of royal couples throughout medieval history there have been several who have had eclectic tastes, yet managed to sire children and continue on with life despite their hidden proclivities.

My version of Torygg adds just a bit of 'what if'. What if Elisif wasn't exactly heart broken over Torygg's death as a lover, but was more upset as a friend? How would Ulfric and Elisif handle marriage as basic strangers? (Like everyone else in the time period. They dealt with it). And when it comes to Ancano, you will find that he plays an ever greater part in the upcoming plot arc through no fault of his own.

This story, I have decided, is about the villains of Elder Scrolls Five getting some love. The much misaligned Ulfric Stormcloak, a Dark Brotherhood Forsworn mage Dragonborn, and Ancano, of course.

Come on. Being bad in Skyrim is always so much more fun than being good.

****oh, and Merry Christmas, ya filthy animals! <3 ****
It was Middas evening in the month of Morning Star, and the College of Winterhold lay bathed in the clarity of winter’s cold white light.

Glacial ice gleamed with prismatic beams, reflecting the auroras above, and the very Sea of Ghosts seemed hushed in its ponderous flow. The wooden lodges clustered in the remains of the town were blanketed in frost, their fires banked with a few trailing arcs of smoke stirring the heavens.

All the inhabitants of the Hold seemed to be at peace.

But, high atop the tallest tower, hot tempers were afire. Shouts rang out, spoiling the calm as voices rose and fell. “My instructions were for you to keep the flame burning, not to snuff it out. If you do not practice with accuracy to the slightest detail, then you will never excel!”

“Wot’s the point?!” A girl retorted shrilly. “Maybe I don’t wanna be a mage, you fetcher of a yellow n’wah! Ya ever think of that?”

“Do not speak back to me in that tone, child!” A cultured voice sneered.

“And what?” The young voice broke with a sob. “It’s not as though you’re my Pa! Not fer real!”

And in the tower that held the Archmage’s quarters, small footsteps pattered across carpets and stone, ending with a crash and bang. “You’re not me Pa, nor me Gran! And ya never will be! So...stop trying!”

...Leaving Ancano standing there, utterly flummoxed as his own doors were slammed directly in his face.

Truly. That could have gone better.

The Archmage of Winterhold sucked in a deep lungful of air and released a growl replete with all the vexation he had stored within himself, soaked steadily up like a sponge until he was fit to burst.

And burst he had. The day had started badly, had become progressively worse...and now it looked as though it were ending with a token bang. A revelatory trumpet of epiphany, his inner thoughts
ground out with resentful censorship. But not a magickal one.

_Damnation. I knew teaching a Nordling would be an errant misuse of time._

Feeling as though his limbs had been transmuted to wood, Ancano turned away from the door and picked up his watering can. Tending to the plants that the previous College Head had nurtured in this icy tower usually soothed the raw state of his mind, and the diversion was something he could do with, now more than ever. It was a balm to his soul, seeing life flourish in an urban household where those of a banal mind would never suspect such growth.

It reaffirmed to him each and every time he caught sight of the garden that magic was indeed the superior force in this world.

Taking a moment to stroke a vibrantly scarlet redwort flower, Ancano paused to view the Arch-Mage’s quarters with reverence. From every surface, plants both exotic and common glowed, hummed, and sprouted new shooting tendrils into the eddies and cracks of the ancient stone walls. He had added even more planters and pots since his abrupt installment as the titular head of this bumpkin school, and he surveyed the fruits of his efforts with pride.

The garden, improbable as it was, revived his faith. It enhanced his resolution to maintain this small place of power within the province of Skyrim...and never mind the cost.

Taking care to drip only a minimal amount of water upon each rootling and patch of dirt, the Thalmor agent let his mind wander as his hands took over the repetitive nature of the task. Dotta had informed him that morning at breakfast that she hated the magical tutor he’d hired (or rather, pressed into service as he found the novice’s choice of study unduly trite. _Mudcrab blood? Pointless._

And after delivering him a scathing lecture over porridge and ale, she had disappeared.

Two hours of rising panic ensued as the college staff searched for her; no, it wasn’t until Mirabelle Ervine unearthed her from her hiding place under a spare desk in the Hall of Attainment that he knew she was safe. Could feel his blood pressure begin to ease.

Ancano frowned as water sieved away from a nirmroot leaf and splattered onto his foot. Dotta was...well, if he were to be truthful, she was all he had left.

Upon his return to the College after the King’s coronation, a gaggle of Nords had appeared out of nowhere, requesting the right to appeal for the two younger girls he had taken under his wing from Orphan’s Rock.

_Blood relatives, or something of that ilk._ He had parted with them reluctantly. The young things had reunited with their kin squealing in glee, and as hard as he tried, he could not help but feel the lack of them, these past few weeks.

He shook the water droplets free from his foot. _Yes._ There was decidedly less noise, fewer pastel ribbons tangled in his hair...he even found himself missing that high, shrieking laughter he had grown almost accustomed to. Echoing through the Halls of Attainment, the Arcaneum, the Hall of Elements as they were chased off by annoyed novices and instructors alike...
There would be no more laughter. They were gone.

Now only the eldest Nord girl remained, and she of a more serious bent. *Much good it did him,* recognizing that salient fact. It had not improved their relationship to denote a similarity of mind between the two of them, so unlikely a pair as they were...mature Altmer and fledgling Nord.

Ancano sighed, dragging himself past his desk as he strove to ignore the mess awaiting him there.

The sturdy piece of furniture was nearly curved, bent double beneath the weight of books and papers that would do any synod library proud. Scrolls were piled chest high that needed his urgent scrutiny; there were strongly-worded orders penned from the Dominion that he would ignore, demands from Elenwen that he wished he could ignore, pleas from the local surviving barbarians who still dwelt in the fells of Winterhold, beset by bandits and native fauna and the occasional wisp...and still Ancano was not done in his catalogue of grievance.

He was awaiting further news from the west concerning the volatile area containing Markarth, and now, seemingly, Falkreath as well.

His spy from the Reach had been curiously mum of late, and it rattled him to think that there was something of interest going on anywhere in the province of Skyrim that he was unaware of. It would be highly imprudent to be caught with his smalls down, metaphorically speaking. Particularly now that he was on such captious terms with the Dominion, after ensuring that his cousin Gethhel would continue to draw breath freely in Firsthold, untethered from the overweening bureaucracy of the Thalmor government.

All in thanks to his propitious use of rudimentary leverage. Ancano grinned viciously. Winterhold was his, and his alone to wield as he saw fit...as was the College and the sum of its parts.

No matter what Elenwen, that power hungry shrew, or the Dominion, or even the High King of Skyrim himself thought to demand otherwise.

Yet he could not quite shake the niggling doubt that his choice to save the remaining mages of Winterhold from the Eye of Magnus had been (as Elenwen’s last missive had so abrasively stated) an act of treason rather than a deed of mercy.

Shaking his head, he mentally batted away glimpses of Faralda, Niry, Enthir, Drevis and others...those of Mer ancestry who had died horrible deaths, writhing in the grips of that nocuous artifact after their bodies were consumed by swarming anomalies.

They had died poorly.

And it was surely due to his own fortitude (and Auri-El’s blessing) that he had not succumbed as well.

He blew away a hank of white hair as the action briefly cleared the cloud that always followed such dire ruminations. *Time would tell if this gamble in claiming Winterhold would pay off.*

He moved to the other side of the garden and began to tend to the mushrooms, taking care not to trod upon the mycelium layered soil.

No. He was a new power, and thus newly unpopular. Not even Nelacar had kept in close correspondence with him of late, other than to scratch a few lines scrawled here and there from various locations in Tamriel.
How the old mage managed to get around so swiftly was a troublesome puzzle, and despite careful questioning Nel managed to remain curiously tight lipped upon the subject of his experimentation. Merely stating that he was studying Nemain’s unique predicament of unlife, and could Ancano possibly keep in touch with her, if only to mind the jinx who trailed trouble behind her like a malodorously dyspeptic baliwog?

Ancano sniffed. He had been endeavoring to do just that. Only that morning had a courier delivered a vague update from Nemain, whose last whereabouts had been Riften (which was peculiar, as he had left her last in Falkreath.)

The little chit. He was now losing his focus being so burdened in thought about the belligerent and vulnerable females in his care, and to top it off? There was something horribly wrong, something skewing his perception of the proper chronology of events.

He was...losing time. Great swathes of it.

That did it. Having blighted his interest in gardening with his morose turn of thought, Ancano shuffled across the room and sat down upon his bed with a creak.

He now had moments during which he was wholly occupied in a task and somehow...he would black out. Returning to his present self staring into space, or holding up a fork for seconds, minutes, once an entire hour later judging by the sinking of the sun’s height through the windowpane...

He didn’t think it was due to mental strain. Though it felt to him during every time-break as brief as the bat of an eye.

Curious. Intractably curious.

...And there was only one cynosure, synod or group that he could think of that practiced time magic in such a troubling way. Or was indeed even capable -or interested- in such espionage.

Ancano rubbed his temples with his fingertips, pressing so deep he imagined that they might puncture bone. The Psijic Order was meddling again. The Eye of Magnus was gone, and good riddance; the maddening artifact absconded with his blessing and the Order’s care into some unnamed distant plane...and yet disturbance roiled within him just as it had when the Eye had claimed the majority of his focus.

Disturbing the function of his cogitations. Distressing the weave of his carefully tended plans.

Something -or someone- still spied upon the Thalmor spy. But to what end?

His fingernails dug into yellow skin. And why?

Ancano had hoped to maintain some semblance of normalcy amidst his responsibilities for Dotta’s sake. Unsuited as he was to the task of parentage, he still sought to make her stay in his guardianship an educational, if not an utterly pleasant interlude.

He harrumphed deep in his throat. By the scales of Phynaster, he had even tried to give his ward a lesson in magic to make up for the hapless tutor. Regardless of her immature tantrum, or the fact that he had little time for teaching...and even less hope of improving the cognitive faculty of a racially handicapped mage.
Much good it had done them both.

Templing his fingers beneath his chin, Ancano brooded. It was possible that his investment in his fosterling would thrive and develop similar gains as this garden had. For a Nord, Dotta exhibited an unusual amount of latent talent. He found himself strangely eager to see her improve.

But for some reason Dotta felt differently about her magic than he did. The barbaric nature of her upbringing was likely to blame...distrust planted deep by authority figures that he would have to root out, tough as any weed.

He scratched his chin, distantly thinking that he needed to shave soon. Come to think of it, the inept tutor may have been the least of his ward’s issues. For when prodded, the girl had been reluctant to cast even the most mediocre of novice spells. Seemingly torn between a desire to do so, and a hesitancy he found most vexatious.

And he had lost his temper in a spectacular fashion when after his scolding she had stood her ground. And instead of being properly obeisant, she had accused him of being a condescending git; stating that her Gran had never once shouted at her. It had been the last proverbial straw to wreck the dam that held back his angst.

Thus, their shouting match.

He did not doubt that what she had said was a truism. The Nords he had met with in this frigid backwater might have been rock-stubborn in dealing with an invading Mer such as himself, but their tempers were utterly sweet and doting towards their young. Clan-minded as they tended to be.

But he was not sweet. And he did not dote. Not even on Dotta.

He doubted he was even capable of such a thing.

Ancano groaned into his hands. No, he did not make it a habit to capitulate to children, yet in this instance he had to admit that he had been a fool. A fool who had just behaved like an ass to a little girl who did not deserve such censure. Regardless of how futile the efforts of teaching magic to a child of the sky would be.

It was his job at the very least to keep her safe, to teach her how to fend for herself...and yet there were so many things that would consume her in a heartbeat without thought or remorse in this wretched place.

His role, his responsibility. If nothing else, Ancano would keep the girl alive and forcibly educated. Even if it meant she despised him for the entire duration of her natural life.

His personal wards pinged, and he cricked a finger to render them inert...looking up just in time to see Dotta’s tearstreaked face peek through the crack of the door.

“I didn’t mean it,” she sniffled. “M’sorry I called you a yellow fetcher.”
He looked down his nose at her, managing to do so even from his seated position upon the bed. “...And?”

“And a n’wah. Wasn’t nice.” Her bloodshot eyes peeked up at him. “Sorry.”

Standing up, he held out his arms and was nearly bowled over as Dotta made a dive for him. He rocked her back and forth, and ineffectually Ancano began to try to explain himself as the girl sobbed noisily into his shoulder.

“I apologize for the loss of my temper, Dotta. For the distress my lesson brought upon you and my outburst earlier as well. The...idea that you were lost in the College was a source of terror to me. There are many dangerous things here that could bring great harm to you, if you treat them incautiously.”

“Like the Midden?” Dotta snuffled into his woolen robes.

He tried to ignore the damp patch slowly growing upon his breast. “Yes, like the Midden. But there are several other dangers that may not appear quite so obvious.”

“What? Wot’s scarier than the Midden?” She sounded genuinely spooked.

Resting his chin upon the top of her head, Ancano made his voice reasonable. Matter of fact, when he felt like shaking the little female senseless.

Of course she had gone down into the deeps of the College undercroft, after he had expressly forbidden her not to. “Well. There are the wellsprings of light that impart unknown reactions at random when touched. The narrow crumbling bridge, the broken walltops...I trust you have seen the magickal anomalies.”

“The wisps?” She sniffled. “I think they’re pretty.”

“They are not nearly so aesthetically pleasing when they attack and consume to the bones, Dotta. Those remnants of the Eye of Magnus can spring up at any time, anywhere...and I have not yet discovered the means by which I might fully eradicate them.”

Ancano looked over at the staff of Magnus lying against a bookcase across his room. That tool had something to do with it, he was almost certainly sure. With the crude shield wall spell he had succeeded in inventing -ensuring that the upper half of the College itself at least remained wisp free- he calculated that it was only a matter of months before he discovered a permanent deterrent to the pests.

And with the orb gone, what else could be prompting the return of the wisps? Mindless horrors that they are? “I half expected to find you as a pile of dust, young lady. I openly admit that it is something of a personal triumph that I did not curse like a Redoran sellsword at you, once you were found.”

Dotta raised her puffy face from his chest and said, “S’bad manners to heap praise on yerself. Gran allus said so. Especially when it’s your fault I ran away.”

“Perhaps.” Her breathing had slowed, and the Mer judged the little thing to be marginally more receptive now than she had been earlier to his ministrations. “Now, will you allow me to recap the lesson we touched upon earlier, Dotta? We may stop at any point you like.”
“Okay.”

“Excellent.” He made no effort to hide the satisfaction evident in his voice. “Now, pay attention. As I was saying previously, magic is not some unknowable mystery - no force of nature, though it may inspire elemental manipulation. Magic is inside all of us, a part of us…you, me…the very progenitor of life itself.”

Ancano lifted his hands, and a swirl of light eddied and swirled about his long yellow fingers. Drifting like a nebula as it cast snakelike patterns upon the tapestries hung in his room.

Dotta watched it warily, tracking the spell-light with huge blue eyes.

“Av molag anyammis, av latta magicka, being translated from ancient Ayleid is interpreted as ‘From fire, life; from light, magic.’ Every bug, bird and sentient being upon Mundus has a measure of Aedric creation within them; a spark of Aetherius from whence we all came.” He released his grip upon the spell and resettled her more comfortably in his lap.

