Speaking with Silence
by SadMageCentral

Summary

After Mercer Frey betrays the Orcish thief Umtaz during their chase for Karliah, everyone who knows her spends some time under a mistaken belief that she is dead. This includes her unlikely friends at the College of Winterhold — and especially her Illusion teacher Drevis Neloren, who has secretly been falling in love with her.

Notes

Folks demanded more Umtaz/Drevis, I am giving you more Umtaz/Drevis. Murphy's Law dictates that this will never gain momentum, but I am posting this on my online outlets anyway.

The story, which I think is gonna be either two- or three-parter, deals with that stereotypical tropey Fake Death Angst that Drevis goes through after Umtaz supposedly 'dies' in a confrontation with Karliah.
Chapter 1

It is Enthir who breaks the news - which makes sense in retrospect, since out of all the College mages, he seemed to be the only one fully aware of what that thuggish Orc apprentice was getting herself involved in during her regular disappearances beyond the borders of Winterhold.

Drevis might have known, too, since he was the girl's personal supervisor (after all, the main purpose of her joining the College was to 'find some book-diddler to teach me how to make myself invisible' - as she so loudly announced on the night of her arrival, standing amid the wreckage of the furniture that she threatened to keep smashing until the mages agreed to take her in). But there is never getting any useful information put of Drevis.

Sometimes, his fellow mages do ask him how he can possibly stand teaching such a brute, all muscle and sinews and hair and piercings in impossible places, who obviously gets up to something illicit when she is not poking around the College hallways, turning her already squashed and broken nose up at 'this weird mage crap' and making jabs at Urag for being 'a bookish Orc; not like me - not like me at all'. But whenever he hears something like this from his colleague, Drevis gives them a round-eyed look of blank disbelief, shakes his head, and says softly,

'Oh no, no, that can't be right! Umtaz is a keenly intelligent young woman, very diligent in her studies... and pleasant company, too! As for what she does when not at the College - that is her own business, and I will never judge her for it'.

Enthir, on the other hand... Oh, the sly, shrewd, down-to-earth Enthir; he haas always noticed far more than the trusting, absent-minded Drevis - and he has been seen passing tight, jingly pouches to Umtaz, in exchange for tightly wrapped parcels, and talking in lowered tones about 'bounties' and 'deals' and 'mutual contacts', and giving her meaningful side-glances that she would respond to with an eye roll and a brusque snarl. All of this time, he has been privy to her life outside the College, very much so - up to the point when he knocks on the door of Mirabelle's office and, disregarding her attempts to shoo him off with a curt 'If this is about Arniel, he is a grown man and can settle his debts to you on his own!', strides in, a carelessly folded letter slipped between his index and middle finger, and announces that Umtaz's life - the entirety of it - has come to an end.

'It's that simple, Mirabelle,' he says, his swarthy face frozen and unreadable. 'Umtaz will not be coming back to the College. An associate of mine reports that she has been killed by a traitor working to undermine his... organization'.

'May I see this report of his?' Mirabelle asks impatiently, reaching up to grasp at the paper slip Enthir is holding (which is half-obscured from view by his fingers, so that all she can make out is 'Dear Enthir', 'about the lass', and 'Shadow hide you').

'I am afraid that is confidential,' Enthir cuts her off stiffly, looking as if he has snapped out of a light daze and suddenly hurrying to fold up the letter more carefully and tuck it inside his robe. 'But if you use that pretty head of yours, you will realize that I have no reason whatsoever to make this up. For a prank, that would be in rather poor taste - and I...'

Something shifts in his eyes - something dark and shadowy and about as close to sadness as this pall that falls over his gaze once a year, when he locks up his room, where he keeps all manner of goods, from shoddily carved mammoth tusks that he tries to sell as unicorn horns to actual gold and garnet jewellery that may or may not have once adorned the head and shoulders of a travelling
Imperial noblewoman, and goes off on a long journey to the outskirts of Whiterun, where (according to some overly snoopy apprentices) he places a candle at the foot of the standing stone marked with the constellation of the Thief, in memory of someone called 'Gallus'.

'She was a good asset, that Umtaz,' he finishes snappishly, before seeing himself out.

And thus the news spreads around the College: Umtaz is dead. The furniture and valuable equipment will never again come into danger of being punched into splinters. The corridors will no longer resound with clumsy, lumbering footsteps that only Illusion magic taught by Drevis can turn at least semi-inaudible. Urag will no longer have to abuse his Atronach assistants because a fellow Orc insists on brawling with them when he mentions he might summon them to punish her for turning in a book too late.

And for most mages, this is the end of it. Master Aren himself hears out Mirabelle's report with a look of weary resignation, and then mutters to himself, massaging his temples,

'They do tend to do that, don't they? Die, I mean? Everyone keeps dying...'

And the response of the Arch-Mage's subordinates is hardly more emotional. Tolfdir gets a little weepy - but then, Tolfdir is the type to gently use telekinesis to get a living snail he finds in his salad to safety. The fact remains: everybody around Winterhold knows Umtaz as a big, rude, green, tobacco-chewing, curse-spitting walking mess. Not someone you are going to awfully miss. Everybody - except five people.

One of these people is none other than Urag, the College's archivist and librarian and the late Umtaz's kinsman - often abrasive like her, but at least considerably more civilized. They used to have a bit of a feud going on, Umtaz always grousing, with her tobacco wad rolling up from one side of her mouth to the other, about how Urag has cobwebs for brains; and Urag responding testily that he is still very much a sure-green Orc 'and just wait till I have you pay the blood price for any books you ruin'... But then, one night, a chance encounter between the two Orcs resulted in a heart-to-heart conversation that would become one of their most cherished secrets.

A sleepless Urag was shuffling along to get some water when he heard a suspicious clicking noise coming from the Arcanaeum - and, rushing to defend his precious books with a fire ball in either hand, discovered that Umtaz had broken in after hours and built a veritable book fortress for herself, nestling in the middle with a stack of opened thick volumes in between the knees of her crossed legs and a flicker of mage light over her head. After a brief back-and-forth, Umtaz, who had whipped to her feet, knocking the books all around her, unexpectedly broke into angry tears and spat out at Urag,

"'S easy for you to be so bloody open about your love of readin'! You're old, and you've been a friggin' book worm all your life! Me, I grew up in the streets! I was raised to be a thug Orc, not a book Orc! I... I missed my chance to turn out like you, and now it's too late for me! Too late to make myself into something different! So I have to hide, and laugh at myself, and pretend that I don't give a spit about books - because thugs don't read! They are not supposed to!"

She may have blathered on and on along these lines - but it all ended with Urag grabbing her by the shoulder, shaking those damn tears out of her eyes, and telling her sternly that there is no single rock-solid path in life, and you can turn yourself into something different at any time if you put your mind to it. She was still a tad ashamed of her fascination with arcane knowledge - guess some things cannot be just punched out of your brain - but at least, from then on, when she felt like doing some clandestine midnight reading, she would find the doors wide open, and the librarian waiting
for her, a knowing little grin on his face and a tray with two mugs full of steaming Elsweyr cocoa by his side.

And now - now one of these mugs will forever stay empty, feeling so very heavy, heavier than a huge weapon wielded by one of those proper thuggish Orcs that never read. And the beverage's warmth will never again caress Urag's large, callused hands, as he picks the mug up, flinching at its weight, and wipes it again and again in a mechanic, redundant motion, and then puts it away and takes to smoothing out the dog-eared pages marking the passages that Umtaz once found interesting, while the bulky creature of ice shuffles behind his back, the whirr of its snowy air sounding like a mournful sigh after Urag tells it that 'No, little atronach, there will be no more brawling'.

Three more of these people are Umtaz's fellow apprentices. They, too, started out treating Umtaz coldly at best, because she kept pushing them away, curbing all their attempts at genial banter with pointed hostility, and saying repeatedly, with a long, squirming tobacco spit or two, that 'all this holding hands and going on about the magic of friendship is for wimps'. But that changed after a few wild capers. Onmund, who used to get quite sheepish when Umtaz silenced his tentative talk about proving himself as a mage with some cynical remark or other, unexpectedly warmed up to her when she took him dungeon-delving to the lair of a lone sorcerer that Enthir had traded Onmund's heirloom amulet to. Except that this sorcerer had now 'ascended' (as he announced to the two explorers proudly, greeting them with a grin full of razor-shard, blood-stained teeth) to the state of vampirism, and started building quite a coven around himself. And then Umtaz and Onmund ended up being chased by a whole flock of blood-suckers across the Whiterun Plains; and he got himself wounded by a blast of that vile-looking blood-red magic their pursuers kept shooting at them, so Umtaz had to spend half the race leaping over boulders and tufts of grass with a helpless, whimpering Nordling and a sack of odds and ends that she had miraculously had time to steal from under the vampire's flat bat-like nose, all tucked under her arm, occasionally turning around to thin the flapping vampire cloud at their heels with a swift charge of mage fire.

When the bloodsuckers finally fell back, Umtaz and Onmund slowed down to a crawl, her healing him along the way, and waddled up to the village of Rorikstead, and plopped themselves in front of the counter at the local inn, stretching their tired legs - and then, Umtaz utterly astonished Onmund by easily parting with what she called her 'hard-won loot' to help buy armour for the inn-keeper's son, who desperately wished to become a great warrior (scowling and insisting that she was not 'being mushy' the whole while). An evening like this... kind of has a way of pushing you, baffled and unsuspecting, towards friendship.

As does watching a magical projection of your all-mighty Telvanni relative being yelled at by an outraged Orc, till its ethereal blue aura begins to turn a deep, suffocated purple. Which is what happened to Brelyna, who had all but given up on befriending her bristly Orc dorm mate - and then almost lost her jaw, forgetting all about stifling her own squeaky sobs with a pillow while Great Uncle Neloth ranted about what an utter failure she was, and if she was not absolutely perfect at the arcane arts, why bother being a mage at all... For Umtaz, who had been lounging on her bed, pretending not to be interested in the historical novel she was flipping through, slid her feet to the floor with a heavy stomp, walked up to the Telvanni magister's projection, and bellowed at the top of her voice,

'Leave her alone, you mouldy mushroom chewer! Her name is not Perfection Mac Perfect Pants - her name is Brelyna! And this is what makes her special! A fat lot of good you do as an uncle, if you love some made-up ideal mageling child instead of the real Brelyna!'

'What are you oinking about, you boar-faced barbarian?' Neloth gasped. 'How dare you! I do not,
and shall not, ever love anyone!'  

'Oh, but you're gonna love these babies,' Umtaz smirked, slowly and dramatically raising two middle fingers in the magister's livid face.

The projection vanished with a tiny pop, never to manifest itself 'for the purpose of checking on Brelyna's progress' ever again, much to her relief, and the eruption of giggles at the memory of Uncle Neloth's face was mirrored many times over during the subsequent sleepovers, as the two young women swapped stories from their pasts (Umtaz seemed to be very careful about not giving away specific names and locations, but Brelyna did not mind), and talked about books and made bets on the colour of their professors' smallclothes, and even did each other's hair once or twice.

Umtaz would still often act reserved and deliberately rude, and tell Brelyna not to be too nice, 'I can see right through you, you are just coddling me outta pity coz you are cute and I am not' - but the Dunmer thought that at times, she managed to crack her gnarled, thick shell... Not that any of this matters now. Now, the sleepovers are off forever. Now, Umtaz's bed will remain empty, so carefully made that the smoothness of the covers is almost chilling, with no crumbs on the sheets and no overstuffed pouches of 'loot' scattered all around and no empty mead bottles rolling across the floor. And then, some day, another new apprentice will move in - and perhaps will prove even a better friend than this odd Orc, and their companionship will heal the pain in Brelyna's heart.

But that is not happening any time soon. For now, all that Brelyna has is the shattering, wounding sight of the empty bed, and Onmund's arms wrapped around her as they sway side by side and twist their mouths in an ugly sob, and the soothing purr of J'Zargo, who is also here to comfort them, who is also hurting on the inside, try as he might not to show it. Because he also came to like Umtaz (as much as he is capable of liking anyone other than himself), after, having discovered that he had been trying to trick her into testing some rigged flame cloak scrolls, she challenged him to a duel on bound weapons, which lasted for over two hours, with them darting all over the place across the College's roof, raining purple sparks over the snow drifts, and ended in a tie.

Breathless, a bit charred around the edges, and, by his own reluctant admission, 'somewhat aroused', J'Zargo offered Umtaz a truce, and if they ever clashed again, it was in a completely non-life-threatening way. But there will be no more such clashes now, will there? No more jabs at one another, no more elaborate pranks that revealed just how good at Illusion the Orc was getting, no more 'revise-offs', during which the Orc and the Khajiit furiously spat whole memorized extracts out of textbooks (and Umtaz later denied everything, because come on, she is a thug, not a scholar). No more.

No more Umtaz. And only five people affected profoundly enough. The librarian, the three apprentices - and Drevis.

Drevis... Drevis, the very first sight of whom, pointed out to her as 'the book-diddler who could teach her Illusion', made Umtaz go starry-gazed and forget how to breathe for a moment, let alone present herself as a savage, aggressive Orc.

Drevis, in whose presence she would often grow quiet and thoughtful and considerate, only baring her tusks when someone dared to mock or belittle him for his absent-mindedness, or his choice of magical specialization, or (in the case of the Winterhold Nord's) his Dunmer heritage.

Drevis, who remembers Umtaz as the owner of the brightest blue eyes, which would glimmer like miniature star planes whenever she figured out how to cast a spell.
Drevis, who, bad at figuring out how one is supposed to give incentives to good students, took her out to watch the northern lights as a reward for an excellent test score, and almost teared up when he saw that the silken billows of blue and turquoise in the sky amazed her just as much as himself.

Drevis, who wrapped Umtaz quietly into enchantment-cloaked warm blankets whenever, having drifted off to sleep over her research, she started twitching and muttering something about 'Grelod' (a woman from her childhood, as Drevis surmised, who tormented her both physically and mentally and continued to haunt her nightmares many years since).

Drevis, who once glowed with pride as the illusions crafted by Umtaz became more and more complex... Ah, to think: she actually took him for a walk in a mushroom tree grove under curly lilac clouds, recreating the description he gave her with such finesse that he was ready to believe that he was back home again, young again, up to the task of courting women again... What a fine, fine illusion!

Drevis, who started treating Umtaz as his friend, his equal rather than his student - which made her back away in shock at first. Gods, he still remembers the spear of pain that pierces his heart when he first glimpsed the horror in her eyes.

'You... You can't offer me your friendship!' she barked, her fingers peeling at the scar on her cheek, like they always did when she was nervous. 'I am... I am a bad person! I do things when I leave Winterhold! Ba... Bad things - bandit things! I don't... I don't deserve being friends with you!'

Back then, he merely shook his head and said to her 'Yes you do' - because he has always been rather... mediocre at this whole social interaction thing, and did not know what other words he should have strung on. But now - oh, now he knows. Now, when it is too late, the words have finally come to him.