Heavy, for such a slight girl. Raising one of his hands again, Ancano cradled a small burning spark in his palm; smiling in approval as Dotta showed him her own flame. Twin fires danced and rolled across their palms, creating new light that shadowed the fascination in her face. “Yes, the fire of life. Excellent control, Dotta. Now as with fire, magic is useful in various ways.”

“Like how we can burn logs with fire to stay warm?”

“Yes, or use it to sear wounds that otherwise might fester and rot. It can cook food, purify water… and yet it can also spawn devastating forest fires and induce agonizing burns. Those who tend fires have a healthy respect for them, and so it should also be concerning magic.”

“I know lots about fire, ‘Cano.”

“Then you will understand at once the symbolism of the Ayleid terminology. Ayleid, you understand, being the name of the ancient Wild Elves, or High Elves who once commanded the breadth of Tamriel. Now -yes, cradle the fire like that- some races tend to display more magic than others, whether by happy accident of birth or careful breeding of magic-bearing bloodlines.”

“You mean elves like you?”

“Indeed. Not all Mer are mages, but those who choose to develop their skills are often more powerful in comparison to others of lesser races. I say this not out of a lack of tact, Dotta, for it is merely truth. Those who contain enough of this gift innately are able to be taught the true meaning and manipulation of magic. Though it takes years, often many decades to achieve any true sort of mastery. Even over a single school or discipline, though I would not lose heart, child. Most men do not live long enough to see the pinnacle of their power before they expire. It matters little your level of skill, so long as you study and try your utmost to excel.”

“So that’s why there’s more mages around who’re elves?” Dotta pouted. “Huh. Doesn’t seem fair. Men have magic, too. But we only live for a…a centuron!”

“Your intent was to say a ‘century,’ I imagine.”

Of course his ward was far more intelligent than the rest of her kind in grasping the obvious. “The consistent use of magicka does have the fortuitous side effect of extending life. Yes, you could say that Mer are more long lived due to their deep connection to the aedric forces than other
peoples...though any supposition beyond that would venture into a theological discussion.”

He extinguished the flame, with his ward closely following suit. “And I’d rather not discuss the reasoning behind the White-Gold Concordat right before bedtime, if you do not mind.”

“Sure. Um...what about me, ‘Cano?” Dotta said thickly, looking down at her hands now layered within his.

He marveled at how pink and pale they were; how slight. Dotta’s curved fingernails were nearly translucent. Like tiny shells, whereas his in comparison were pointed, dark and hard as horn.

His fingers twitched around hers. Predatory, even.

“I’m a Nord. But I can do magic.” She poked his cheek, recapturing his attention. “Where do I fit in?”

“You are rare for your race,” Ancano told her. Meaning every word. “A diamond in the rough.”

“S’not what Gran would have said. Every time she had to light a fire with her hands, she used to mutter somethin’ to Lady Kyne an’ Lord Shor...something to fend off bad luck.”

Picking her up, he began to walk down the winding step towards her rooms. “I confess, the more I hear of this lauded Gran, the less inclined I am to like her. What brings you to feel so poorly about your talents?”

“Magic’s for the weak, Gran allus said-“

“-Always, Dotta. Be grammatical.” He readjusted her in his arms so that her sticklike elbows would not jab into the flesh of his side. “Now why on Mundus would a wielder of supernatural forces be considered weak?”

Her small hand tightened its grip upon his arm. “It’s just...because...ugh, I dunno.”

He looked down at her, wondering what exactly was her perception of him at this point in their odd relationship. Not for the first time, he wondered if human women thought him unattractive. Not just for his race, but merely in the general sense.

It was interesting that he had never cared to inquire before. He had bargained, bribed and spied his way through the bulk of his clandestine efforts for the Dominion over the years, but never had he imagined to wield flirtation as a tool.

The nameless, beautiful servant who had so boldly spoken of seducing him at the coronation ball briefly flitted through his thoughts, and Ancano huffed.

A Nord should be so lucky to attract his graces. “Dotta. Do I look scrawny or unkempt to you?”

“No, ‘course not, silly goose.” She yawned. “And ya took me away from the bone cages with the bad men, Ancano. I like you. You’re brave. But,” and here, her jaw cracked with an even wider yawn, “...most mages are s’posed to be cowards.”
“Are they.”

“Aye. Milkdrinkers what can’t lift an axe or swing a hammer, I guess. Lazy swots who lay around reading all day, ‘stead of doing honest work for honest pay.”

“I find myself flatly uninterested in curtailing my love of the written word. And you would not believe what certain skills such as enchanting may earn insofar as a living is concerned. Anything else?”

“I’m too tired to remember it all. S’bad to have lots of magic, though. Means there’s something wrong with ya.”

He laid her down upon her bed, despising the inhabitants of Skyrim anew. Had her Gran not meddled so in her rearing, his ward would be practicing her skills eagerly, without fear of reprisal.

And, he was woefully coming to realize, Dotta would not have been taught to fear the lack of social acceptance amongst her peers. If only someone in this primordial wasteland had deigned to mention the benefits of wielding one’s mind as opposed to one’s fists.

_Beefwitted rubes._

“Do you think I could have saved my gran?” Came one last drowsy sentence. “With my magic?”

“Hmm?”

“Could I have, um, done something back...back there, when those scary men captured us an’ took us to Orphan Rock?” Her fingers twisted in her furs.

He sighed. “I do not know, child.”

Her voice came out small. Timid, as though she were afraid of the answer. “Did my little brother Moof really have to die and...and be etted? Could I have stopped them? Would he be here with us, too, if’n I had only learned magic sooner?”

Ancano closed his eyes at the raw pain in her query. “That was not your fault. And you could not have prevented that occurance from happening. Everyone dies someday.”

“Even elves?”

“Yes, even we Altmer. Death is as much a part of life as birth. We elves have lifespans that triple the races of men...but death demands its due for us all, Dotta.”

“Oh. Oh no. Are you gonna go away and die too?”

She was waking up now, struggling to open her eyes, and he gently shushed her. Not wishing to arouse the froth of her emotions. “No, I gotta know. What’s gonna happen to me, Ancano? I don’t got any more family like the other girls got. Where’ll I go, if’n you get dead?” Her eyes glistened with tears.

“What’ll I do?”

“The correct sentence structure is ‘I do not’, and never ‘I don’t got.’” Not unless she wishes to grant
me a premature aneurysm. “Please...cease this meaningless struggle you seem to have fixated so upon. I do not plan on being deceased for centuries yet.”

“And,” He continued, feeling the rightness of his words seep into his spirit, “...if I ever do manage to leave this icebound hovel for good, rest assured. I am taking you with me.”

“Good.” Dotta said, whispering as her eyes fluttered shut. “That’s good, ‘Cano. Cause I’d miss you, you know. If you was a goner.”

He ignored that. “Rest while you can, little gyfaill. We will continue this most erudite of discussions in the morning.”

He waggled his eyebrows and poked her in the ribs, being rewarded with a sleepy chuckle in return. “I will even give you a list of library books to peruse, if you can but pry them from Urag gro-Shub’s green clutches. Thank the Eight your Gran at the very least taught you how to read.”

“Ha-hah. The Orc- he talks funny, y’know...like he’s always licking his words ‘round his tusks.” Another yawn. “But he’s nice. Like you...not so’s you’d notice right off, but nice when it matters.”

Nice was not the word Ancano would have used to describe the grouchy Orsimer librarian.

Or himself.

But it was strangely pleasant that the she-Nord thought thus. “Hmph.”

“I’m glad he survived, ‘cause Tolfdir would have been a horrible-” she yawned even wider, “-librarian, ‘coz he don’t care about ‘splaining big words like Urag does.”

She paused, then whispered. “Plus, Tolfdir’s breath stinks real bad. Like pickled fish.”

“A most undesirable trait.” Ancano whispered back. “Perhaps it is just as well that Urag remains at his post. Though I fear you will find his breath similarly tainted.”


He tucked her more securely into her pelts, though he was not sure why he chose to do so. The room was adequately warm. “Goodnight, Nordling.”

“M’not just a Nord, anymore.” Dotta turned to her side, pulling a stuffed mammoth toy closer to her chest. “I’m a mage, ya know.”

“That you are,” he agreed with a straight face. Leaning over, he hesitated while brushing a blonde tendril of hair away from her forehead. I am not her Gran. I am an agent of the Thalmor, loyal subject of the Aldmeri Dominion and third in line to the throne of Firsthold in Auridon. I do not kiss little girls goodnight.

But he could wish them well. “Sleep deeply, Dotta. May Vaermina never catch you in her web. Let your dreams be untroubled, child...let them be of peaceful, happier times.”

But Dotta did not hear, for she was already fast asleep.
Tiptoeing out of her chambers, the Archmage of Winterhold closed her door to a mere crack and resumed his habitually rapid gait up the spiral stair only when he was sure Dotta could no longer hear it.

He needed to at least read, oh, six of the scrolls before turning in to bed himself, Ancano mused. More, if the task could be accomplished before his eyelids sealed shut from sheer ennui.

He idly wondered just how annoyed Mirabelle Ervine would be if he summoned her to retrieve a snack for him from the kitchens. He was feeling rather peckish, come to think of it.

_A taffy pull, perhaps. Or mayhap some eidar cheese..._

Mentally weighing the virtues of Surilie wine over Skingrad for its soporific properties, Ancano walked into his quarters and discovered to his rapid shock that he was no longer alone.

The black clad invader froze while riffling through his desk, and they looked upon each other for a moment in dead silence. His thoughts stuttered in a slurry of surprised fatigue.

_Forgot to reset my personal wards after Dotta barged in. Damn._

Then, almost as if prompted by some unspoken signal, they both moved.

He summoned fire on his right, with jets of electricity tingling in his left palm, and he let it fly as the intruder pulled a wickedly curved Daedric dagger from a thigh sheath and crouched low, nimbly ducking and rolling beneath his first fireblast.

Waving the blade in a dizzying formation meant to trick the eye, the intruder scurried away, dodging as he cast spell after spell, hissing in frustration...for the action had stirred up a stray gust of air, _no_, a breeze from the now-open window, battered by the wind upon its abused hinges.

How this would-be thief had climbed up the sheer, nearly featureless tower to invade his privacy was something he would have to mull over later.

He watched in horror as the gust of air surged from the high currents outside straight into his chambers. Knocking over potted plants; taking half of the ink, quills and scrolls with it as parchments and books piled upon his desk slipped off and spread in a nihilistic array of chaos all over his floors.

-Creating an absolutely nightmarish snarl of busywork. A task that he was sure would take absolute _days_ to replace and properly sort.

“Oops,” came a muffled snigger. The pinpoint eyes behind the smothering black cowl twinkled brightly. “Sorry about the mess, Archmage.”

One black boot trod intentionally upon a scroll. Smashing it flat. “Better take care. Don’t wanna mess up something important.”
An expletive laden oath that Dotta would definitely have needed a translation for slipped past his lips.

When he regained control of his speech, he quietly swore, “The only picking up I am about to do will be to send you flying from the top of my tower…” He quickly added, “bitch,” because somehow he was sure that the figure cloaked beneath so much stealthy black was feminine in form, if not in deed.

An amused chuckle came from beneath the hood. He watched in avid fury as it puffed out with her words. “No need for name calling. Try to get rid of me if you can, but I would argue that it doesn’t have to come to that.”

“Truly.”

“Aye, truly. I can play nice.”

He slid his right foot forward. Preparing to spellcast, for the longer they gabbled on about tedious mundanities instead of fighting, the better he would grasp the measure of her.

-And swiftly punt her out into Winterhold’s version of a prison oubliette, aptly named ‘The Chill.’

*Let us see how her clever quips suit against Frost Atronachs.* “Perhaps I was incorrect in my initial estimation of you, thief. Though I rather doubt it.”

“Such faith! Almost, I’d take you for the religious sort.”

“I.Indeed. Enlighten me.”

“Heh.” The invader’s dagger hovered, then lowered to rest at her thigh. “Fine. All I want are Enthir’s things, golden boy. And then I shall be on my merry way.”

*Enthir?* The name eluded him, but then it all snapped back together. “That Bosmer is long dead, and his effects already distributed according to his last testament and will, save for some journals and documents that would be of little interest to one such as you.”

“Shame. Still…”

Her free hand slipped into a pouch upon her side, and Ancano gasped instinctively; choking as he inhaled the cloud of pale shimmering dust that was thrown upon him.

Quicker than a snuffed out candle, his spells were extinguished. He found himself slipping bonelessly to the floor, unable to do more than raggedly wheeze.

He could not cry out. He could not will himself to move, save to twitch like a landed histcarp upon the cold stone floor.

Black boots whispered noiselessly towards him, paused, and then pivoted towards his shelves. “-Gotta have a look around. No, don’t get up…I’ll help myself.”

Ancano found himself barely capable of grinding his teeth, much less launching a counterattack as
the thief rapidly searched through dresser drawers and closets. She casually pocketed a soul gem here and a coin purse there, causing him to renew his struggles when he saw how she trampled over plants and priceless books alike in her dogged investigation of his quarters.

No matter how he tried, he could do little more than breathe against the magic dispelling paralytic he had so cunningly been given; willing himself at least to continue breathing as he watched the intruder systematically tear apart his belongings. *What could be so important?* He had hardly known Enthir in life, and the glib Bosmer had carried whatever secrets that might have been interesting beyond his death.

For assuredly, he had looked. Aside from some musty tomes and half-scribbled translations concerning Falmer, Dwemer and the ancient extinct Snow Elves, what could she possibly find that would be of use to a thief?

After what felt like an age, she returned to him. Grasping him beneath the shoulders, he felt himself being pulled, his limp body squashing the painstakingly tended garden as she roughly dragged him along. Finally she sat him up and began to bind his arms behind the single tree that provided the focal point for his greenhouse.

His fingers spasmed, and Ancano willed his face to remain expressionless—hoping the thief did not notice that he was regaining some utility of movement. Whatever she had given him had a limited time of efficacy. Surely it would begin to wear off.

Helpless to effect any sort of escape for now, Ancano chose instead to focus upon the woman’s dusk black armor, following the tracery of ergonomic lines as he attempted to place the origin of its making. The armor—and that face concealing cowl—were unfamiliar to him.

Though the woman’s voice tickled at the back of his mind. Tugging at a concealed half-memory.

“Righto, Archmage.” What felt like rope was rapidly spooled around his wrists as his fingers were tucked tight within the bindings. The woman’s muffled voice was nearly cheerful. “Can’t find Enthir’s things, so it looks like you’re gonna have to tell me where they are.”

*Or else,* hovered in the air between them, and Ancano gagged as the air dropped out of his lungs. Compelled by the weight of the woman; as she sat down abruptly upon his lap and lower abdomen. Spreading her legs to encompass the breadth of his thighs….his discomfort gaining new, unforeseen heights as she adjusted her perch.

“Who wishes to know?” His voice, when he could manage to speak, was a bare whisper.

Leather creaked as the woman leaned even further into Ancano’s personal space. Tugging the black cowled hood away, Ancano felt paralyzed anew as a fall of hair fell in a glorious fiery-red tangle, framing a pale familiar face. “I do.”

It was the woman from the coronation. The noble maid in rags.

*Shit.*

“Remember me? You managed to gain the upper hand last time,” the woman drawled with
nonchalance, “but I must say I hold the advantage now. So...tell me where Enthir’s junk is, and I’ll let you live. More or less unmolested.”

“Still intent on seduction, Nord?” Ancano rasped, testing his binds. The little minx had some skill with knots. “I am afraid you will enjoy precious little success.”

A throaty laugh. “Sex is fun, but unfortunately akin to a festival game. Pretty damn useless without a prize to show for it. Now,” she drew herself upwards, pressing her thighs even tighter against his own. Her luscious mouth set into a flinty line. “Talk.”

“You try my patience with your primitive blustering and inane questions.” Gods, the straddle of her armor was riding his nethers, and he felt himself growing unexpectedly rigid.

He sent up a rather inelegant prayer to Phynaster that the hardness of her armor would not allow her to feel him. Her weight felt unaccountably good, but he had great practice in ignoring such feelings, and he relied upon that experience now.

Instead, he strove to reach the blunted might of his magicka; to light a fire with his hands. All the while beseeching his gods that she would not see; could not smell the smoke that would inevitably rise as he roasted his bonds. That she would not sense the ridge of his manhood, riding the seams of her tight leather pants, and thus find further ways to taunt him.

It was shameful enough that he had been caught in such a foolhardy position as this. He tried again to break free, and managed only the barest wriggle.

“Release me. Now, before I summon the other occupants of this tower.”

“Perhaps I was incorrect in my initial assessment of you.” She mockingly repeated his earlier words, rocking back as she lifted up her daedric dagger. He gave the dagger his full attention as the tip hovered over his pulse point.

He managed one quick swallow before the tip pressed into his skin. She lifted the knife, watching him as he watched the ruby bead of his blood sit poised upon the sharp edge. Finally it fell, splatting onto the dirt beneath them.

Ancano cleared his throat. He could not fail at this game, and he did not care for her charms.

No matter what his baser instincts screamed for him to do to this uppity bitch, the Thalmor agent would maintain his self control. Dignity, to the last.

“Primitive is as primitive does, and bawling for help sounds pretty god damned archaic for you. Whatever happened to bargaining, golden boy?”

Ancano looked away from those determined eyes, absently noting the white sliced scar upon her cheek. His words came at last, reluctantly. “Release me, and I will search Enthir’s belongings for that which you seek.”

“Mmm.” Her knife lowered. “But that means I would have to let you go.”

“That is the most common interpretation of the term.”

“But why? I like you right where you are.” Her thighs flexed, drawing them even closer together.
Ancano fixed his sight upon an old cobweb in the rafters. He would not beg. He had been through far worse torments, these last few centuries.

He would not beg. “I will allow you, whoever you are, to leave, and you will owe me a favor of my choosing at some point in the future. Does that not agree with you?”

“Oh no, no no, snowylocks. That won’t work at all. You can tell me here and now where Enthir’s shit is, and I’ll search it myself.” The woman purred.

“Then maybe…if I like what I find…I will loosen these ropes and we can go our separate ways, with all this no more than a pleasant memory. It’s the least I can do. If you choose to cooperate.”

Her knees locked into place on either side of his hips, and Ancano nearly bit off his tongue when she rolled against him. Once, twice; three times a charm, and he felt himself stiffen even further.

“No deal,” he hissed. “Get out, before the other mages begin to wonder why I cast offensive spells at such a late hour.”

“If anyone was going to come to your rescue, Archmage, they would have shown up by now.”

“You cannot know that.”

And damn if he did not sound outright desperate. He gave another futile tug at his bonds, ruing that his fingers had been so tightly restrained. He could manage a little fire, now, though it would take some time to smolder through the ropes. Restrained as he was. The powder she had attacked him with must have been expertly mixed, for so slow was the release of his magic from its dispelling effect that he wondered again just what flavor of thief this mystery woman was.

Not an assassin. Not Thieves’ Guild - not with that armor, black as pitch.

Just who was she?

The hand not holding the knife gripped his hair, lifting his head. She spoke quietly, yet with a guarded menace. Her eyes were fathomless pools.

“Last chance, sweetheart.”

He remained silent, until she raised her knife to touch his left earlobe. “Fine. I know some Stormcloaks who would pay hard cash for ears like these…”

“The lockbox!” Ancano squeezed his eyes shut, not wishing to see her triumphant gaze. “Second lockbox on the third shelf, on the bookcase containing the volumes on Dwemer histories. Though I cannot imagine what purpose you may find for such documents. They are hardly treasure maps.”

The weight eased off as she stood. He sucked in air replete with defeat and the sensation of danger, narrowly averted. “Many thanks, Mer. Now, was that so hard?”

Yes, he silently sulked.

Ancano watched as she sauntered off to the bookcase, willing his hands to break free. Wisps of
smoke drifted into his nostrils, and for the next few moments he concentrated on burning through the ropes, listening as the nameless thief tried and repeatedly failed to pick the master lock. Trying to ignore the roundness of her rear lifted up like an offering as she knelt before his bookcase, quelling laughter as she cussed in several languages both Man and Mer at the elusive lockbox bolt.

He did not notice her arse. He would not look.

Ping after ping, her broken lockpicks clattered against the floor, and he managed to wrench half of his left hand free, wincing at the burns before she returned to him with a face dark as thunder. Her fingers yanked his head back by the hair again, ungentle.

“The lockbox needs a key. Where is it?”

He smiled at her frustration. “Having some trouble? I am not surprised. Your people can be so...heavyhanded.”

She hit him. Not with the open flat of her palm, but with a closed fist.

That hurt. Blood dribbled from his nose into his open mouth. “And again we see the crude foundation that is the fallback of a lesser race,” he told her. Relishing the way her nostrils flared. “Use me as your punching bag, Nord, and I assure you. Someone will hear us.”

“Afraid of a bit of tough love? You elves have less starch than a wet rope.”

Her hand tightened upon his hair, and he set his jaw, preparing for her next swing. Not long now. If he could but bear the pain of the burning cords a bit more...

“Where’s the key, Ancano!”

Ancano delicately licked his lower lip, tasting blood. “I cannot remember.”

She gave him a shake, her right fist drawn back as if to punch him again. “Where’s the key!”

“Won’t tell.”

He thought she might actually strangle him this time, but then the woman let go, sitting back against her heels, and for a time they stared at one another. He swiftly extinguished the flames smoldering at his fingertips; unwilling to risk his imminent freedom.

Just as the silence was becoming difficult to ignore, the thief released one of those husky chuckles Ancano was beginning to dread.

“Tell you what. Change of plans. Let’s have a little wager, you and I.”

The Nord leaned over. So close he could see himself reflected in the pupils of her eyes. Her breath smelt like apples and ale, hot and sweet.

Her breath blew over him now, a faint perfume. “I bet you that I can make you beg, Archmage Ancano. Beg me to end it; to tell me everything and anything I wish to hear. Including where that Shor-forsaken key of yours is hiding.”
She chucked him under the chin with the tip of her finger. “What say you to that?”

His lips impulsively twisted into a sneer, and he thought she might have grinned, though he dared not look down at her mouth, if she was inferring what he dared to imagine.

“If I win, you give me the key and I leave you alone. If you win…” she trailed off suggestively.

“-Then I hurl you and your plump arse into jail.” Ancano said tightly.

“Plump? Flatterer.” She shrugged. “Fair enough.”

Leaning over on all fours and lowering herself upon him until he could barely breathe, she molded her lips to his and began to kiss him. Ardently.

He lay under her like a bent board, refusing to comply. Her teeth nibbled at his lower lip, nudging at his tongue with a lick from her own.

It was intolerable.

Working his hands free, Ancano endured as the thief crooned, gasped, and made all manner of outlandishly provocative sounds that would have made Sanguine weep.

“Your trickery will not work on me, Nord.” he uttered through teeth snapped shut, truly annoyed as she giggled and unwrapped his robes, exposing his chest. Her questing hands made him jerk, tracing circles over his flat nipples, and he pulled away as she cupped the hard line of his cheek. “Give up and I will be mercif-”

Her finger stroked the edge of his ear.

Ancano drew in a breath, for it felt as though he had been shot with an arrow through the heart.

Just the edge of it was all she touched. The thinnest part, the tip, which happened to be the most finely fleshed and sensitive part of a male Altmer’s anatomy, save one. And the desire; that damned elusive siren that he had kept successfully banked since the death of his wife roared awake. Soaring into a demanding inferno - a phoenix with blade pinioned wings.

He uttered a deep groan, more pained than pleased.

The red headed daedra stopped cooing and looked at him in surprise. “Ooh. Do that again.”

“When Oblivion freezes over,” he managed to bite out, working his fingers from the rope. *Almost there*. His left hand was nearly free!

Anger was eaten away as she replaced her mouth upon his, the kiss somehow more distracting than it had been before, and his entire body seized when he felt her hands...both of them, this time...caressing his ears. From lobe to tapering tip.

The fire sapped away his resolve.

With every touch, he burned.
“That’s right, golden boy.” she crooned into his lips as he began to utter stilted, guttering gasps. Writhing in the acute, all-encompassing pleasure of her touch. “Who’s the superior race now? Where’s that goddamned key?”

This was nought more than another fight, Ancano realizes. A spar without words.

She expected him to falter, to back down like the weakling mage her race imagined his kind to be, as when she had stomped her way free from him in Solitude. The way she expected him to give way in the Blue Palace servant’s quarters, when she had collapsed into him, and not the other way around. The way she expected him to bow before her now, in his very own tower.

But he, Ancano of Auridon, was no weakling. He had survived the Oblivion Crisis, countless wars and insurrections, had managed to avoid the perils of courtly intrigue, assassinations, and attack by the vile beasts and bestial men of this frigid frontier. He would not falter, and he certainly would not back down.

He returned her kiss, instead.

Pulling his left hand away, finally free, Ancano thrust his fingers into the mass of her fiery hair and pulled her to him. Kissing her so violently that their teeth clack together...delving his tongue into her open mouth, tasting her, for now it is her turn to gasp. Her turn to be handled. Her turn to beg.

He feels her surprise, her sudden uncertainty, and she retreats...falling back as he sits up, all the better to pursue as his other hand wrenches away from his bonds, burnt flesh healing with a stray thought as his focus narrows into one woman. One goal.

And somehow, Dotta’s words echo, rattling in the recesses of his anger. Just enough to blunt his lust. Milkdrinker. Weakling.

You elves have less starch than a wet rope.

The room becomes hot as Ancano matches the thief move for move, giving back everything she had heaped upon him. She reaches for her knife, he distracts her by squeezing the cup of her breast. He grabs her waist, and nearly swallows her tongue when she releases a desperate moan.

It feels phenomenal, and he silently swears that he will draw every bead of sweat from that strange, human-pale skin before he surrenders the fight.

Thoughts flee like shadows as they wrestle for control. She tops him; his superior length dwarfs her. There are flames building deep beneath the surface, ones that make him grind against her palm, even as she hooks her leg around his knee.

He is nearly there...has nearly brought her to the brink, for he can see the wanton desperation clear in
her face - this Nord, at least, is not impervious to the attraction of the Mer race- and it matches his own, nearly there...just one more twist of his wrist...but then, he is flung without ceremony out away from her, and into the cold.

“Ancano? Look out! You get offa him now!”

The Archmage blinks stupidly as his young ward sends lightning bolt after firebolt, scarring the stone flagged floors. Her aim is awful. One spell sets fire to the wooden beams of the tower, and he easily flicks a gush of water to quell it.

His beautiful thief has a red face to match that unruly mane of hair, and Ancano reaches out instinctively as she screams, staggers. Is hit by one of Dotta’s errant blasts; frost and cold.

-Yet she manages to lunge, grabs the lockbox from the bookshelf...and then with a single, enigmatic glance back at him, she hurls herself out from his window.

Out into the nothingness of space.

“Ancano! Did ya see!? I got her!” Dotta’s ecstatic face fills his vision, and he cannot help but groan. “Who was she, and why was she attacking you? Papa, why’re yer hands so burnt? An’ why’re you so outta breath? Weren’cha going to bed? Huh? I heard noises an’ yelling, so I came running!”

Standing wearily, Ancano shuts out the incessant questioning of his foster daughter and manages to stand. Placing one foot in front of the other, the Altmer gathers enough stamina to properly fasten his robe before looking outside the open window.

Far down...so far that the ocean waves look like the rippling of a pond, the thief jumps from a rope into a boat moored at the base of the tower. Ancano blinks, peering at the handholds that have been driven into the stone walls of Winterhold’s highest tower, and laughs when he realizes that they are crossbow bolts.

Bolts that have ropes fastened at random intervals...fail safes in case a rope used while climbing should shear. Clever girl.

Boat and woman are tiny as toys, and he feels a splendid disconnection from reality as they move, paddling with his lockbox towards a far off shore.

He looks to see if she will look back at him again, straining his eyesight. He wishes she would look back. The wind bites into the exposed skin of his chest, and his teeth are strangely dry - he is smiling.

This will not do. Ancano sternly wills his mouth to cease such foolishness. Immediately.

When he turns to look down at Dotta, registering that she has at last called him ‘Papa,’ he is greeted with both innocence and a frown.

“You’re awful silly, Papa. Playing with fire like that after our lesson...aren’cha afraid of gettin’ burned?”
He pats her head, and then moves to close the window. “Something like that.”

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It’s dark and cold and he’s got a fucking miserable pounder of a headache, but Farkas eventually woke up from the blackness dragging him down.

Fighting it back, he wrinkles his nose at the disgusting taste in his mouth, rotten and old, and then he sneezes. Because for some fucking reason, he’s got hay in his nose, and what’s worse, he’s laying in it. Laying in wet, shit and piss stained hay. Not his nice comfy bed back at Jorrvaskr, not at camp with his dollface and her angry cousin…

_Huh. This ain’t no barn. He sniffs. Not a stable, either._

Creasing his eyes open, he pretends to be out of it as he steals a look at his new digs. Stone walls, dirt floor, an unused bucket, metal bars…

_Well, horkershit. I’m in prison._

Thinking hard and fast, the Companion pushes himself up from the pile of hay he had been sprawled in for gods only knew how long. He couldn’t...couldn’t quite remember what he had been doing, before. Whatever had landed him in jail, and a shitty jail at that. The kinda jail that debt dodgers and child molesters got thrown into, where the key got thrown away and forgot.

_Ugh. He snorted at the smell of himself, like a muckheap and cesspool rolled into one. Rubbing his neck where it was sore, he got a whiff of something else, too, and his anger deepened._

Nightshade, silver extract, wolfsbane. Someone had drugged him, and drugged him up good.

And by the stench of it, he’d been out a damn long time. He didn’t know what day it was, much less where his ass was planted or why. *Shit. This is bad._

A lithe figure walked in front of his jail cell, and he tensed, ready to spring. Her shadowed shape - but mostly her smell, wildflowers and leather oil - made him relax. Even though there was just a single torch lit, his wolf eyes and nose allowed him to know what no mere man could make out.

It was Aela.

He was saved.

“Good morning, ice-brain.” His Shield-Sister greeted him smoothly. “Finally, you decided to grace us with your presence.”

“Think I’m gettin’ tired of laying around,” Farkas replied in kind, flexing. Testing what remained of
his strength. A good meal, a good bath, with my armor and sword, wherever the fuck these milkdrinkers stowed ‘em...yeah. I’ll be fine.

His knees wobbled, but with a quick shove against the wall he managed to stay standing. “From what I think I remember, you knocked me out and dragged me away from a job. Wanna tell me why?”