You do. You do deserve it, Umtaz - you deserve all that is good and bright and pure in the world. Because no matter what darkness your life has tried to thrust you into - you are beautiful. Of body, and mind, and heart. You have constellations glimmering in your eyes, and the deepest melodies living in your voice. You are one of the most gifted scholars I have ever met - and you actually do not treat me as a joke, or an embarrassment. Seeing you, talking to you, practicing spellcraft with you - it is the highlight of my day. I do believe that I am falling in love with you, Umtaz - and it's me who does not deserve this. The happiness of being around the woman you love is clearly not made for a foolish old mer like me. But still, thank you for this.

So many words. So many flowery phrases. What is the point of mulling them over now? He is speaking with silence - and there will never be an answer. There will never be cocoa in an empty mug in the library, or hearty Orcish laughter in the apprentices' quarters, or a warm, grass-green hand in his as he walks beneath the northern lights.

There will never be anything, any possible magic, any clever illusion, that can replace the part of him that is now painfully, irrevocably missing.
The truth of Umtaz being gone, gone for good, beyond the reach of all magic, does not properly sink into Drevis' mind straight away. When Enthir's message is first passed on to him by a pale, tense Onmund and a puffy-eyed Brelyna, he responds with a small, nervous laugh and says,

'What nonsense! Umtaz is not dead! She can't be dead! She just went away on her out-of-College business, as usual - and she will be coming back any moment now! She always comes back exactly when she promises!'

Yes, exactly when she promises - and that day ought to have been a week ago. But Drevis shuts this thought off, brushes it away like a bothersome mote of mage light that has floated into his eyes during an experiment, and walks off to watch the approach to the icy bridge that links the College to the decrepit little town of Winterhold.

He has done it before - spurred on by the restless longing to see his Orc friend again, to hear her voice, to share some exciting new magical discovery with her, he has often left the relative warmth and comfort of the familiar hallways and plunged himself into the frothing snowy crucible beyond the College walls' shelter. Keeping himself warm with a summoned flaming cloak (which flaps and curls up in the wind just like a real one), he has spent hours upon hours gazing out into the wintry blackness, until being rewarded for his patience by the most heartwarming, joyous sight of all: a small clot of darkness separating from the rest, drifting past all those rippling, shimmering layers of dark-grey, and deep-blue, and fuzzy white, and sticky pitch... And finally, shaping itself into the tall, sturdy figure the mere silhouette of which has always, without fail, made Drevis grin with recognition, the corners of his mouth tingling and his heart feeling both huge and so very light inside his chest.

Any moment, any moment now, this will happen again. She will emerge from the snow storm, and wave at him, and call out hoarsely,

'Master Neloren! I think you should get back inside! It's bloody freezing out here!'

And he will give her a good-natured little reminder not to be so formal, barely hearing his own voice over the howling of the wind and the loud, triumphant drum rhythm that his heart will decide to beat when she gives him a handshake, the glow of his flame cloak spreading to her as well, warming her without leaving blister markings on her skin and highlighting her face... Oh, that beautiful face, with its strong jaw and curious metal adornments and huge, vivid blue eyes...

'Ooh, I do not mind the cold,' he will say to her, with his gaze still lost in the vibrant blueness. 'And remember: it's Drevis. We are friends now; research partners'.

Any moment now...

The moment never comes, of course. It does not, no matter how stubbornly Drevis waits for it. Each time he thinks he can see Umtaz, trudging through the churning slush, just about to approach the bridge, to reach out to him, to call his name, the dark shape that he mistakes for her turns out to be just a cloud or the outline of a Nordic cottage's porch, given the illusion of movement by the rushing torrent of snow. And whenever that happens, he feels an invisible fist, small but clenched so tightly that it seems hard as a rock, punch him violently from inside his chest, leaving the flesh of his heart sore and bruised.
The bruise keeps growing, darkening, throbbing with an incessant ache - and ends up consuming Drevis' entire heart - many, many hours later (or was it days? weeks? his eyes began to sting at one point, after all those lashes of wet snow across his face, and he sort of lost track of the passing of time; but he does think he can recall witnessing a few sunrises… sunsets? And maybe… eating?), when Faralda, whose duty it is to patrol the bridge to keep out unwanted visitors, rushes over to Drevis and hauls him off towards the stone walls that loom behind his back in the evening murk… Or is it pre-dawn murk?

'I know who you are waiting for,' she says sternly as she pushes Drevis past the cloaked statue in the courtyard. 'You must still be in denial - but I can't let you freeze out there, just because you are being… Drevis-y!

Stumbling in front of Faralda, with his protective flame spell reduced almost to nothing, his legs numb and stiff like a couple of icicles and his skin breaking into a net of burning cracks, Drevis tries to shake her off on occasion - but not too persistently. He does not really care enough to be persistent; caring about anything does not come easy when there is an ugly bloated bruise where his heart ought to be. Perhaps Faralda is right; perhaps he is being Drevis-y - seeing things that are not there, expecting to get an answer while speaking with silence, getting himself absorbed in a make-belief world... A world where Umtaz is still alive, still out there, and all he has to do is be patient, and she will return, and everything will be as it once was...

His head swimming a little, Drevis feels as if part of his essence has floated out of his body and is now looking on at his fumbling in the snow with idle, half-bored curiosity. What an adorable spectacle he makes: the naïvely hopeful old mer who has decided to play pretend. Because he cannot face the fact that the main source of warmth and contentment in his life has been snuffed out; that he is back to being the loony, ludicrous, lonely Drevis, with nothing but the cold blue lifeless light of his own magic - nothing like the blue light of Umtaz's eyes - to keep him company. Look at him sniffling and blinking and whispering that 'what if Enthir was wrong; what if that's just a rumour'... As if his games, his whispers, his hopes can ever change anything. As if this will suddenly make Umtaz... less dead.

He does not remember how he gets to his bed; Faralda must have seen him right to his quarters and helped him lie down. He becomes aware of his surroundings - the stone walls of his little room, the papers littering the floor, glowing white in the moonlight, the alchemical ingredients merging into black shapeless stacks - only when startled from his detached state by the searing pain that has begun to spread through his slowly thawing limbs... As though his bone marrow has been turned to lava.

This fiery stream devours everything: his legs, his back, his ribs, even his teeth; but somehow, it does not hurt him worse than the heart-shaped bruise in his hollow chest. He spends some time tossing and turning, trying to wrap his stupid, unwieldy old body into a pose that will ease the pain, but to no avail. Then, sighing heavily, he rolls to his back and tries to distract himself again - by another round of play-pretend. This may not bring Umtaz back to him - but what if it subsdues the pain? Because gods know he cannot function like this; no-one can function like a regular person with a bruised heart and a creaking, aching body.

Turns out that him being Drevis-y is not good for that either. Lying still in his bed, face turned up towards the ceiling, he bends his arms in the elbow and, flexing his wrists with a dry crack, starts conjuring up illusions - pale reflections of Umtaz as he remembers her, glowing silvery-blue in the murk of his room.
Umtaz laughing; not smirking after some rude remark, but actually laughing, the way the other apprentices and Drevis would make her laugh - shyly at first, covering her mouth to hide her tusks, because the cruelty of the humans that raised her, 'a lone green toad in a herd of soft pretty pink things', has locked her in the shackles of self-consciousness; and then, with more and more boldness, more and more vigour, throwing her head back and letting her happiness flood over her. Making it absolutely impossible not to join in.

Umtaz casting her spells - again, first constricted, unsure, convinced that this is not an Orcish thing to do... But eventually getting into the flow of the magic's enthralling dance, her muscular arms moving with breathtaking grace, while her fingers, hardened and chipped with many old cuts, gently pull at the invisible threads in the air, weaving them into complex sigil circles and ribbons of light - a performance that, in the flesh, would once make Drevis suppress a squeal of boyish excitement.

Umtaz moving, turning, putting her hands behind the back of her head while stretching after long and strenuous research work. Umtaz just... looking at him, happily, sadly, thoughtfully. Umtaz being herself, daring to be comfortable and unafraid of being judged - just as he was, with her around. Once.

These illusions do not quench the fire in his bones, or alleviate the sore throb of his heart-bruse; on the contrary, they add up a poignant sensation of longing that claws at his throat in an unuttered desperate groan. As they dissolve in the dark of night, the last specks of ethereal silver floating down to Drevis' upturned, flaming face, and then melting away, the visions of what he lost leave him even more exhausted, and crushed, and drained of all his magicka... plus all the water in his body, which has gushed out of his eyes in a silent salty stream. By the gods, he is so parched now!..

Wait a moment... Parched... That's it! That's it! He knows just the thing that will wash off that bruise, and put out these hungry flames!

With a little 'Oof' as something cracks and snaps somewhere around the small of his back, Drevis staggers out of bed and snaps his fingers several times - first to rekindle his flame cloak, and then to cushion his feet with a muffling spell, so as not to disturb Faralda, or anyone else. Thus prepared for pushing himself into oblivion, he creeps outside again and heads for the Winterhold inn.

He has not had much experience with drinking: a couple of sips of sujamma are usually enough to make him flushed and giggly and much too eager to talk about the wonders of Illusion for the liking of just about anyone who isn't Umtaz - and he has no idea how things will fare for him when he is confronted with that bizarre yeast-based concoctions Nord's imbibe. But he is certainly going to find out tonight - by forcing the stuff down his own throat if need be. He has to wrap himself in that spinning haze, like he has wrapped himself in his flame cloak: because the snow storm has died down, and he can see the stars, pulsing faintly through the green pall of the northern lights, and that is yet another agonizing reminder of how happy he used to be when he gazed at this very same sky with Umtaz. At this rate, his poor bruised heart will not be able to take it much longer... If he does not... what is the expression... make it sufficiently... pickled.

He hesitates for a moment in front of the door to the Frozen Hearth, suddenly remembering how his last encounter with Nords and liquor resulted in him getting stabbed by some racing drunk, who took the colour of Drevis' skin as a personal insult (Umtaz chased the fellow down to the Jarl's long house, threatening to duel with every guard until the drunk was charged and arrested). Maybe... Maybe this is not such a good idea after all? What if this place is packed full of hostile locals? Well, in that case, he will set all the... all the n'wahs on fire and clear the inn for himself! He came here to get intoxicated, and get intoxicated he shall! No-one is going to stop him!
'That's the spirit, my friend,' a low voice drawls into Drevis' ear, while a warm, heavy hand rests on his shoulder.

Drevis is so utterly taken by surprise that he almost shrieks and leaps into the air. Has he been thinking out loud? Well, that must have been really embarrassing!

But the stranger who has spoken to him, emerging out of nowhere behind his back, does not show any inclination to mock him. When Drevis turns and looks into his ruddy face, which almost seems to float in thin air, as the black robe that the man (Breton, by the looks of him) is wearing is merging with the nocturnal shadows, all he reads in his bloodshot blue eyes is understanding... And a little bit of mischief.

'I have a feeling we are going to be fast friends, you and I,' the man continues, grinning and opening the door for Drevis (by magic, it seems, for he does not see the Breton touch the knob).

'Name's Sam. And I have a little drinking game to propose. What say you?'

'Let's have a drinking game,' Drevis agrees readily.

This will probably catastrophically tarnish his (already kind of dubious) reputation at the College - but after losing Umtaz, losing everything else will seem like a bit of mildly amusing slapstick.
'Ah, there you are, you cute lil chunks of metal!' Umtaz coos, reaching out for the weapons and armour cache that this wicked-haired Forsworn lady, Kaie, has prepared for the prison escapees outside the city walls.

The supplies include Umtaz's own gear, which she was stripped of most rudely when the bloody bucket-head guards took advantage of her becoming exhausted by all that fireball-hauling and ice-shard-versus-sword-fencing (all in the narrow confines of the shrine to Talos, and then out on a precarious, slippery ledge above a frothing waterfall, which some Dwarven wise guy decided to call a street).

She is more than eager to eel inside her armour again, and then to spread her shoulders and feel its steadying, grounding weight. A heavy cuirass, crafted out of jet-black plates of polished ebony that are linked together with intricate chainmail, might seem a tad too clunky for a thief to wear - but she has mastered the Muffle spell for a reason; and plus, the thing wreathes her in smoky dark shadows whenever she crouches down into a sneaking pose, actually making it easier to lurk about undetected.

It has a whole story behind it, too: she got it from a bunch of crazy cultists who were punching each other near the statue of a snake lady, which she bumped into on her way to do a sweep job in Windhelm (she thinks it's one of the Dunmer gods; a precious... a mer like Drevis would never worship a being so nasty, but she's still gotta be respectful to him and learn the god's name proper). That lot was mighty impressed when she kidnapped Grelod - the old hag who had been in charge of beating Umtaz into a 'proper child' until she got into her first big mess for robbing the Temple of Mara and ran away, while the guards were being led around on a false trail by one of the priests, a beardy Dunmer fellow who had caught her red-handed but let her keep enough of the loot to make it out of Riften, under a solemn promise that she would 'turn her life around' (Hah! As if!).

Having subdued Grelod with magic and brought her to the shrine, Umtaz let the cultists sacrifice her to the snake lady. She did not scream as much as Umtaz remembers herself and the other kids screaming at the strikes of her iron poker, or broom handle, or whatever she happened to be holding at that moment; or as much as Umtaz screamed when the hag discovered the secret stash of food she would pilfer at the market stalls and cook for her fellow orphans at night, and splashed a panful of boiling grease into her face, giving Umtaz her largest scar, which takes up all of her right cheek. But eh, it had to suffice.

And for that sacrifice - plus killing some bandit lord - she got this sweet ebony get-up. She hears that the orphanage Grelod used to be in charge of is in good hands now, and even drops some skimmings of her loot now and again at their door as a 'donation from a mysterious benefactor' (hopefully, none of the folk at the Guild got wind of that). And even though all those things the hag used to say to her do not ring any less true - because she sure is ugly, and useless, and unwanted - at least when she is wearing the cuirass, she can pretend that she has won.

In all, it's still a welcome change from these skimpy furs Team Madanach had her pull over herself when they were about to exit the Dwarven tunnels they'd made their escape through.
She really, really does not appreciate wearing garb that threatens to slip off and make her tits whip about all over the place at any sudden move of hers - and the 'old magics' that are supposedly woven through her new beast pelt undies, adding flickering green highlights to the matted fur, make her kind of queasy... Like there's someone whispering some supposedly cryptic crap at the back of her skull.

But she takes care not to mention any of this out loud - because she still remembers the toothy grin that split across Kaie's swarthy face and the glimmer that danced in her pale eyes, while she described in meticulous detail how many guards she had to kill, with quiet, merciless swiftness, in order to get Umtaz's confiscated belongings back.

They are ruthless, these wild Reachmen; they do not stop to get lovey-dovey and cuddly when something is getting in the way of their mission. Best not get on their bad side if you are satisfied with the way the gods decided to glue your limbs together, and to fill your mouth with teeth, and to keep all the blood flowing on the inside.