Her green eyes were inscrutable. “Tried to save you. Sorry.”

He wasn’t expecting an apology, and it worried him. More anger coiled up from its hidden place, where his wolf bided its time. He didn't use to be so angry. That used to be Vilkas's thing.

Used to be.

“Don’t think you were in the right this time, Aela. What I was doing was good. It was important. I-”

“Say no more,” She interrupted. The leather straps of her armor creaked as she turned, and to his shock she gave a deep bow.

That bow, and the anxiety and concern wafting his way, caused Farkas to clamp down upon his tongue...giving him pause to what he had been about to say. Or scream.

“Here is Farkas, my Shield-Brother in honor. He will answer your questions.”

Aela moved briefly out of sight and returned, dragging with her a wooden stool. She placed it in front of his barred cage and then took a step back, folding her arms. Farkas waited with his hands loose, relaxed at his sides for whatever would happen.

Keeping his limbs relaxed was important. Meant he could move in any direction, take whatever shit they wanted to throw at him.

Whatever he had expected, Ulfric Stormcloak showed up instead.

*High King Ulfric Stormcloak*, Farkas corrected his thoughts. Locking away the part of him that wanted to reach out beyond the bars and rip the fucker’s face off and eat it, he schooled his features into polite blankness as the man sat himself heavily down upon the stool.

It must be good to be the King. The former rebel Jarl was decked out head to toe in velvets and fur-trimmed silks, but since Farkas had seen him last Ulfric’s face had gained new lines carved into the furrows of forehead and jaw, almost concealed by a reddish gold beard.

But those glacier-cold blue eyes still had that same eldritch quality. As if he could lay Farkas’ soul bare just with one look. As if he could see right through the flimsy sackcloth they had dressed him in, strip open the skin and flay Farkas open to the heart...tearing apart all the tenderness. Penetrating right to his feelings for his wife; the Dragonborn that had once been this man’s secret love.

Maybe the King didn’t know that Nemain was alive.

*Well. Sort of.*
Fear made Farkas stand tall. Caution froze his words to ice, sliding down the back of his throat. Swallowed before they could be spoken.

No. Nemain was his. His sweet doll, his wife. His own. Farkas allowed himself to tighten his fists. And I’ll be a fucking dead bastard if the King decides he don’t like it.

“Farkas.”

He dipped his head. Just the barest bow, a sop to formality. “King Ulfric.”

Those blue eyes fixed him in place. More solid than irons. “My spies tell me you were captured escorting a Forsworn and his undead thrall across the border to Markarth.”

He didn’t know. Farkas tried not to relax, to reveal any shred of happiness or guilt that this man didn’t know a god damn thing about the woman they both loved. “Yeah. I was on a job. Mind tellin’ me why I got pulled off of it so fast?”

Aela spoke next, her gaze furtively stealing back and forth between him and the King seated on a wobbling stool in a jail. “Your Highness, my Shield-Brother was...not aware of the embargo placed upon the western border at your command.”

“Oh?” The King’s mouth curled a bit. “That is interesting. I thought nearly everyone in Skyrim had been notified by town crier and courier that the western border and the northern wilds were strictly off limits.” His fingers tapped a soundless rhythm. “Even to merchants and sellswords.”

“He is fairly dense, my King.” Aela murmured. “I beg your indulgence on his behalf. I cannot imagine that he acted out of treasonous intent.”

Allowing his shoulders to hunch in slightly, Farkas tried his best to look dumb. And slightly bewildered, like that cow that had got loose from the Grey-Mane’s field and had wandered into Kynareth’s temple...as though he hadn’t the slightest clue where he was, and couldn’t imagine even the word ‘treason’ to ever cross his mind, much less his lips.

He raised his hands in supplication. “My King, it was just a job. Folk in need of protecting for gold. I didn’t think...I had no idea…”

Ulfric’s eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline. “You didn’t know?”

His voice was deceptively calm, with daggers waiting beneath the untroubled surface of that calm. “You were unaware that you were escorting two Forsworn through a battlefield, through hostile enemy territory into a city that has been undercut by unrest for decades? It simply escaped your mind? And it did not occur to you that the one who had been raised as an undead thrall could have protected its master sufficiently well without your swordarm, Companion?”

“Heh.” He scratched his head, and was rewarded with a handful of nits. “Must’ve needed more muscle than some dead bodyguard,” he hastily added, “uh, my King.”

Ulfric stared at him some more, his face remote. Then he turned towards Aela, who stood at attention. “Aela. Explain to him why he is here.”

“Yes, your Highness.” His Shield-Sister executed a perfect about face and looked at him, her face finally cracking with emotion. “Brother, our King has need of your skills. Our skills...our swords and shields bared in combat for our country. This is important, you ingrate, so listen well. We-”
Ulfric cut her off, her mouth snapping shut as she gave him her trademarked gimlet glare. He could nearly hear her voice in his thoughts, slapping him around.

*Listen well, you idiot, and we might just make it out of here alive and rich to boot.*

“Your Shield-Sister is correct,” Ulfric said smoothly, standing from his stool with an ease that Farkas envied. He felt weak as the runt of Jarl Balgruuf’s prized bitch’s litter. Wobbling all over the damn place.

“The war is over, and the mass majority of my army has returned to their flocks and fields. This is normal and necessary. Fields must be replanted, trade must be resumed; yet we are a newly fledged nation…and so, we are vulnerable in this, our time of rebirth.”

The King began to pace as he talked. Farkas watched him go, and so did Aela, her eyes bright with something the Companion did not like. “While the conflict at large has been concluded, I find that I am in need of experienced help.”

“What kinda help, exactly?”

“Skilled soldiers.” Ulfric stopped in his paces directly before Farkas, and for a moment the werewolf could see the warrior that still lurked within the finery of a King. “I need soldiers, Farkas, to send out in small covert groups to divert attacks, spy upon our enemy’s plans and carry out direct orders. I would use the Companions for such a purpose...if you would but agree to my terms.”

“What are your terms?” Aela questioned, clearly at odds with herself.

Farkas breathed in and out, willing himself to remain calm. To look like the idiot Aela had brashly declared him to be; giving him a reason to blank out all emotion at the King’s words.

“You will do what I say, when I say it, without question.” Ulfric Stormcloak smiled, though there was little humor in it. “We have won the war, but lost two Holds. Markarth and Winterhold; they are heavy losses indeed. I aim to gather them back to the fold, shore up our borders as best we are able, root out any insurrections from those still loyal to the Empire within our lands, and occasionally, send out a fist of Stormcloaks.” he nodded “-under your capable direction to perform certain tasks as I deem necessary.”

“I will call upon you often and in excess of doubling your current fee, along with covering any costs you may have regarding supplies or transportation. And on your end…” Farkas felt the weight of Ulfric’s regard rest heavily upon him. “I will expect you to be loyal sons and daughters of Skyrim.”

“You will obey my orders to the letter, with no delay or obfuscation of my original intent. You will speak of your tasks to no one save each other, and any other Shield Siblings you deem capably responsible. And I mean it. Not a word to your spouses, your lovers…I ask that you do not so much as write your experiences down upon paper where prying eyes may see.”

“We understand, my King.” Aela said. “Your orders are for our eyes only, and will be burned shortly after being read.”

“I’m glad we are of one mind on this. Do you find these terms acceptable, Aela?” At her hasty nod he turned towards the Companion in the cage.

“...Farkas?”
He had to think about it. He wanted more time to think, to really work out the ramifications of taking this on while being married to what amounted to a Forsworn deserter of the Stormcloak army and more, but Farkas wasn’t *that* dense.

He figured the King wanted an answer, sooner than later. “What about our jobs with Jorrvaskr?”

“You may still attend to them, when not occupied by my commands. My orders, naturally, will take precedence.”

Farkas thought about that, sucking at his lower lip. “Gotta choose who I fight with. Ain’t no way I’m gonna be saddled with some milkdrinker what can barely lift an axe.”

The King gave him a sharp nod. “That will not happen. You may veto your subordinates as necessary. I’d actually prefer you both handpick your individual teams.” The King shrugged, exhaustion apparent in his face, and for a brief moment Farkas almost imagined him to be a mere man. A mortal, just like them. “Battles are won by brothers in arms who bear one another’s trust, as well as their blades.”

But the impression faded away when Farkas asked another question. “How many men are ya gonna throw at the Forsworn, King Ulfric? Or at the College? Nobody cares much for them mages anyhow. Seems like an awful waste.”

Aela interjected before the King could open his mouth. “Forgive him, my King. Farkas is—” she shot him a chastising look “—unaware that your Majesty was close friends with the former Jarl of Winterhold, Jarl Korir and his wife and child, Assur and Thaena.”

Farkas felt some sympathy. He knew now from watching Nemain how bad it felt, wanting to go home, but being afraid of it all the same. “Sorry to hear that. They waitin’ to go back to Winterhold? Maybe the Archmage can be reasoned with.”

The King’s face did not move. “They are dead.”

“Oh.”

“And concerning the West Wold,” Aela said, carefully changing the subject, “his Highness has shared some of his plans with me. He does not appear to be in favor of pitched battle so much as striking hard and fast from a place of fortification.”

Reading between the lines, Farkas blinked once to show Aela that he understood. His Shield Sister was trying to reassure him the best way she knew how...for whatever reason she could imagine that he held feelings of some sort for the Forsworn.

She was a good woman. “Yeah. So...in and out, just like that.”

“Just like that.”

Farkas thought a bit longer. “The smart thing to do, if ya really want to keep people out or in, is to build a wall. You gonna build a wall?”

Ulfric’s smile was steel. “If I have to.”

“If we do our jobs right,” Aela retorted, obviously exasperated, “Then there won’t be any need for a Shor-blessed wall. For Kyne’s sake, hold your tongue until only sense rolls off of it.”
“Aw shit, Aela, y’know I don’t mean nothing bad.”

The King’s face had finally thawed with a degree of emotion: amusement. He gestured towards Farkas in his cage with a final sweep of his hand. “I will do what is necessary to secure our land and people’s safety, gods be willing. And if the People of the Reach are willing to talk in conference and not simply react with further killing, I will stay my ire. I am not needlessly cruel, Farkas. I wish for peace in Skyrim as much as any Nord.”

“But…” The King rubbed at his beard, solemn once more. “-If either of you have certain…emotional attachments that would divide your motivation upon a task I set you, please. Give it to another. And do me due courtesy in explaining why.”

*Attachments.*

It touched a nerve. The King’s probing comment was far too close to the truth, and Farkas shifted upon the balls of his feet. Aching to run, to flee, or to fight. He wanted Nemain; wanted to be sure she was safe, back in Markarth, and not strung up on some Forsworn fire. He wanted to be back in Jorrvaskr with her curled up in his arms, warm by the fire and full of ale and meat, shit, he wanted his brother alive and laughing. *I want lots of things.*

*Looks like I might get one thing, at least. Huh. Fancy that.*

“So, uh. We free to go now, or what?”

Ulfric chuckled wearily and tapped upon the bars of the cage. A guard hurried forward and unlocked the door. “You are free to leave. You are no traitor, Farkas of Jorrvaskr.”

He caught one of Farkas’ arms as he sidled sideways through the door, bending his head to fit beneath the mantel. “And despite your performance, I think you are no fool.” His blue eyes bore into Farkas’ own.

“Rather the opposite, in fact.”

It was a threat.

Though it was couched in velvet-wrapped manners, the King had threatened him. Had seen through his act, knew that something was kept concealed. Lied about. Though he couldn't imagine how - the King was no werewolf. Had no nose for smelling lies, or feeling a heartbeat when it sped up under stress. How?

And if he distrusted Farkas’ performance, then he would want to find out why, and that could lead him to Markarth, and the job that was really all about escorting Nemain, and then…

And then that would be bad. Really bad. *How could the fucker know I was lying through my teeth?*

Farkas breathed deeply; nails pricking into pinpoints. Ready to become claws.

Aela cleared her throat and uncrossed her arms. “Your Highness, my Shield-Brother has been
brought here under great strain and captivity. At your leave, I will lead him to his rest.”

The King turned, distracted by the footsteps of his Steward, who promptly handed him a scroll. He unwrapped it and began reading as he walked, waving them along. “Of course. Relax, you have earned it. We will meet again soon, Companions.”

They followed the King and his steadily growing retinue up the mold-slick stairs, up, up, up until Farkas suddenly balked. Shying away from the blinding, brilliant sunlight. Too much light. Light that gradually became the massive bowl of the docks near Solitude, for the cramped stairway had let them out a hidden door concealed beneath the towering bridge that bore the bulk of Skyrim’s capital city.

Farkas breathed deeply of the fishy salt-and-marsh air, feeling Aela brush up beside him in concern. He gave her his best cocky, shit-eating grin, and was rewarded with a shy version in turn.

He would forgive her...this time.

“Hey, High King.” Farkas called out. King Ulfric turned around, his servants and guards milling about him nervously, like ribbons cast into the wind.

Aela pawed at him, hissing at him to shut up, but he ignored her. “How will ya keep people from going back and forth from, uh, from your lost Holds in the meantime?”

“The ban on travelling to hostile kingdoms remains in force, until I have reason to rescind it.”

Apparently uncaring of saltwater ruining his fine leather boots, Ulfric slogged towards them, his face plainly curious. “Why? You lose something, soldier?”

Or someone. “Naw. One of my jobs...sometimes I gotta be a courier and deliver papers to dangerous places. Books, letters…” he coughed suddenly as he felt a blush rise up in his cheeks.

“-Divorce papers. Uh, you wouldn’t happen to know where a man could get a hold of a writ of divorce, could ya?”

“I knew it! You dumbass!” Aela shrieked, and all men within earshot winced.

She began hitting him with her curled up fists. But Farkas wasn’t worried. If she had really wanted to hurt him, she would have used her claws.

And maybe her teeth. “You went and got married by accident, didn’t you?! I swear, Farkas, you are dumber than a sack of sodding rocks sometimes and just as useless! That poor girl! Is she with child?! No wonder she wants a bloody divorce, if it means a lifetime stuck with the likes of you!”

Someone snorted back a laugh. Aela tore away from him and began muttering to herself viciously as Farkas stood up straight again, recovering from the rapid rush of her assault.

The King, he noticed with a jolt of surprise, was now standing in front of him along with his whispering retinue. Looking intensely amused. “Who is the divorce for? Is it for you?”

Farkas nodded, shaken.

“A bad marriage?” Ulfric’s voice was casual. Offhand. “Does she beat you often? Steal your drinking money? Sleep with your best friend, or even better: refuse your bed?”
The laughter that had so far been smothered grew to a smattering of knowing chuckles.

“Nothing so bad as that,” Farkas managed to respond, incredulous that this conversation was even happening.

He kinda wished it wasn’t. “I just...I gotta give her the choice, that’s all. Our wedding, it...uh. It happened when we were both drunk as shit. She’s mad about that. Wanted the, uh, the whole ceremony with her friends and stuff. Family, flowers. The works.” Which was still better than the ugly truth.

“So, you fucked up.”

“Yeah.” Farkas hung his head and managed to look contrite. “I really fucked up, and now she wants out. Could really use your help, here.”

“You really are not very bright. Are you.”

He exhaled with a rush. “No sir, I am not.”

The King’s lip curled, contorted, and finally became a reluctant smile. “You have my sympathies, son. Here,” he snapped his fingers and his steward appeared like a djinn. Ink, quill and parchment in hand.

Farkas stared, slack jawed as the King of Skyrim scrawled something and then finally handed him a writ of divorce, written in a formal style of calligraphy and carefully sanded dry and sealed with a fine silk ribbon.

“Now these aren’t exactly party favors, Companion. Take good care of it. And likely the Temple of Mara will want to have words with the both of you.”

“But, as far as legal matters go, if you can get your woman to sign this parchment, and you sign it then yourself...you both will be free and clear, until such time as you decide to re-enter the state of blissful matrimony.”

“Thank you, my King.” He cradled the paper carefully in his filthy hands, unwilling to stain it. This shit’s getting too crazy, even for me. His head hurt, the headache renewed by the bright shot of sunshine after so much gloom, and Farkas peered up at the sun and the King.

He was pretty sure both were smiling. Gotta go hit something, or talk to someone. Do something that makes sense. “So, uh. Yeah. Thanks again. I’ll be ready in a few days or so to do, uh, whatever the f- I mean, whatever you want. Just uh, let Aela know.”

The woman in question had gotten over her snit and was now stalking over, murder apparently on her mind. He’d better get going. Before the she-wolf could launch her own inquisition of where he had been for the last few months and why.

Farkas sighed. He owed her some stories. He owed her some of his time, period. She had grieved, too, for those that had been lost at Jorrvaskr, and had grieved without him there to help her. Her Shield-Brother.

He should have been there, at the Hall of Jorrvaskr. He shouldn’t have left alone; should have asked
if she wanted to go kill some of the Silver-Hand, too...but at the time Skjor had shaken his head no. And he had been too numb; too god damn dead inside from grief to question otherwise.

Perhaps now, they would be ready to talk about those who had passed on. About Vilkas, and Kodlak, and the many others they had lost to the sword and the bow.

Farkas closed his eyes. Perhaps they could drink some mead together and laugh about the good times, remember the good things without thinking too much about the fucking bad.

*Though,* he thought sadly, he would probably have to lie a lot about the best parts of his stories. And so goddamn much of his future depended on the woman he had been forced by Aela’s dirty tricks to leave...so much depended on this roll of pretty paper getting all smudged and dirty in his hands.

Yeah. He was getting good at telling lies, especially to himself.

*Better get used to it.*

“Aela-” He stopped his Shield-Sister before she could begin shrieking at him again. “I’m tired, everything hurts. Please tell me you got my weapons and armor stashed away somewhere, along with a bath, a bed, and a hot meal.”

A range of emotions flitted across her face, until finally it smoothed out into the concern he had so hoped to see. “Of course, Farkas.”

“Now,” she patted his back as they both made their way towards the docks. “Tell me all about your new wife, ice-brain. And for Shor and Kyne's sake, *please* tell me you haven't knocked her up.”

*Small chance of that.* “Sure. Yeah. I mean, no, she's not with child. Lemme eat something, first.”

“You know, it would be within my rights to kick the everloving shit out of you for not inviting me to your wedding. I could have come. Skjor could have come, and the rest of the newbloods. Oblivion take you, I could have even talked you out of it. Saved you the disgrace.”

“Food, Aela. Food first, then we talk.”

“And no lies! You know I always know when you lie, dumbass, so don’t you dare tell me the whopping great falsehoods that you laid upon our King. Honestly, I am amazed he even talked to you outside of your jail cell. Farkas! I am talking to you! Farkas?”

He scratched his head, scowling as a guard muttered under his breath about someone smelling like wet dog.

“Uh...yeah. Bout that...”
Yeah, I made a wall joke! Deal with it! (Any coincidence between Ulfric and certain persons of orange complexion are purely theoretical).

Aela would totally be the annoyingly protective, abusive big sister we all love and hate. I think she gave Vilkas and Farkas just as much hell as they probably gave her.

Yeah, Ancano is still going to be a player in the upcoming story, though I hate to say his romance (while fun) will not be playing the starring role. I just don't have enough time to do them justice, so I will focus on the real power couple here. Heh. Power couple. We'll just see how it all pans out.

For everyone still reading and commenting, bless you. Your comments inspire me to keep writing, even when I feel like tearing my hair out.

In case you were curious, Solveig is seeking the information from Enthir about the Falmer's Eyes (that Thieves Guild quest where they go spelunking, almost get drowned, and get some big ass diamonds). But in my AU, he died, so sexual hijinks ensue.

Also, sorry but not super sorry for all the language. Farkas is a warrior, and soldiers (in my experience) swear all the goddamn time. Ancano, the snooty poof, is a bit more decorous in his language.

Golden boy, haha. I'm not sure if I like that better or worse than snowylocks.

Oh, and I love making Farkas feel super awkward. He's such a rock in the game...you could hit him with, 'oh, and by the way, I'm like really a dragon,' and Farkas will respond with 'You're a strong woman. But I already knew that.” I luvs him.
Lover's Comfort

Chapter Notes

If you're like me and you enjoy folk/tribal tunes, then you probably have already checked out Heilung's new album. If not, listen to it RIGHT NOW. Perfect vibe for Skyrim.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PBo83bPyOE

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was the third week of Rain’s Fall. Nemain, Ard-Banríona an Ruigsinneachd, High Queen of the Reach, sat barefoot in the abandoned apple orchards of Deepwood Vale.

Completely at peace.

She could not see the white petaled flowers that occasionally brushed her cheek with their softness, nor view the green hills layered in their sweet scented cream, as the young orphans described to her with innocent awe. But she could smell their delicate perfume. She could thrust her fingers and toes deep into the life-giving soil, breathe deeply of the spring air...rich upturned earth and tangy juniper sap.

Home! After so many years, she was home, at long last!

A pattering of familiar feet. “Ma! Hey Ma, we got all the roots and greens over by the cliff.”

Aventus was exultant, his voice cracking comically on every other word. “The others want to know what to gather next, but um, if we’re done...can we go swimming?”

“They’ll catch their death. Be the sun shining strong enough fer such things, son?”

The chill of the wind did not bother Nemain unduly, but the children were another story. She remembered what it was to be miserably cold, though the memories became harder to recollect as time continued passing by. Each new day as dark as the last.

“You told me yourself: mountain mist burns off by mid morn, and it’s past noon. It’s sunny! Don’t worry so much!” Aventus responded with the enthusiasm of the young. “We’ve been foraging for hours, and I can’t wait to wash off all this sticky sweat and muck. It’ll feel great!”

The Dragonborn sighed. Not long now, and her foster son would have little interest in playing with bairns or gathering crops with the women.
Sixteen years old. Old enough to be considered a man, and she had noticed the way he tended to linger around the other warriors...especially with Rhys and the orc chieftains. Practicing with blade and bow when he thought she would not notice. Asking to be involved in the hunting, the smithing...begging to be allowed on patrols.

Soon he would be fighting. Fighting, aye, and killing. And though the part of her that was his mother ached like a bruise at the thought, who was she to deny him the honor? Lacking warriors as they lacked nearly everything else?

Nemain dug her heels more firmly into the earth. It had been over a year...nearer to two years since she and Aventus had chanced to meet in Windhelm’s prison cells; since she had gathered the frightened, defiant boy in her arms from the Bloodworks and made him hers.

So long, and now so much had changed. It was enough that Aventus still chose to spend time with her, and she treasured every moment.

“Do ye wish tae go swimming?”

“Aye!”

“Well then!” Nemain replied. “If Rhys and Baz’s lot go with ye and the orphans, I dinnae see why not. I’ll set up a fire for ye tae warm yerselves by; once you be done. Just mind the young ‘uns well. No trying tae fish outside of the shallows dammed up by the rocks...the current be swift and strong there. You hear?”

“Course, Ma. It’s not like we’re gonna go jumping off rocks into the Karth.”

“Smart lad. Go on, then.”

She smiled as she felt his lips peck her cheek, and listened as the young man tore off with a wild whoop; shouting for the others to drop their baskets and run to the river.

This had been a good decision, taking the time to travel north back to her ancestral home. She had spent the last several months on the move; consolidating her rule by visiting the far flung clans and Orc strongholds who were now allied with her, enforcing the edict that all would work. All People of the Reach, diminished as they were, would band together: contributing to the kingdom in whatever way they could...and in return, they would receive both fair wages and victuals according to their labors.

And in return, their voices would be heard in Council. None would be left wanting, so long as no hands remained idle. It was a step in the right direction towards a cohesive Kingdom of the Reach, towards equitable living conditions for all.

Yet it had spawned numerous unforeseen, headache inducing problems.

*The Queen shall but say it, an’ it shall be done,* she thought morosely. *Right.* Nothing was ever so simple. Several of the Folk had resisted - complaining that her laws violated the old ways, their tradition of raiding, of reaping supplies and animals from neighboring clans and Nords by trickery and theft.

Nemain rather thought they were more irritated at being thwarted in carrying out the old grievances of clan blood feuds than in actually pillaging their neighboring residents of Skyrim and Hammerfell, but their reasoning mattered very little to her.
They would heed her words and work, or they would die...*dobbering gits*, even if every man, woman and child in the Reach managed to pull their fair weight and ate only half of what they were greedily gulping down, they still might all die. By famine or by sword.

But she had come this far. She had found a purpose beyond her discreet monthly visits to the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary, and it was in preserving the People of the Reach. Their destruction would not happen while she retained some semblance of control.

Not on her time. Not on her watch.

Cocking her head, the Queen listened intently as children began to splash not far off in the shallows of the river...beginning to relax again as no screams or shouts for help arose.

*One must be wary around rivers.* Her Máthair had taught her that.

The solution that had seemed so simple last Midwinter had branched into a knotted tapestry of complex ends. Unraveling even as she tied off other looser corners. The treasury of Markarth had all but been emptied in her efforts to preserve her people throughout the cold season, and though she was looking into other ways, both magical and mundane of making money, there was only so far she could get without reading spellbooks on her own.

It was a grind, but every spell she wished to cast now had to be taught verbatim. Hand to hand, with the words painstakingly spelled out for her, like a stripling novice. And only the Khajiit caravans and certain bandit peddlers would dare barter with them for supplies (at criminally inflated prices) so if something did not change soon, eventually all the magic in the world would not make a bit of difference. No matter how Ancano reassured her that such ways were possible, for enchanting objects was not her specialty.

There was no avoiding the state of things. Nemain was rapidly running out of ideas.

They would starve if she did not find some way of establishing trade; of finding an export valuable and unique enough to her homeland that none could imitate it...and they would be conquered if she did not do it quickly enough to weave the bonds that were begotten by trade to avoid invasion. As Queen, she had to increase morale, guard her borders, boost the population, and somehow encourage the tacit notice - if not acceptance - of the Reach as a land beholden only to its own.

And, she reminded herself with a wince, she had to delay -for as long as possible- the knowledge of her existence to certain persons.

...Such as Ulfric Stormcloak. High King of Skyrim.

Some days she could scarce believe that she had played a pivotal role in seating that Nord’s arse upon the Jagged Throne. The near past felt far more like a distant dream, the longer Nemain stayed with her own kind; hearing her own tongue spoken back to her as she toiled over the welfare of the people she loved.
But never mind what cannae be helped. One Reachfolk custom had been of some use, at least. Nemain had firmly banned the common use of her personal name upon taking the throne, and hoped that her relatively insignificant origins would cement her as merely the titled Queen. The necromancer known to the common folk as the Gravesinger; head of the Reach’s Council...and not the Dragonborn who had traveled with Stormcloaks, fought against the Empire, and who had handed the Nord King the Jagged Crown of legend on a silver platter.

Eh. More like a pillow than a platter, but no matter. Markarth would shank me all the same...if they but made the connection.

Nemain dragged her toes in the grass. Indeed, Madanach had begun losing his power the moment the rabble had begun to bandy his name about, instead of respectfully whispering the titles he had chosen.

King in Rags. The Black Fox. True names had strength, and she would guard hers with all the obscurity she could muster. She had learned terrible things from her Máthair; she would learn from her father’s mistakes, too, and learn well. For having been known as a mere errand girl and nobody for much longer than the Dragonborn was a boon.

But the fact that she could Shout was something she tended to conceal, now, more often than not. Particularly with the tensions regarding Nordic politics running hot, a constant thrum beneath the surface of all conversation. For the Thu’um was a Nord sort of magic; originating with Kyne, and not the wilder, more primeval gods her people so relied upon.

There had been rumors, whispered. Not dared to be spoken abroad, yet nonetheless they had reached her ears: was the new Queen of the Reach possessed of Nordic blood? Was her pedigree true? Had she really been borne of Madanach and Melka, to be so abandoned and despised by them...priest and priestess of Hircine as they had been?

Nemain sighed. Better to pretend. Better to keep something under wraps for the future, to let the Folk forget she wielded such Thu’ums, until the opportune time came to remind them of it.

Aye. Let those who saw and marveled during the duel with Madanach forget. So few still lived that remembered who she truly had been before all of this that she dared to hope the revelation of her connections could be delayed for some time longer. Kept in check by the natural reticence of her folk when they dealt with foreigners.

I cannae imagine how Bear be chafing tae reclaim Markarth and Winterhold, both lost tae him from the Civil War. Wait ‘til he finds I’ve stolen much of the wilds of Falkreath from him as well. Nae more than he deserves, posting spies and soldiers along the entirety of my borders. Near killing me an’ taking Farkas in the process.

Sly ruddy bastard.

An unwelcome thrill rippled through her even as she thought of the man, of Bear, and she sighed at herself for using her pet name for him. Even in her mind.

Weak. Uncommon stupidity, tae nurse sich weakness.
In her desperate quest to both expand her spy network and discover the whereabouts of Farkas, she had learned much. She had tried her best only to hearken to the blandest, most commonly bandied news from Solitude, but try as she might Nemain heard more than she liked.

And what had she expected? For the wedding of the High King of Skyrim to the Jarl of Hjaalmarch was the stuff of legends, and was still being celebrated as far south as Dragon Bridge and Old Hroldan.

She overheard far more gossip than she wished to about the new Queen; that Elisif was a beauty with long hair as red as the setting sun to complement Ulfric’s more burnished gold, that she had sparkled like an aedric vision during the ceremony and that the Nordic soothsayers had proclaimed them both fortune fated and fertile.

Only the chosen of the gods bore Their fire upon their heads, it was said in the Reach...and Nemain tugged at her dark long braid like a penance. If fair hair was blessed, them she of a surety was cursed.

Foolish vanity.

She forced her mind back towards more important matters.

Her ban on thieving was not the only complaint some had, but it had become the rallying cry. As though thievery be somehow noble, she silently mulled. Not that I have the high ground by any means, Sithis-blessed murderer that I be. But still.

Taking when one had no other means to survive was reasonable, understandable...but when other options existed, to decry honest hard work bespoke a self indulgent laziness. A laggard apathy that Nemain was determined to root out...this taint of the shite-gilded idea that ‘tradition’ was the penultimate reason that the Reachfolk should remain the way that they were: destitute, starving and despised.

Always easier tae take than to sow. Nemain chewed at the inside of her cheek. Ambitious though her policies had seemed to the Council, she wanted more for the People’s future than what they had endured.

She wished for them to thrive, not merely exist.

And if she were to turn a blind eye to rampant banditry the Reach would never rise above its shaded past. Hammerfell, High Rock, Cyrodiil and certainly Skyrim would never enable open border trade...never recognize them as sovereign unto themselves.