This is what any pragmatic person would say anyway; and she's doing just that, right? Right? Being pragmatic?

Ah, Daedra farts - who is she kidding! She doesn't wanna hurt the Forsworn's feelings because she has kinda... befriended them. Just like she has befriended those stupid Winterhold apprentices. She may try to deny it, but this knowledge remains inside her mind, deep, deep down, lodging its claws good and tight and refusing to get kicked out or shaken off: she maybe, in a way, sort of likes them now.

They have mined silver together, under the flying, cracking whip of the Orc overseer (before she left, promising to return in two weeks' time to weigh how much metal they've whacked out of the rock and decide whether or not they have deserved to be fed).

They have opened up an escape tunnel into the ancient ruins together, and dodged the staggering steam attacks and slashing swipes of the Dwarves' metal guardians together, and crawled out into the open together, Umtaz having to give Madanach her shoulder to lean against as he was almost pushed off his feet by the burning wave of sunlight, seeping through his coarse, dust-eaten skin for the first time in twenty years (the old codger said so to Umtaz himself: he had forgotten what the sun looked like, and had to take a little breather to fully get used to it - which made her feel rather sorry for him).

They have raced into the great wide open together, raining flames and lightning on any Nord guard that dared to stand in their path (nothing more gratifying than setting guards on fire; Umtaz does not know if the folks back in the Ratway would have approved, but she sure as Oblivion had one mammoth of a time).

So yeah. They are all one gang now - and in order not to disappoint her gang mates, Umtaz makes a point of coming up with a better excuse than 'I am happy to change back cuz your armour leaves too much of me open and talks to me weird'.

'I still have work to do in the city,' she says, flexing her muscles and then smoothing out the chainmail. She remembers to put in as much rough lingo ('colloquialisms' she thinks the proper word is), too. She always downplays her vocabulary and intelligence, unless she is with Drevis.

'The folks remember me as this screamin’ green biddy in Forsworn get-up who roasted guards with
Madanach - they don't remember the Orc warrior in black armour, because I was real sneaky when investigating your lil... arrangement. Picked Thonar's notes right outta his pants... pants pocket. So I best return in this here cuirass if I don't wanna scare the court mage outta his robes'.

And that is not exactly a made-up excuse either. The sole reason why she came to Markarth in the first place was to find some High Elf geezer and prod him with questions about the Falmer language. She could never have foreseen that, moments after she walked through the gates of what one of the bucket-heads called 'the safest city in the Reach', some ragged kid with tattoos all over his face would leap out, eyes bugging and knife bared, scream 'Glory to the Forsworn!' and stab the customer at the jewellery stall, just as Umtaz was beginning to debate with herself whether the lady was worth pickpocketing.

In hindsight, she probably wasn't; she would have likely caught Umtaz's hand on her purse with them honed reflexes - cuz, as it turned out, she was no random gawking traveller that you can pick off like a cherry tree in between two twitches of a skeever's nose. She was an undercover agent, sent to investigate the inner workings of Markarth, and all those lies and schemes and plots that twist into a slurping slimy mess behind the scenes, like bugs that live under the wall panels of one of those homes that look all fancy on the outside but in reality, are rotten to the core. Umtaz squished most of the bugs, thankfully - and now she can get back to her actual Markarth mission.

Because the sooner she gets done with figuring out what has been going on with the Thieves' Guild, the sooner she can show up back in Winterhold and explain to the apprentices - and to Drevis! because he must be so worried about her not showing up for her lessons! - that no, she has not vanished off the face of Nirn. No, she is not dead. She was, for a while - but she got better.

The thing was, she and Mercer Frey went on this long and kinda tedious dungeon crawl in search of the double-crossing Dunmer that was scheming against the Guild (tedious because Mercer, too preoccupied by singing praise to himself for being such a great and cunning thief, kept walking into traps, and Umtaz had to pull him out of spike pits and the like by the seat of his flaming pants).

And at the end of that crawl, the Dunmer emerged in person, long brown cloak swooshing all mysterious-like and a pair of amethyst eyes blazing in the shadowy gap between a lowered leather cowl and a pulled-up scarf. She had an arrow all notched and ready - and with a brief, echoing twang, she released it, hitting Umtaz straight in the sliver of her skin that was not protected by chainmail, with such skill and seemingly effortless precision that Umtaz might as well have been a big fat target dummy rather than a fully armoured warrior.

And when Umtaz hurtled down into nothing, and the ruins around her grew all askew, she thought she saw Mercer, striding across the ceiling, with the charred mark of the exploding traps still glaringly visible on his arse. Having explained, in that insufferable storybook villain tone, that he had been the double-crosser all along, and that he had framed the Dunmer because she posed a threat to him, just as Umtaz did, he leaned down - and stabbed her, the dung-eating bastard!

Or did the stabbing come first, and the arrow followed later? She is honestly somewhat fuzzy on that part. All she remembers is the bright orange flare of Mercer's Dwemer blade (looted from some stuffy, endless booby-trapped ruin like this one, no doubt), and the jagged groove along its edge, which formed one of those square maze-like patterns the Dwarves seemed to go wild over, and was slowly getting traced over with deep crimson as the etched lines filled up with Umtaz's blood. Then, her vision grew blotchy with the fuzzy chunks of green fluff - the same chunks that clogged up her ears and replaced her tongue. The green gradually darkened to black, which flooded the whole damn world around her, like icy water flowing on a moonless night... And Umtaz
thought to herself, the back of her head hurting like mad, like someone was putting a lot of pressure on her skull and trying to crush it,

'Well, this is it. I am dead. Wonder what Malacath will make of me? Probably nothing too flattering; I did not do a very good job being a proper Orc... Not after I went all soft and squishy over meeting these apprentice wimps and... Drevis... Oh gods, Drevis! He... He will go to Azura's Halls after he dies, won't he? I will never see him again, for all eternity! Damn it, I hate being dead already!'

What a bloody relief that she did get better. That when the blackness cleared, she woke up not in the heart of that Ashen Forge place she heard about from stronghold Orcs, but at a little campsite in the heart of the snowy wilds, all cosied up in a cocoon of blankets, with the Dunmer watching her closely while squatting in front of a little makeshift fire pit and stirring the embers with a stick. She must have used fir cones for kindling, because Dibella's tits, the rich, heavy smell of tar was something else! It reminded Umtaz of that little solution she and Drevis brewed once, to cleanse the acrid fumes left over from some botched experiment or other. That was when they discovered that, apart from spell-casting, they both were great fans of potion-making - and this made Drevis' eyes sparkle brighter than any of those fancy rubies or whatever she had ever had a chance to loot, a net of tiny wrinkles spreading out of their corners as he smiled... And the look on his face, together with a lung-ful of that fresh piney smell, made her go all giddy, as though she had just raced full-speed up a steep, scenic cliff, like the ones looming over the green valley where Riverwood is tucked in, and then looked over the edge and...

Whoah. That was way too much unnecessary mushiness going on in her stupid head. Back to setting her story straight.

When the Dunmer saw that Umtaz was awake, she smirked at her, shoved a bunch of potions into her still kinda limp arms, and introduced herself as Karliah.

Umtaz's first gut instinct was to snarl at the little elf for using her for target practice - but Karliah reassured her that her arrow shot had actually kept Umtaz alive: the special paralytic poison had slowed down her heart and prevented her from losing too much blood when Mercer stabbed her. So yeah, like she phrased it before: she was dead, but she got better.