Usurping upstarts, perhaps...wildling neighbors who might be indulged out of turn with a charitable allowance, and laughed at behind closed doors, but a self sufficient kingdom? A power to be reckoned with?

Nay. Not e’en a wee bit.

Aye, and that be the raw rub of it, she mused, picking apart blades of grass with her fingers. There had been a minor uprising as several clans banded together to challenge her rule, at one point holding Aventus, Bothela and all others associated with her for ransom in exchange for her submission. Her surrender. Her final death.
Last Frostfall she would have sought such an end gladly.

But now, she found herself unburdened by the self pity and horror. It was, she reflected, incredible how swiftly one could accustom themselves to a situation once enough time and experience had passed. *Hah. Much good it had done them tryin’ tae take me o’er, the sorry lot.* She had feasted well that night...had nearly glutted herself with their lives to the rare feeling of satiety. Which was truly novel in her new life as a lich, for if there was one constant, it was the hunger. Desire verging on lust for flesh, for life. A hunger that never ended.

Ignoring the burn as it arose unbidden, Nemain snickered softly to herself. Scared shitless as the People were of her, now, there had been no talk of thieving cattle or mounting raids since the rebellion had been put down. Even the Council, the most elite and influential of the seers, shamans, hagravens, briarhearts and chiefs, had not dared to challenge her in these past few months.

Which was bloody fine by her. Just fine.

More footsteps, stealthy ones. But she recognized them as belonging to Sybille Stentor. One of the newer, more misanthropic allies she had made. “My lady. Here are the items you requested, and I have further news for you from Markarth and the Council.”

“Thank ye, Sybille.” Thrusting her hand out, Nemain wriggled her fingers impatiently until the basket was securely in her hands. “These be the ores from Cidna Mine as well as the wool samples?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Marvelous.” The wool was from the long haired goats of the Druadach that ran wild in the west wold, ornery and difficult to breed. But their wavy hair was as soft as rabbit fur, once sheared and carded...and was vastly superior to the coarser, more matted wool produced by Nord breeds.

She petted one of the skeins and imagined barrels of socks; mountains of knitted hats, scarves, and felted cloaks to be shipped far and wide throughout Tamriel. Though most of this new work as ruler seemed to involve sitting, arguing and listening in ever revolving repetitions...perhaps working with her hands would be of some benefit.

Spinning and knitting as she whiled away the endless meetings with her constituents could dispel the boredom that inevitably accompanied such sessions...used as she was to a more active lifestyle.

And it was one of the few lines of work that did not rely wholly upon sight...

*Useless.* She shunted aside the grumbling resentment that always accompanied these feelings of being stifled; being shut in. It wasn’t as though she had much of anything else to do, hampered as she was now by both her blindness and her position.

*My choice. My burden to bear.* “If ye happen to have my staff hereabouts, I would like to have it. Just in case I be needing tae walk. Or summon that forfochting Daedra once again...can ye believe that blighter had the gumption tae talk back t’me on Morndas last? I truly detected a sneer. Och - and can the news from those Council tossers wait? There havenae been more attacks from those pesky wisps, have there?”

Sybille hesitated. “There have been two encounters with the wisps, my lady. One in Markarth’s stables and one in Karthwasten.”
“Damn. Any casualties?”

“A horse tossed a shoe. Fortunately no one was hurt. This time.”


The uppity Altmer had managed to send letters near every other month, finding out through some wizardry where she had ended up despite her efforts at prevarication. And even though she had weighed in her mind the very real risk of dictating her tart perspectives in response to each missive, so far her fears and hopes alike had all come to nought.

...For neither of the mages had managed to figure out a way to stop the wisps, those queer magical anomalies, from appearing.

Which was unfortunate, considering she felt somewhat responsible. After all, she had been a part of the team that had brought that magic hemorrhaging orb from Saarthal back to Winterhold. From what Ancano had related to her via letter, the consequences spawning from that seemingly innocent quest had been rather dire.

Within the self reflection she had found herself stewing in all too often of late, Nemain found she had an invested interest in finishing off what remained of the influence of the Eye of Magnus. Which was yet another thing easier said than done.

Another raveling thread she felt compelled to chase and catch.

They were not actually wisps, Nemain and Ancano had discovered...not the ice flinging companions of those ghostly apparitions, the Wispmothers. Ghoulish spirits who had once been women, confined to a purgatory of wailing and walking the vast tundra plains. Those she could have handled, she surmised. Susceptible to destruction magic as they were. Fire, in particular.

A few good hefty blows from a fireblast, and a Wispmother would disappear. Freed at last from her ephemeral prison.

But not these creations. Instead, they seemed to be exactly what Ancano had hypothesized: bite-sized bits of magic left as the aftermath of a grand spell to run amok. Striking out with mindless violence, they circled and materialized at random, spooking the herds of cattle and goats. Scaring the Reachfolk to the point where many would not leave the safety of their brochs or walls without a weapon, for the wisp-like anomalies were resistant to spellcasting. Were typically only taken down by physical means, and with great difficulty, for the fiends were agile and strong...and absolutely devastating in larger groups.

There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to when an anomaly would show, chiming with magic. Several smaller settlements had been found with its occupants crisped to the bones. A few of the Briarhearts had thought them dragon attacks, before the truth had been learned.

Nay, it had not been dragons that had turned her people to dust; snow sprinkled grit she had sifted her fingers through. Fine and silty, with jagged bits of frostbitten flesh scattered within...gruesome raisins in a mortal pudding. It had been those damnably difficult Magnus-born spawn.
"T'was a raw problem. She sucked upon her inner cheek. One of the more troublesome knots in her tapestry of woes.

And no matter how Nemain wracked her brain, she could not imagine why they had appeared in the first place, for the Archmage of Winterhold assured her repeatedly that the Eye of Magnus was good and gone. Taken by the Order of Psijics to a world beyond this world, an island that could not be found save by those who already knew where it was.

Which was bloody confusing, because if the Isle of Artaeum was unfindable, then how had the blade beaked buggers found the isle in the first place? Had it been some sort of spell?

And if so, how could she turn it to her own advantage? *If the Reach were impossible tae locate through the mists, save by those who had been given the trust of it...*

She shelved her useless ponderings for another time. “I’ll have tae dictate another letter to Ancano then. He’ll wish t’ken the location of these new attacks, as he be plotting them on that map of his. Anything else?”

“Nothing from the Council that cannot wait.” The vampire shuffled her robes. “But there is something that I believe requires your immediate attention.”

“Aye? What be that?”

“A who, not what, my lady. There is someone here to see you, though I cannot imagine why you would allow this doggerel Nord the grace of your presence.”

“Faugh. Very tetchy, Sybille. We do have some Nords amongst our number...nae many, but some. Out of all of us, I’d think ye’d be the one most used tae it.”

Her cool voice was disapproving. “Tis not the Nord of him I dislike, my lady, but the werewolf.”

Returning the wool and rooting through the basket for the ore samples, Nemain crowed with glee - distracted, as one of her better ideas left gritty marks upon her palms. *Grand, just grand! This could save us all.*

“A shifter, eh. That be right - vampires’re nae fond of the Moon Blessed. I wonder why that be?”

“They are dangerous, my queen. Irrational and prone to impulse.”

“Pffbt. So am I. Let him approach, and leave us be tae talk.”

*Perhaps the stranger knew something of the whereabouts of Farkas.* Falkreath was teeming with the children of Hircine who sometimes walked on four paws, most of whom were sympathetic to the Reachmen and their cause. When Rhys visited, which was less often now that she had given much of the supervising of the southern wilds to him and his unruly clan, he sometimes mentioned meeting one or two of them.

Some were wary, but willing to entertain a wee bit of fireside conversation. Others were not so welcoming. She hoped this werewolf was among the former.

And perhaps this stranger would bear some good news for once, since despite her better efforts she
had not heard aught of the man who held the dubious honor of being her husband. Which be, she snorted to herself, vexing and depressing in equal parts.

*If Stout wishes tae leave me, he better well hae the stones tae say so tae me face. Tis not like him, this skulking and hiding aboot.*

*Unless, of course, the man be dead. I dearly hope he still be alive.*

“Oh! And attend tae the children if ye will, Sybille, before ye go fixate on whatever experiment ye be currently hawing away at. Make a fire for the bairns tae warm themselves by, leave some vittles, and then ye may take yer leave.”

She waved her hand, shooing the woman away. “And leave me my staff within reaching distance. Other than that, I shall no need ye fer a time.”

There was a soft rustle of cloth as the vampire bowed. A soft thud as her staff hit the grass. “As you say.”

Nemain busied her herself with the contents of the basket as the vampire left to retrieve her visitor, thinking about the odd paths that fate often took.

Finding Sybille Stentor has been a true stroke of luck. The former court mage of Solitude had shown up some days past her ascension to the throne. Fighting and killing by her side during the rebellion, she had proven herself indispensable as Nemain’s right hand and confidant these past several months.

The outcast vampire shared her same views on justice, in that it should be both vicious and prompt, and had aired the idea of preying upon those who thought themselves above the law before it had even occurred to the Reachborn Queen.

Considering how well it had worked in terrifying the citizens of Solitude into civic obedience, Nemain had to admit the idea held merit - and also a certain sort of satisfaction.

Bloody, lifetaking satisfaction.

It was an elegant solution to the question of how she would sustain herself in a sea of untouchable humanity. Small wonder the woman had come with such a reputation...and a desire to serve, albeit in somewhat diminished circumstances.

Nemain smiled a wicked little smile, reaching out to touch the staff of Sanguine. A soothing reminder. *Nature be the ultimate law, and death its final arbiter.*

For if there was anything a necromancer lich and a vampire had in common, it was skill in delivering death.

“You need someone waiting on you according to your station,” Sybille Stentor had flatly informed her during the chaos of her early reign. “Someone who can be your eyes - see what you do not see - and arrange things to your liking. A housecarl, spymaster and maid all in one.”
“Oh? And ye think ye can do that fer me?”

“That, my lady, and far more.”

And she had. Nemain realized now just how often she had bumbled into an etiquette-laden disaster at Council without a guiding hand, had never realized how often she had dressed in mismatched garb or left a haversack open, dropping its contents without noting her mistake. Madanach may have been her father, and Melka her mother, but they had never raised her to replace them in their roles. Had never taught her the finer points of balancing tactful advice and adroit set downs; the art of handling highborn peers without giving offense.

They never imagined she would rule the Reachborn, and why would they?

_I was a damn good courier, and would hae been a fine court mage, had fate taken such a turn. But now...none care fer the Listener save that I bring in new contracts tae keep the assassins busy, selfish bloodthirsty bodgers. And being Dragonborn only got me killed fer my pains. Damn near broke my heart as well._

_But perhaps being Queen might not be sae bad after all._

She was more at ease now, far more well fed, thanks to Sybille’s attentions...and it showed in her marked lack of desire to constantly hunt. Her throat burned, and she swallowed firmly.

Only a temporary reprieve, to be sure - _nothing good e’er lasts forever_ - but here in Deepwood Vale amidst apple blossoms and the sound of children’s laughter, Nemain could imagine. She could pretend that the hunger simmering beneath the surface was merely a lull between wholesome mortal meals.

That it was her stomach, and not her soul that was empty.

She _would_ pretend, as long as she was able. However long this borrowed life Sithis had granted her would last.

Luck often came in threes. _A sacred number_, Nemain thought happily, _the luckiest of numbers_. The triskele with three sides was balanced - every point a potential base. Stable and secure...and every point a spear with which to strike.

Her first stroke of luck had been to become Queen in the first place, and retaining Sybille Stentor’s services must have been the second.

The third lucky break walked up the hill and sat down. Clanking in his armor, the sharp smell of sword oil, leather and musk causing her to stiffen in shock, then delight.

_Farkas._

She soaked in the sight of his blurred form, translucent green in the Detect Life Spell, and listened to him breathe. Deeply, in and out. Like the bellows of some tranquil, mobile forge. Deep and warm
and wonderful.

“So tis you, then?” Nemain made her voice lazy. Untroubled, as the large man rearranged himself to be comfortable on the grassy knoll. “Took ye long enough.”

“Always late for something,” Farkas quipped, a laugh lurking beneath. “Sorry I kept you waiting. That bloodsucker took her damn time vetting me before I could get close.”

“Tis her job tae investigate all visitors. She be good at it.”

“Yeah, well. Glad you got someone watching your back. Even if she creeps me out.”

Nemain made a non-committal noise in the back of her throat that could have meant anything. “Mmph.”

Farkas must have expected something more. He coughed, a bit abruptly.

She waited. He had kept her waiting, after all.

“So, uh. You look good...um, your hair, I mean. How’d ya managed to grow it out again?” He reached out and touched it, sliding his hand down her braid until his fingers lightly scraped her hand.

Nemain dared not respond, not even to hook her finger around his thumb. She felt strangely nervous at the thought of doing so...which was foolish, for had he not been inside her? Had he not embraced her, slept by her side and fought at her back -stark naked and drunk on Sanguine’s swill to boot?

_Ye wished tae ken where he was and why he was gone; and soon ye will know! Why sae worried? He be alive, at least._

She was afraid to ask all the things she wished to know. She feared -and craved- his answer far too much to feel in control of herself.

Nemain shuddered, remembering the rebellion. Waking up in a drowsy sodden pile...aware for the very first time of how oddly warm she was. How soaked in blood and life and body parts she had been, to remain at such a heated temperature.

Sybille still spoke of that time in hushed tones. Reverent: as though the slaughter had been a hallowed function, instead of an unavoidable event.

_Yes. Losing control would be verrah bad._

When the words finally came, they were almost slurred. As though she had sampled too much juniper mead. “Er...magic. I grew it back using power...couldnae burn it all off, so I funneled it into something silly. My hair.”

She chuckled, twisting the end of her braid around her finger. “Guess I missed it.”
“Yeah, I missed it too. It’s, uh, pretty. I like it a lot.”

“Meaning it be ugly before?” Nemain sniffed. “Fuck you, Farkas.”

“Aww, don’t be like that dollface.”

“For the last time...I’m not yer doll.”

She half expected him to laugh and reaffirm his self-tendered name for her, but the man remained silent. It stretched between them like a taut string, and she practically felt the air itself hum as Farkas pulled his hand away and waved around them, as if to gesture at all the green that surrounded them.

“Yeah, well…” he cleared his throat. “...hey. This is pretty too. Never thought the Reach would be all flowery and well...damn.” He whistled. “Almost, I see why the Forsworn choose to live here out in the wild. Wouldn’t mind waking up to this view of the mountains every morning.”

“Hah! Ye say that now.” Nemain jerked her chin up to the east, deciding not to correct him about the current inaccuracy of calling her folk ‘Forsworn.’

*Tis his turn tae pretend. Let the Nord believe that all be well in his homeland, fer now. “It do be lovely, but tis not all sunshine. The sacrificial altar tae the Et’Ada be right up there, near that cliff. D’ye see it? High up there?”

“Yeah. I see it. Looks bleak. Remember you warning us about that in Whiterun.”

“Mmm. Aye. For special ceremonies...y’see, nought appeals tae the Gods quite like human pain. It catches their attention. Makes ‘em listen, when all else fails.”

“Huh.” He shifted again. “Seems like they’d pay lots of attention, then. Considering the last few years.”

“Aye. Ye’d think.”

They sat for several painful moments. She shredded more grass between her fingers, determined not to speak any more. In case he wished to explain himself.