As the restorative potions set to work, boosted by bits of Umtaz's own healing magic (which she began to cast on herself the moment she stopped feeling too groggy), Karliah went on talking about Mercer, and what a despicable flea-bitten weasel he was. She did not really call him that, but Umtaz was more than ready to fill in the gaps. The blighter had betrayed the Guild - the first place ever in her life where she could return to more than once, the way normal people return home (the second being the College, but she still has a bit of a hard time getting herself to believe that she belongs there). He had made a bloody piece of Orc kebab out of her and left her for dead - but most horribly of all, he had killed the man Karliah loved!

That totally had Umtaz sold to help the elf bring Mercer down - after all, if someone ever gets it into their head to hurt Drevis, she is ready to do anything to make them regret it! Not that she... Not that she loves Drevis; she just hates seeing him come to harm, is all. Who wouldn't hate for something like that to happen to such a brilliant, gentle, sweet, handsome elf? Who wouldn't want to make sure that he is safe and happy and able to cast his incredible spells in peace, and look so goddamn gorgeous as the illusions of lush, many-petalled flowers and silvery trees spring up all around him during 'morning practice', and little blue sparkles float over his head?

Anyway. As Umtaz is the one who weaves spells, while Karliah is more of a sneaky cloak and
dagger type, the Dunmer asked her to establish a magical link with Winterhold, so that she could talk, through an ethereal projection of herself, to her dead lover's friend who lived there, and ask him for help. That friend turned out to be none other than Enthir - Enthir, who could have spotted Umtaz and spread the news of her being back from her misadventures, alive and kicking! Who could have waltzed into Drevis’ quarters, with that sly look of his, and said to him,

'Guess who's returning soon?'

But no - Enthir had no idea she was there. Because Umtaz had to maintain the projection spell, so all he saw was Karliah, prattling on and on about betrayals and coded journals and wizard experts, while Umtaz remained behind the scenes, all of her innards aching as an unuttered scream thrashed inside her body,

'Hey! Heeey! Enthir! It's me! Umtaz! I am all right! And I will return, like I promised! Pass it on to Drevis, will you?'

And then, the spell frizzled out, and Enthir's pale, purplish-shaded reflection on the magical link's other side faded away, and off Umtaz went to Markarth, with her Winterhold friends (she can call them that, right? she can call Drevis that?) still being left in the dark.

She considered writing to them, but Karliah talked her out of it.

'The longer everyone thinks you are out of the picture, the more advantage we have over Mercer,' she commented, seeing Umtaz off. 'Element of surprise and all'.

Makes sense, kinda. And she never did tell Karliah the whole truth. She never let Karliah know that, among the people she knows in Winterhold, there is someone who is as special to this ugly old Orc as her Gallus was to her. Because that would have been stupid. Drevis is not... They are not... Gah, she just wants to leave this journal decoding thing behind her!

'I have work to do in the city,' she repeats to the Forsworn, giving a farewell handshake to each of them. 'Guess I will be seeing you lot around'.

'Oh, you will,' Madanach says, his upper lip sliding up and baring his teeth and a sliver of gum. 'As the sky above us rains red'.

'Told ya,' Madanach's huge, impressively hairy, one-eyed bodyguard, Borkul the Beast, grunts under his breath when it is his turn to get a handshake. 'Can't spell Madanach without Mad. Or so the saying goes. Me, I never was much for spelling'.

Umtaz snorts to show her appreciation of Borkul's humour. He evidently likes that: the gaze of his only eye keeps travelling back to her even after he concludes his handshake with a playful fist bump against her shoulder and steps away.

The big guy seems to have taken a bit of a shine to her: she brawled with him for the right to access Madanach's cell in Cidhna Mine, and won, too - which he was almost girlishly thrilled about. Apparently, everyone in that joint was too scared of him to as much as try to tackle him in a fight, and her arrival had presented him with the first true challenge in years.

'Been a while since I tasted my own blood,' he announced to her, with a nonchalantly cheerful note in his voice, after getting up from the kneeling pose one of her punches had landed him in. 'Sour. Thanks for the brawl, new meat. It was fun'.
Since that moment, during their entire escape, Umtaz would often catch Borkul sizing her up approvingly. She supposes she should be flattered: he is a proper Orc, after all, all comfy and confident in the skin of a brawny bandit, the way she herself has never been, not fully. He is what she ought to aspire to - he is the sort of fellow in whose company she belongs. He might even take her without asking her to hide her face, the way elves or humans have done while bedding her. And this is all she can ever ask for, right? She cannot really take her fantasies seriously, can she? The ones where Drevis looks her in the eyes the whole time, and actually begins with kissing, like they do in books; where his hair is silky-soft under her fingertips, and his lips gently half-parted as she traces them; where he touches her skin, the brush of his hand butterfly-light, and smiles at her, his cheeks flushed and his pupils widened; where he is slow and tender and thoughtful, like no lover has ever been with her, and cuddles with her afterwards...

None of that is ever gonna happen. Not with her. Not with him. Daydreaming about him is like speaking with silence. He is way, way out of her league, and it goes without saying that he does not feel the same way about her... And hey - maybe he is not worried at all. Maybe he is relieved to see her gone, with her puppy eyes and pathetic attempts at magic.

Maybe she should not hurry up with that Gallus mission. Just lounge about in the city for as long as she can; pay a visit to Dibella's Temple to chat and play with that kid she had to rescue for the priestesses last time she was in these parts, after that statue job went sour...

Yeah, maybe the goddess has 'blessed' the little thing with visions and all that, and she needs to train to become the next Sybil of Dibella - but she is, what, ten years old? Life can get pretty sickening when you are ten years old and stuck doing your homework in some stuffy temple all day, every day, separated from your parents and all the things that used to be so familiar to you... Maybe even with an added sprinkling of nightmares from the time you were kidnapped by the Forsworn for one of their 'let the skies rain red' rituals.

Sure, at least the kid is cared for, and has a roof over her head, and Umtaz can place a safe bet that the priestesses don't beat her - but just because she herself had it worse as a child, doesn't mean she gets to scoff at the tiny Sybil and tell her to suck it up!

Yeah. That's settled then. She is gonna snoop about that court wizard and his Falmer decoding thingamabob, then cheer up the Sybil... And then, well, she doesn't know - drop by to say hi to the Forsworn again? Get fucked by Borkul to get Drevis off her mind?

She'll see. For now, she has left her new gang behind, and is trudging towards the mist-cloaked stone towers of Markarth, her heart having suddenly gotten the same colour and texture and weight as her cuirass.

Chapter End Notes

This story is going to have four parts, after all, because this chapter turned out way too long due to my infodumps on Umtaz's previous adventures, and I had to put off the reunion till the next installment. The main focus on Umtaz and Drevis finally getting to resolve their romantic and sexual tension, but I also needed to outline some potential side fic ideas before I forgot.
Chapter 4

It hurts to be dragged back into existence - out of some black, rotting mire, judging by the stale taste that lingers at the back of his mouth and under his heavy, sticky tongue. It hurts to blink, especially since each excruciatingly slow bat of his eyelids not only sends a drilling pulse back to his temples, but also clears off the fog around him, bit by bit, until everything is flooded by angry bright yellow light, which burns through his eyes so much that he has to shut them right and shrink his head into his shoulders, whimpering softly... Which also hurts.

And he cannot even get started on the noises. So many noises. So much brushing and scraping against the floor (might as well have been against his own exposed, throbbing brain); so many thunderous footsteps... And so few words to describe how much it all hurts.

The voice is the worst. Filled with anger, shrill and sharp, like a long needle passing into his ear and scraping at the inside of his skull, it rings out of nowhere and demands that he wake. But

'That's right! Wake up!' it repeats, over and over, each exclamation point a club that pounds against his poor head. 'Time to open your eyes and clean up your mess, you drunken blasphemer!'

That last part makes him comply - out of sheer terror more than anything else. Blasphemer? What... How? Why? Has he committed a crime? When did he manage to do that? And where exactly is he?

A few more agonizing blinks reveal that this is not the Frozen Hearth: the building where he is lying on the floor has a much taller ceiling (it does keep continuously floating up and down a couple of inches, but the fact remains), and its walls seem to be made not out of brownish wood, but out of something grey... Stone? Is stone supposed to be so fuzzy? And oh dear gods - the searing orange blob that keeps yelling at him is gradually shaping out to be a human woman in a priestess' robe.

'Ooh, right,' she jeers, hands on her hips and foot stomping the floor and causing a tiny but still rattling earthquake. 'Now you're gonna say you don't remember bursting into the holy sanctum of Dibella, turning it upside-down... And fondling the statuary!' 

The sanctum of Dibella? B-but... But Winterhold has no major shrines dedicated to this Divine... Not that he knows of... Has that 'drinking game' he supposedly entered with that bleary-eyed fellow - Semm? Seam? Sam? - brought him all the way to Markarth? Or has he been at it for so long that the people of Winterhold have managed to build a whole new temple, without him even noticing? He does not remember... He does not remember anything... Not even whether or not the game was actually entertaining.
'He did not fondle the statues, Senna,' another voice rings out - friendly, but just as painful to listen to - while a second orange blob floats up to him, a deep-blue orb hovering by its side.

He thinks he can recognize it, his mage's reflexes sluggishly awakening. It is the aura of a Restoration spell used to treat minor diseases - and when it glides up to him and touches his forehead, a faint chill tickles his skin, and most of the burning pain subsides. He is still woozy, and it takes a couple of tries for him to stand upright; but at least, the rotten taste in his mouth is gone, and it looks like he will be spared from the crushing shame of vomiting. The stone chamber's walls and ceiling have also stopped bobbing about among tufts of mist, and the two priestesses' voices no longer make his ears bleed.

'He just sort of... hugged them round the knees,' the second priestess goes on, nodding in satisfaction at her handiwork. 'And also cried a lot, and asked why none of the statues was an Orc'.

His back and armpits grow sticky with cold sweat. He... He did that? He must have been thinking about Umtaz, even in a drunken daze... So the intoxication did not bring him oblivion, after all; not in the way he wanted to. His heart is still bruised an aching; he can feel it now, more and more acutely, what with the fog being gone - and the only thing that he forgot was what an utter fool he had made of himself.

'A... A thousand apologies,' he stutters, pressing his hand against his forehead and shooting a tentative glance up at the statues of the goddess that line the hall - tall and imposing, with smooth, glinting carved arms and... bared breasts that have been rendered by the sculptor with a rather discomforting realism.

While he is looking around, he also discovers that the less friendly priestess, Senna, was hardly exaggerating when she said that he had turned the sanctum upside-down. The floor is littered with empty bottles and scraps of greasy paper that must have been used to wrap up something (he is not certain that he wants to find out what); while some of the pews have been turned over and incense bowls, shattered to bits.

With a tiny squeak at the back of his throat, he makes a swaying step forward and drives his freshly awakened mind to focus on a telekinetic spell, which, after a couple of initial hiccups (figurative, thank the gods) flares into a steady, green glow, splitting apart into several long threads that wrap over the scattered furniture and drag it across the floor to places where he thinks it belongs.

He would have done this even if Senna the priestess did not command him to. This is by far not the first time when he has inadvertently wrecked someone else's property - but that does not make him feel any less sheepish. He should never have listened to that Sam... Who is nowhere to be seen, by
the way. Maybe... Maybe he imagined him. Or conjured him up as an illusion - a make-believe drinking buddy to make himself feel less pathetic.

He is so caught up in berating himself that he does not even notice that there is a small human child straddling a bench that he is trying to get in line. It's a girl - a Nord, most likely - with dark hair that is slightly frizzy for not having been properly combed, and wearing something that could be both a white ceremonial vestment and a night gown.

'I think an Orc statue would be great, Orla,' she says to the friendly priestess, dangling her legs carelessly as the bench floats above the floor.

'My friend Umtaz is an Orc. She saved me from the wild men and carried me in her arms all the way back to Markarth because I was so weak and scared, and didn't even break a sweat. She was also quite worried that I was still sobbing - just a little, though! I am not a baby! So she told me this incredible story about a brave and cunning rogue who beat traps and ran from guards and saved the prince who'd been captured by an evil wizard. And then I smiled, and she smiled too, and suddenly I felt much, much better. So I think... If an Orc did me such a good turn, and I am sort of your boss now, I could order you so Orcify one of the statues as a present to her'.

At some point during her little speech, the bench came crashing down, no longer sustained by the telekinesis spell (for the spellcaster seemed to have suddenly been drained of all strength, barely capable of doing anything save for taking deep breaths and keeping his mouth tightly pursed lest his heart leap out). It was only Senna's intervention that has prevented the child from tumbling down and getting injured.

'You are not our boss, Fjotra,' she says sternly, after catching the girl into her arms and setting her down to the floor. 'You are a Dibellan Sybil in training - and you should be having your meditation session with Hamal, not prancing about with your bed hair! And you...'

She glares at the apologetic, slightly tremulous caster, who has picked up the threads of telekinesis again.

'If you are not more careful, you may find yourself hurtling down the stairs with fire eating away your...'

She inhales deeply, evidently figuring that such language is not for the ears of a child, even one anointed by the goddess of... adult themes.
Making use of the pause, Fjotra prances up to the awkwardly mumbling 'blasphemer', stands firmly with her back to him to block out his downcast figure and keep the grown-up's wrath at bay as best she can, and declares,

'Don't be mean to him, Senna! This is Drevis - he was the prince in the story!'  

Drevis loses control of his spell again, almost hitting the poor innocent Orla on the back of her head with a bottle.

'I... You... How...' he mouths, his heart working itself into a frenzy again.

The girl turns to him, frowning.

'Oh. I called you by your name before you introduced yourself, didn't I? I do that a lot. Sometimes I look at people and just... Know things about them. Mistress Hamal is helping me make sense of that. Which means lots and lots of boring lessons. But yeah - I know you are Drevis, and I know that Umtaz thought of you when she told me that story. So... You must be her friend, too, right?. Wait, why are you crying?'

He... He really is doing that, isn't he? He seems to have sunk to the nearest pew he has just finished turning over in the air, and his face has suddenly become flushed and wet. He does not know how the adult priestesses have responded to the little scene - for the stinging salty drops in his eyes have reduced them to orange blobs again - but the child has promptly climbed onto the seat to nestle close to him, and is now searching his face with her round, worried eyes.

Regardless of whether or not her Sybil powers have already made the little one aware of what happened to Umtaz, Drevis does not have it in him to tell this sweet, trusting child that her friend, her protective, courageous friend, who tore her out of 'the wild men's' clutches and brought her to safety, and made sure than her sobs turned into a smile, is gone forever. So instead, as soon as he conquers that sharp-edged, hard-to-swallow lump in his throat, and is capable of speaking again, all he says is,

'I... I am crying because of how much I care for Umtaz'.