“So. You’re probably wondering what in Oblivion happened after I got worked over by Aela, huh.”

More invisible hand waving. “Got, uh, caught up with the Stormcloaks, but I got away. Couldn’t figure out where you were for shit ‘til I managed to get a message out to your cousin at his longhouse.”

*That poitin addled blabbermouth. “Rhys let ye in on the big secret, did he.”

“Yeah.” A puff of amusement. “He told me you were, like, the new Madanach. Who I guess used to be your Pa.”

His deep voice darkened. “Woulda been nice to know you were planning on making yourself an orphan, y’know. Could have talked you out of it, maybe. Seeing as how I watched you kill your Ma not long before.”

The disappointment in his voice was nearly worse than the sting of accusation.
But she’d had her reasons. “T’was better you did not know, Farkas.”

“Right. Dumbass here. Not like you’d talk to me anyhow, so...” He swore in frustration, and she held her breath. Anticipating whatever would come next. “Honestly, wasn’t sure you’d be excited to see me, Nemain. Now that you’re like, uh, a Queen. Or something.”

“Or something,” she agreed, leaning against his pauldron covered shoulder. Relief made her words come out in one bright wash. “But...ye came back after all. Despite what you have learnt?”

“Yeah. I did.”

This time, she was the one to slide her fingers into his. ‘Good. That’s grand. Ye had me worried sick, Stout.”

“Aye?” His giant hand wrapped around hers and squeezed. “Kinda glad to hear that.”

And on the end of her relief came a surge of fury; hot and bright. “Clodheided duff!” She boffed him on the head, enjoying his muffled oaths. Frankly, it was a relief to take out at least a sliver of her angst upon him.

She would look forward to him returning the favor later. “Blooterin’ buffoon! Can ye not ken how worried I was aboot ye, Farkas? Not a word - not a sight, sound or hair of ye for months! Months! I thought ye might be captured, tortured! I thought fer a space that ye might e’en be dead!”

“Aaugh, sorry, sorry!” Fending her off, he reclaimed her hand and went quiet once more.

She itched to ask him just where in the blazes he had been, but instead focused on rubbing the calluses of his knuckles with her thumb. Simply savoring the pleasure of having him there by her side.

Finally Farkas spoke. “I, uh, got taken to see the King. To see Ulfric Stormcloak.”

The relief that she had been basking in was immediately plunged into icy dread. “Dibe’s tight wee nips...what?!”

“Uh, that’s where I’ve been. Kinda. See...”

His fingers scritched into his hair, and Nemain tried very hard not to reach over and shake the giant like the toy doll he was forever comparing her to, until he told her exactly what she wanted to know.

“...Found out that Aela had been hunting me for months, since I left after Kodlak and Vilkas’ funeral, and uh, kind of took off. She caught me trying to cross the border with um, with you, and she got talking to the Stormcloaks cause I guess they thought I was turnin’ traitor.”

“You?” She laughed incredulously. The very thought of it. “A traitor? A Nord Companion of Jorrvaskr, plottin’ with the nefarious witchmen of the Reach?”

“Yeah, surprised me too. Truth is weird, sometimes.”

One last squeeze, and Farkas released her hand. “So, yeah. Aela knocked me out and took me to the King, ’cause I guess he wanted to see us Companions about some jobs.”
“Jobs? What sort o’ dreich task would Ulfric wish fer ye tae do, then?” Does he know? Be Ulfric plotting e’en now tae retake what be mine?

It was on the tip of her tongue, but she would not speak it. Does he still think me dead? Does he speak of me at all?

She was a fool. And she had been duped by a greater fool. Oh merciful Et’Ada. Was Farkas sent here tae kill me, take me prisoner, or worse: tae stay close and spy on me? Takin’ my measure, while the new King waits tae launch some grand new invasion? Be Ulfric waiting outside the gates of Markarth now, at this verrah moment? Preparing tae Shout down the city I hae only just finished restoring, at sae much cost?

What am I doing!? Shite oh shiteohshite-

“-Can’t talk about that. Hey. Hey!”

Rough hands tipped up her chin, revealing her throat, and she swallowed. Setting her jaw against the tenderness of the gesture, Nemain scowled.

She felt vulnerable. Exposed.

“It don’t have nothing to do with you or your kind. I promise, doll. King’s work is just that: work. Nothin’ else you need to know.”

Nemain tested her teeth with her tongue, straining against the muscled tension holding her firm. “Better not be aught else, or I’ll be rollin’ upon a new werewolf pelt rug in my chambers, Stout.”

He laughed, loudly, and she felt like punching him again. Hard. “Wanna roll me around on your floor? Sure. I’ll make it happen. Shit, that’s been on my to-do list since Evening Star. But first, listen.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

He ignored her sulky huff. “So, I went back to Jorrvaskr for a while. Caught up on some training. Did some work, spent time with my Shield Brothers and Sisters, got paid. Thought about, uh...stuff.”

She startled when his hand moved from her chin to pat her arm. It was warm; nearly hot where his fingers stroked against hers. “Hey. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell Ulfric nothin’ about you.”

A sigh. “Probably was wrong to lie, ‘specially to the King...but you and whatever you’re up to...it’s just not my secret to tell.”

Thank the Et’Ada.

“So.” Nemain picked her words carefully. “Ye’ve had a grand reunion in your odd fear thuaidh boat-hall, gained some gold and hae kept the man unaware of all else, eh? Be that the state of things?”

“Yes. Ulfric knows nothing.” Farkas hesitated. “Leastwise, nothing important. But I got something from him that I wanna give ya. Something you’d like.”

Parchment crinkled. “Something special.”
That fool little thrill showed up again, thanks to the four forbidden syllables. *Ulfric Stormcloak* sparked its way from the base of her skull all the way down to her groin, pulsing, and Nemain swallowed.

*Gods. I would take any token from Bear that Stout would think tae pass o’er tae me. Anything…even a crumb. An’ yet…*

“This is for you. A writ of divorce. All ya gotta do is sign it, and you’ll be free. S’what you want, aye?”

Whatever she had imagined, she had not expected divorce papers.

“Erm. Thank you,” Nemain murmured, holding the parchment in her hand as though it might bite. The bulk of him moved, bumping against her shoulder as Farkas shrugged. “This really what you wanna do?” He sounded mournful. “We got a good thing going here.”

How Farkas could wish to be with her without the fetters of marriage was beyond her. She wanted so badly to take the pain out of his voice, but she couldn’t. Not yet. “Perhaps, but I wish fer something better than just ’good’ for ye, Stout. You an’ I…we did everything ruddy backwards, y’ken. Fighting, marriage, courtship…most of it t’was right out of our hands. And with your work, and my title…I dinnae ken how it can be helped, not signing the writ. We know so little of each other…and now…”

“That’s easy. Ask me questions and I’ll tell ya no lies.”

She snorted. There was a sob in there, but she made her words matter of fact. “Glib, but tis never sae simple. As ye said, there be secrets I cannae say. Things that be not mine tae tell…not merely as a woman, but also as Queen.” *And as the Dark Brotherhood’s Listener.*

“Fair enough. Answer one question for me, then. Just one. Tell me the truth, and if we can’t make this work afterwards…I promise. I swear on Shor’s name that I’ll leave you be, if that’s what you want.”

Such a terrible idea, promising to answer a blank question.

But she would do it.

For him. “Verrah well.”

A much longer pause. “Alright then. So. You, uh, still got feelings for him? For Ulfric Stormcloak? You still wanna be with him, and not with me?”

*Bawbags.*

*This was not going tae work.*
The epiphany dawned on her with a certain, grim sobriety. She wasn’t worthy of love. Especially not what was being offered by this man, guileless and kind as she knew him to be.

Was it wrong to imagine that this pointed inquiry meant that the Nord werewolf wanted more? Wouldn’t he tire of her; undead and cold thing that she was? The Companion would leave her eventually in the end, she feared in her heart of hearts; driven by the mortal drive to reproduce, to father children. Even the Moon Called were not immune to that call of nature.

So why wouldn’t he wish to go off and be free of her now? To enjoy a life beyond the unlife that was her fate, bought day after day by the siphoned energy of others...an unlife that most certainly would end in the near future. For she could not imagine years upon years of danger; of war turned inward and death always there, always calling. The Night Mother’s voice a gentle but persistent nudge in the darkest corners of her mind.

She would never be rid of him; of Sithis and his brood. Never would she forget that slaughterfish smile. My name is Discord. Doom. Chaos. The Void...no more human than you appear to be, little thing.

Her self loathing intensified. Will Farkas meet his end at my hands on some hunger-struck night, when the throb of that wet, hot pulse becomes too much tae resist?

Nemain clutched at her stomach, a sourness rising in her throat.

She was a selfish creature. It was so easy to be with the Companion, most of the time. They’d moved so abruptly from being casual friends into becoming husband and wife, and once she could look past the wildness of the ride she could honestly say in her own mind, privately, that the moments shared between them had been bucolic. Comfortable; as though it had always been thus.

Then something would come along and tilt the axis of things, and then the way he’d behave...the damn fool things he would say...

He waited for her, patiently. Nothing was heard but the sound of their irregular breaths stirring the wind, and farther off, the splashing sounds of children at play.

Thinking hard, Nemain bit her inner lip until she tasted blood. You still wanna be with him, and not with me?

Farkas stood out starkly different from among her past lovers. She had known Galan, known him like the back of her hand long before they had been intimate, and they had grown up together. Practically brother and sister they had been. Suffering and fighting and worshipping in the same way, to the same Gods…and her relations with the orc Moth Gro-Bagol had been a watered-down version of the same.

A pleasurable interlude between bouts of backbreaking work. With Moth it had been more like scratching an itch than anything emotionally profound.

But then...
She allowed herself an almost silent sigh. Being with Bear had been like staring into a mirror. A strange reflection of herself, flipped upon its head. And relevant in a way that still set her at odds with her own logic, especially at times like the present.

*Do I still have feelings for him?*

A collapsed prison tower, a palace, the monastery of High Hrothgar...they all flashed through her mind, in instances too numerous to count. She saw with unnerving clarity a shut-up inn room in Whiterun, where together they had discovered, touched and tasted one another. A memory she only allowed herself to reflect upon alone, in her more despondent moments...when she wanted more than anything else to remember what it had felt like -just once!- to be wanted. To be overtaken by such fevered madness, such love.

Nemain shivered. It had been all fire; rage and passion equally entwined. She had known him, and he had known her, more deeply than anyone had the right to know another soul. And it had gone on far longer than either of them had been willing to admit, as they learned and fought and traveled side by side, hardly leaving the other without a letter or a promise to return...

And that was the trouble.

She didn’t know Farkas. Not really. Not well enough to guess what he might do, or say...to anticipate his reactions. She liked the man, more than she ought, but perhaps...perhaps all that she had imagined he would do was wrong.

Was it wrong to want something good for herself? Dare she even consider herself worthy of affection?

Nemain sat up a bit straighter. This was nought more than mere foolishness, this fearmongering. She had left Markarth...had left the only home she had ever known to venture into Skyrim’s unknown. Had left to kill Ulfric Stormcloak, ended up Dragonborn...and had found in her prey a new lover, the warborn twin to her heart who had eventually left her to her final end, to torture and death.

She kept her tongue silent, but as Farkas shifted in wait for her response, her thoughts continued to race, tripping upon themselves in their haste to be recognized. *When all hae been said an’ done, Bear left us, Aventus and I, to the tender mercies of the Forsworn. Could’v bothered tae personally hunt our tracks and rescue us, as I so fervently prayed he would, but he did not come, did he?*

*And what would have happened, had he followed? Would Alduin still have come? Sae many gossips cannae be false. He chose tae make war on Whiterun instead, and married that bonny Jarl despite all those pretty, poisonous words, but I survived his leaving and his wedding, didn’t I?*

And she had outlasted Galan, and Moth gro-Bagol, and finally even Farkas in his absence.

Her heart was not yet broken, nor was it bound.

She had meted out her vengeance: had torn her way out of Alduin’s belly, had killed her mother first, and then her father for their sins; had ended up here in this place after a lifelong ban. The ban broken by the Forsworn, who were forsaken no longer, and now she was taking Bear’s Kingdom away from him, was she not?
Piece by piece, without the man even knowing...and a werewolf Companion from Whiterun and a Thalmor spy on the other end of the world were her unlikely allies in molding this new reality. This new future, strange and open, that she would personally guide. A new era, for new beginnings.

She smiled, willing the sheen of tears to fade away. *Was this not rich? How she would laugh, if he but knew!*

In a wash of petty spite, she wished Bear did know about her, if only for a wee moment. What she would not give to see the look on his face when he realized just who had become such a thorn in his side.

The imagined fantasy settled her. It had all led to this. *Sod these fears, the lot of ‘em.*

Nemain found, despite her desire to answer, that she had no words to speak as the silence stretched on, for didn’t Farkas already know? She had never concealed the truth of the matter from him, no matter how she had reluctantly enjoyed being his wife. In all aspects.

And to say the words... *t’would be like rubbing salt into an open wound.*

Farkas spoke first. His annoyance rasped at her ears. “Kyne’s breath. Enough, Nemain. I want you to say it.”

“Say what!?” Nemain threw up her arms, upsetting the basket in her exasperation. Rocks and skeins of yarn rolled against one other, skittering down the slope as she turned more fully to face him.

“Say the truth? Gods, you wish me tae admit to your face that I love the man, but that I care for ye still -despite my better judgement? That neither us can have a banjaxed opinion of the matter, because we be married, lest ye forget... sod that bloody bit of paper, and Bear? He be sodding wed as well tae some bloody Nordic goddess, inconstant brute, and he likely will hae Khajiit kittens when he finds out what I’ve become! Merciful gods, and you...you be working fer him?! Who be demanding honesty, here, eh? What shall I do when the next job yer King requires be my head on a bloody pike! Eh? What then!?”

She reached out and gripped his breastplate, shaking him with all the force she could bring to bear. Which was necessary -the Companion’s armor was as firm and solid as the rest of him.

“What do you really want, Farkas? I’ve told ye the truth, now give me a damn quill and ink and help me sign that damn parchment, because this be over...tis been long over, in truth, and should ne’er hae begun, and I’m tired, sae goddamn tired of pretending and waiting and wanting, so if there is tae be more than mere paper between us I would have it begin fresh and plain. *What do ye want from me?”*

“What I want? What do I want!?”

Hot hands gripped her neck, encircling her throat until she could barely squeak. “I’ll show ya what I want.”

And then Farkas bent forward and kissed her.

Really kissed her.
The shock of his warm, dry lips pressing and sliding on hers made her tense up at first, and she entertained mulish thoughts about resisting out of sheer spite - how dare he put her on the spot like this?! How dare he!

Stupid, fool numpty heided fear thuaidh!

But her resolve lasted for all of a single moment before her muscles melted into warm jelly of their own accord.

Nemain didn’t intend to kiss him back, furious and doubt riddled as she was, but she couldn’t help herself. He was warm and alive and strong, and the intense sensation of his mouth opening, of his hands tight upon her neck, of his tongue…

Abruptly he let her go. Leaving her in a fugged daze, her mouth tingling in reminder.

“Guess it don’t matter what I want, but...shit. I’m gonna try for it anyhow. I want you, doll. I want all of you. Even the crazy messed up parts. I know you’re older, and maybe you’re smarter than me ‘bout some things, being a mage and all...but, yeah. And hey. I know you worry. You’re all bent out of shape about being with me, about limiting my options. You think you’re not good enough for me, well. You’re wrong.”

“Farkas…”

“Shut up, Dragonborn.”

Nemain leaned away in surprise as Farkas continued to speak, a fine anger still searing the edge of his words. “You think being a werewolf is normal? Think it’s easy? Sweetheart, you got no idea. Sure, your people think we’re normal. Just part of the scenery, like hagravens and briarhearts. Anywhere else though, doll? I’m a fucking freak.”

She leaned over and touched him. “That be not true, Farkas.”

He laughed, sadness and disgust in equal measure. “Yeah, well...I know that, and you know that, but the rest of Skyrim doesn’t. Come on. We fucking eat people. Bad people, but still...people. Vigilants of Stendarr tend to frown on that shit...and the good villagers of Whiterun would burn Jorrvaskr down to the ground right along with the Silver Hand and cheer while doing it, if they knew the truth about the Circle. Even though we’ve saved them time and time again from bandits and kidnappers and wild beasts in their own homes, fuck, if I showed up as the wolf one day instead of the Companion? Yeah. They’d run me outta town. Pitchforks, torches and all.”

There was a metallic bong as Farkas smashed his gauntlet against his chest. “But you know what? Farkas! "Fuck ‘em all. Ever since I took Kodlak’s blood, I’ve been fast and strong. Fierce. Knowing I can outrun and outfight anything under the goddamn sun? I like that.” His breath washed over her, musky and hot.

Tasting like the woods, like the wild. “I like what I am, Nemain…and I like you. You’re sweet, you’re fun, you got nice tits, a smart mouth and a perky ass...and -shit, I could stop there, but I won’t. Cause I really like that you know all about my other side, my wolf, and yet you don’t give a damn.”

“Of course not.” Nemain sat up straighter. “Stout, that doesnae mean-”
“-Still not done talking. Listen. What matters is that you like me. I can tell, so don’t lie. You like it when I’m around. You like what I do to you, when you fucking let down your guard long enough to feel anything.”

Farkas hissed through his teeth. “Problem is, you don’t love me. Not the way you love him.”

“Listen, I-”

“But shit, guess I’m selfish too, then. Aye? Don’t wanna be someone’s second choice after all. Took just once seeing the fucker again to realize that. Wanna be first. Want a fair chance. A real shot at winning you, without that royal bastard shitting on things. Guess I’ll take whatever I can get. Whatever you’re willing to sodding give. It’s messed up, but that’s what it is. And to do that, I want a fresh start...probably just as much as you do.”

“And if this is what it takes, so be it. Sign the paper, Nemain.”

The firm feathered edge of a quill was placed in her hand, and she could smell the bitter soot and gall of ink. “But I…”

“If you want to get a fucking divorce, sign the gods damned parchment.”

With unsteady hands, Nemain scrawled her name to the best of her ability. When the last letter had been shakily formed, Farkas took away the quill and made his own signature...pressing so deeply that she could hear the nib scrape through the meat of the thick document.

“There. Done. Nothing to do now but deliver it to the Temple of Mara so they can bitch and whine about us.”

*The Temple of Mara.* Blurred recollections of their marriage floated across her mind, pricking at her. “D’ye think they still reckon we owe them for desecrating their altar?”

“Reckon they do. If they wanna squeal about it, I’m game...haven’t had a good brawl in what feels like an age.” Farkas’ voice was gleeful. “Got a goddamn bone to pick with Sanguine about that night too, y’know. Met that shithead after we met your Ma, did I tell ya?”

“No. Truly? You met the Prince of Debauchery?”

“Yeah, he was still dressed as Sam Guevenne. What an asshole. Told me he thought he was doing you a favor.”

Nemain bit her lip as the werewolf blew softly upon the parchment, waiting for the ink to dry before rolling it up and stowing it in his pack. His rough voice was even, every word measured and weighed. “He had good taste in drink, though. Women, too. I’ll give the bastard that much.”

It would have been better if Farkas had yelled, if his words had been harsh. Accusing. *If he’d been just a bit more of an arsewipe, then this wouldnae feel like such a forfochting mistake.*

Damn it, her ruined eyes had now forfeited the fight and she was crying. Bloody tears leaked into her mouth, and she swallowed. Smearing them across her face as she turned away, struggling to
clean herself up.

She reminded herself that she had wanted this divorce for a multitude of eminently logical reasons. *Contrary woman! Ye must look a right awful mess.*

“M’sorry. Can’t seem tae stop-”

“Why would you be sorry for crying?” Big hands gently pushed her quaking fingers away, wiping her cheeks with what felt like the wool from her basket. She was too tired...too bone weary from all the emotional upheaval to make him cease ruining her samples.

“Makes you seem a bit more human, y’know. Everybody cries.”

She laughed wildly at that, hiccups as he tenderly worked the wool around the corners of her face. Patting her chin clean. “Ah, but the Queen of the Reach cannnae stoop tae cry, else her people will think her weak. I - well, folk have been banished fer less.”

“Huh. If that’s true, then sorry, but the Reach can kiss my tight fucking ass.”

For some reason the foul oath made her laugh even harder than she had wept, and she felt his armor expand as he laughed right along with her. Bits of ruined wool and rock bumped against her hips, and she searched around. Placing them back into the basket, even as she laughed and cried and thought about what he had so boldly stated. *I want you.*

His aura was a haze of heat in her second sight; fulsome and vibrant.

“So…” Farkas drawled hopefully. She felt him poking at her side. “You’re still laughing. That’s good, I think. Wanna stay friends?”

“Friends with benefits?” *Gods, the man truly didnae ken what he be asking for.* The term worried something loose in the back of her mind. Something that she and Ulfric had jested about before, during one of their many exchanges of letters.

*In the service of Dibella. Shooting twist wind and water. Laboring over leather. Plunging the wicket. Princum-prancum. Shining the Stendarr. Ride below the crupper...* all the silly terms they had shot back at one another and collected to share, every volley baited with good humor and more than a hint of lust.

Nemain mused, rolling one of the mineral ores around in her palm. *Friends with benefits* had always been a possibility, *but would it be enough?*

It would have to be enough. She turned, feeling him waiting expectantly.

“You’ll be shunned among my people,” Nemain said, sparing none of her bluntness. “They’ll make jests behind yer back.”

“Ain’t courting them, so I don’t care.”

“Don’t ken if I’ll ever wish tae be married again, Stout. Once was enough.”

“I hate weddings.” Farkas nuzzled her neck with his nose, inhaling deeply. She desperately hoped the quick bath she had taken last night in the stream had been thorough enough. “-Cheap booze and shitty tight clothes? Not my idea of fun.”
“Hmph. You’ll get bored.”

“You? Boring? Trouble follows you like wet off an Argonian’s back, dollface. Trust me - ain’t worried about being bored.”

She surrendered, tired of fighting him on this. If he wanted the dried out dregs that were left of her heart, she could not deny him. “If that be what you wish, Stout, then...then that be fine. Yer getting the raw end of the deal, y’ken? Got a job that be even more dangerous than your own, and even if I were nae the Queen...gods. I’m not getting any more alive, darling.”

“Not getting any older or wrinklier, either. Win win.” With a gentle nudge, Farkas tipped her upon her back and sprawled over her, upsetting the basket again. Something hard crunched beneath their combined weight, but they both ignored it.

She whispered into the face of the man above her. “I cannæ bear you sons and daughters. And I’ll never be pretty, Farkas, nae matter how many times ye call me that foolish nickname.”

“Eh, you can’t see yourself real clear, so I’m gonna let that one slide.” Plated elbows ground into the grass as he framed her face in his hands. Nemain choked on a giggle, coughing as he squished her face with his fingers.

Stretching her lips into a smile. “Also, you got like -what? A foster son and a thousand scrawny brats running ‘round here that you can claim as your relations. So yeah, if you’re worried about me wanting some anklebiters of my own, yeah, I’m good. Ain’t gonna be low on little snots to wrestle with anytime soon. Trust me on this.”

“...And sure, you got scars. But I’m blind to ‘em. All I see…” his lips pressed against her forehead “is dainty…” he kissed her nose.

“...doll-like...” and ended nipping at her chin.

“-you. And I like you enough to wanna see more. Even if I gotta fight with your bite-sized cousin over being Nord and hating that shitty bagpipe music. I’ll do it. Happily.”

His nose circled the swell of her throat.

“Just give me a chance.”

Nemain blinked and breathed shallowly, seeing only the vast greenish form of him.

She wished not for the first time to see, to read the features before her. Lifting up her hands, she traced the bump of his browbone. Felt the thickness of beard shift as he smiled. “Sure. But you might come to regret yer choice to stay. I warn ye, I keep terrible hours.”

“So do I. I’m gonna be gone for months at a time too, y'know. This sword and armor don't stay pretty all by itself. And hey, I like sleeping late in the morn, whenever I get the chance. If you said you were a morning person then I mighta just turned around and walked away.”

“Ha-hah, verrah funny.” Nemain tucked her chin, feeling suddenly shy as Farkas nibbled the underside of her ear. Gently touching the thick ropey scar that banded round her throat. “But tis true. I work all day, and often all night long. I need only a little sleep. I...I understand if at some point it be
too much, if it be too tiresome to wait upon a woman bound to the fortune of a failing land…”

“Ugh. Enough. You’re my toy, doll. Remember?” She blew out a breath at him in exasperation, and his own laugh blew right back. “Seriously. What you need is fun, not more work.” His thumbs massaged her neck, fingers pressing into the bend of her shoulders. “And I think I can definitely give you that.”

Mmm. That felt good. Nearly there, so close, and his lips skimmed the edge of her own. Teasing. Taunting.

She squirmed beneath him, realizing from the muffled giggles and suspicious silence from the riverbed that they had begun to attract attention. Her diminutive relatives were watching.

Pulling her arm out from where it had been pinned, she managed to brandish a weapon. “Fine. I’ll have fun. But first...lick this rock.”

His deep laugh was free and easy, with no trace of pain left. She was glad to hear its lack.

“A rock? Hah, right. Not gonna happen.”

“Lick this rock,” she made her voice persuasively sweet. Quiet, so that only the two of them could hear, “...and I’ll let ye lick summat else tonight, when our audience be otherwise engaged. And return the favor. Tit fer tat.”

“Mmm. I’d call that a deal.”

His hair spilled over her face, and she nearly sneezed as Farkas dipped his head down low; his tongue catching the edge of her fingers as he licked the rock.

Immediately he reared back with a barely stifled oath, and she began to chuckle along with the children at his antics.

“Bleugh...ugh! Waterskin -where’s my waterskin. That what I think it is?”


Primly Nemain sat up and surreptitiously began to rearrange her robes. It wouldn’t do to have Sybille come back and find the Queen of the Reach looking as though she had been mauled.

“You’re so weird. Why’d you make me do that?”

Hefting the ore in her hand, she rubbed the sample with her fingers and smiled. Fun indeed. “Just gettin’ an outsider’s opinion. How’d it taste?”

“Uh. Salty?” Aventus sat down next to her, visibly placing himself between her and the werewolf. She patted his wiry back comfortingly as Farkas continued to drink. Draining his waterskin dry. “Ugh. Seriously, what gives?”

“This be fine-grained rock salt from a newly delved corner in Cidna Mine, near worth its weight in bronze,” Nemain replied. “High quality. And I be thinking it will save us all.”

“Save you?” Farkas had finally quenched his thirst, and was now standing in front of her. Blocking the light, for it was subtly cooler in his shadow. “How?”
“Fiscally.” Carefully placing the rock salt back in her basket, Nemain smiled up at the giant who was now her ex-husband. She lifted her hand, and he took it; pulling her up to a standing position. Aventus huffed behind her, but she ignored him and his grumbling as she walked with Farkas. Swinging her basket like a wee lass, nearly skipping as they approached the fire where the bairns were drying themselves off and making merry with the provisions.

Aventus had been almost more distraught than she at the absence of Farkas these past few months. She wondered with a sudden gnawing of guilt if it was the progression of disappearing father figures that most troubled him.

*Boys need men tae look up to in life. Much as I might wish it, I cannae fill those shoes.*

Nemain would corner Aventus later when they had privacy, to ensure that he was well. At ease with her current situation. She reformed her thoughts to reflect the present. “Tis wonderful, Farkas, finding this rock salt. Do ye have any concept of how expensive salt be tae harvest from the sea? Months upon months of work, of finding good untouched coastline for the taking. Carving out furrows in the shore, shaking sand out of the dehydrated salt an’ crushing it fer shipment.”

“Hmm.” His large hand squeezed hers, one finger making its way between two of hers. Pumping slowly. “Sounds like a lot of work.”

She nodded, distracted. The children were trickling in from their play and were now proceeding to eat everything in sight. If they ate too much, there would be fewer victuals left for the journey southward. She should scold them. Hold something back.

Yet she found herself far more diverted by the lazy crawl of the Companion’s thumb around her knuckle. She allowed no trace of it though as she continued her explanation. “Aye. But what be much less work, and for a product of greater quality, is mining the salt that can be found deep within the depths of the Druadach mountains. Finally - a product unique to the westwold that be truly unique.”

“Uh-huh.”

She waved her basket. “This could change everything, Stout! Everyone be needing salt, y’ken. No trade, house or Hold can go without it. And the prices I could ask in Hammerfell...”

“Alright, alright, I take it back. You *are* boring.”

With a heave, Nemain found herself suddenly upside down, her braid dragging the ground as the Companion walked off. Hauling her over his shoulder, as she clung to her basket with both hands. Unwilling to lose it yet again. “I am nae boring!”

“Yeah, when you’re talkin’ shop you are. Hey brats! Wanna see me toss your Queen into the river?”

“Stop it, Farkas!” She pounded the back of his breastplate ineffectually. “Stop it! At least let me drop the samples-”

Without ceremony Nemain was flung into the river and she came up from the water, sputtering. Floundering as her robes dragged her down in the current. *Upstart fear thuaidh!* She could scarce believe the gumption of that man!
Yet, slowly her annoyance abated as she reluctantly began to smile. Hearing that booming laughter mix with higher tinkling giggles coming from upshore.

She had been held in reverence and fear perhaps a space too long. It was possible that Farkas was right.

*I could truly use a holiday. A holiday in which I'm nae working.*

Riverwater sloshed around tree trunk legs as the man in question waded towards her. Lifting her out of water as though he were plucking an apple, and not a woman full grown.

“There you go. Shocked the serious right outta ya. Feel better?”

Tightening her arms around his shoulders, Nemain allowed herself to rest her head against his neck and closed her eyes. Reveling in the sea of unbroken black; free of the greenish forms of life that often meandered in her second spell sight, as she breathed in his scent.

Inhaling the musky maleness of him, as the Queen of the Reach kissed her Companion.

“Aye. Sae much better. You know what?”

"What?"

"I think I am truly ready tae have some fun."

Farkas returned her kiss with interest. "Perfect. I'd say it's just about goddamned time."

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**Chapter End Notes**

The oldest salt mine in the world is found in Hallstatt, Austria...and it was mined by Celts! They used to be found all over the European continent before wars and invasions by Goths and Romans drove them further north to the British Isles.

And oh, salt was super valuable. The word 'salary' actually comes from 'salarium' because at times Roman soldiers were paid in salt instead of cold hard cash.

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