While he is getting the words out, his voice sounds like something's cracking - and it turns out that the 'something' has been the inner dam pressing down on all his thoughts of Umtaz, keeping them locked away in a messy heap that would come close to flowing over the brim at time, but not
quite... Not until now. Now, the crack has set the thoughts free - and before he himself knows it, the dam is no more, and all that he has been mulling over is flowing out, in a torrential stream of hasty, breathless speech, which is sometimes interrupted by squeaky hiccups as he chokes on his own tears.

'She... She is the best thing that ever happened to me; when she is near, I feel more myself than when I am left alone with nothing but my... my m-m-musings on ma-magic to keep me company... I... I do not usually feel like this when other people are near; I get aw... awkward and clumsy and lu... ludicrous... But Umtaz... She is the b-best research companion... the b-best friend... I could ask for... Even though, for some reason, everyone thinks that she is coarse and uncultured and not very intelligent... M-may... Maybe it's because she leads them on s-sometimes... But the truth is... She - she is brilliant! And beautiful! She has such striking eyes! And that scar - and her overall bold, fierce look, with that thing she does with her hair, and all those earrings, and the black facial paint she wears... Of course, she is what young people would call... out of my league, but I can still... still admire her quietly... And sometimes... When she stands against the light... A black silhouette... with these fine strokes of bright blue... on her forehead... and nose... and lip... I can picture myself... kissing those lips... Oh, oh gods - you are a child! I should not have said that! I should not have said any of that! Because what's the point now...'

He closes his eyes, the stinging haven gotten too much to bear, and presses his fingertips against his lids. The temple falls silent - it must be quite a shock to witness his stupid antics, as always... But the silence does not last for long, broken by a hoarse outcry, and more footsteps again, hurrying towards him, accompanied by a distinct metallic clamour. Fjotra giggles joyfully for some reason - and a lowered voice whispers, 'Hey kid,' to her... A voice that he recognizes; a voice that he should not be hearing ever again.

So he has gone beyond visual to auditory illusions, then? Conjured up a spell - without even realizing what he was casting - that allows him to bring a tiny bit of Umtaz back?

He wonders if she will be there if he opens his eyes; if the voice is accompanied by an image, like it was in the case of his delirium about Sam the drinking buddy... His stomach clenching tight, his heart seeming to grow both hot and hardened like a lump of heated up coal, he dares to look - and there she is. Sitting next to him, with Fjotra having apparently gotten up and moved aside to make room for her (or simply vanished as the illusion took up the entirety of Drevis' consciousness).

It is overwhelming, Umtaz being so close to him, so solid, so lifeline... Just as he remembers her... Except... Except that she is crying too, her nose twitching a bit and her eyeliner and war paint running down her face is a greyish stream.

This... This can't be right! Illusions are based on mental images, on memories and fantasies, and he has never seen, or imagined, Umtaz cry before. Not like this - not giving herself fully to her tears, letting them flow without reservation.
He may have caught sight of moisture glinting in her eyes when she drew herself up to her full height and lashed out angrily at whoever mocked her or threatened her friends. But this... this is unlike Umtaz; and it frightens him. It drives him to reach forward and embrace her, to offer her comfort, even though none of this is real. Even though he is actually speaking with silence.

He may have started having doubts - but what other explanation is there? What else could this be... A ghost visiting him, perhaps? Umtaz's spirit drawn to him for one last bittersweet goodbye? Which would mean that... that he was important...

But either way, this is not the real Umtaz, the Umtaz that he lost... And yet, he still wants her to dry her tears.

'Hush, my love, hush,' he murmurs, pressing his cheeks against hers, so that their tears mix together (a most... realistic effect; just as the feeling of her scar's rough texture against his skin - once more, he almost lets himself be swayed into conviction by these intriguing details of his own magical spectacle - or of this manifestation from Aetherius).

'Please do not cry... Whatever caused you pain, we are going to work through it together, I promise'.

His words may not carry any weight now, when it is far too late, but he likes to believe that, if Umtaz were truly here in the flesh, he would have told her the same.

'I am sorry...' she sniffs, her voice softer than he can ever recall, even if he thinks back to their quiet, peaceful conversations when no-one else could hear Umtaz speak and she allowed herself to mellow.

'I just... I had no idea that you cared...'

Oh, so that's what this is about. The purpose of this illusion - or of this haunting - is to give him a second chance. So he can say the things he has never brought himself to say when she was still alive.

Well then, so be it. He can hardly make the priestesses think him more of a Shivering Isles case than he already is, right?
'I do care,' he says earnestly, drawing away from her and straightening his back. 'And it saddens me that you would believe otherwise. There is so much more to you than you give yourself credit for - and the more time I spend getting to know you, the deeper my affection grows'.

He blushes and looks down, his chest filled with so much frantic fluttering that one would think he was pouring his heart out to an actual person.

'I... I know that... That when a man confesses his love to a woman... This can be taken for... A demand to love him in return... But... But I know that you would never love such a... fumbling old mer... I just wish you could love yourself... That's all... All I ever wanted...'

He hunches his back again, tears getting the better of him - and then almost falls off his seat, as Umtaz leaps up and bellows, in that gruff Orcish voice he would switch to whenever their blissful solitude was interrupted by someone else,

'All right, that's it! I may have... almost fallen for your creepy Dibellan magic, but this is too much! Will you lot stop cookin' up this visions of the... things I... was totally not thinking about!'

'Oh no,' Fjotra gasps, rushing over back to the pew. 'You think it's not real too?! Drevis thinks that you're not real, and now...'

'What? Like he is?!' Umtaz cuts her short irascibly, tears rippling through her voice again. 'What would he be doing in Markarth?! Why would he be saying all these things to me?? No, it's just some weird... Mind control thingy! An illusion spell - or something the air, maybe! Psych... Psychedelic Dibellan incense! Mauloch's hairy butthole, I just came here to visit you, Fjotra! I didn't ask for my heart to be messed with like this!'

Senna reminds Drevis and everyone else that she is still there by scoffing loudly.

'Oh, he is real all right! Staggered in not long ago, drunk as a dead skeever in a vat of wine, screamed something about a goat from Rorikstead, and then caused more wreckage than all of the Hold's Reachmen combined!'

This is getting more and more confusing. The priestesses can obviously see Umtaz too, as can Fjotra (who, all by herself, may not be too reliable a witness, as she has powers that go beyond observing the physical world). Can this mean... Can she be... But... But everyone told him... that he
was just in denial... Speaking with... silence...

And oh dear stars, he is in Markarth, after all! What an impossible journey that must have been! In the company of a goat from Rorikstead, too! Goodness, he will have to seek out that poor animal and make sure that he did not set it on fire or anything. Later.

'Now I know that drowning my sorrows was an awful idea,' Drevis says meekly. 'But I had to do something about the pain of losing... someone so dear to me'.

Umtaz's jaw hangs almost unhealthily low, revealing that her tongue has been pierced just like so many other parts of her face (and, despite the situation's emotional charge, he cannot keep from saying to himself that, were he actually desirable from Umtaz's point of view, this tongue could find so very many uses... Stupid Dunmer blood. Stupid mid-life crisis).

At length, she snaps her mouth shut, and opens it again just wide enough to whisper huskily,

'So what you are saying... You are really here... You really did mean all of this... about me... And you were so hurt... By me being gone... That you... You tried to... Oh Drevis!'

Her voice abruptly soars in pitch - and, again, the scowling Orc vanishes, giving way to the sweet, tender mage, who throws herself on her knees before her flabbergasted research partner and lays her head on his lap, holding on tightly to his legs,

'Drevis... I am so sorry... I am not dead! I was never dead, I swear! Not for long, anyway! I was just... I got hit with a poisoned arrow, and people assumed I was gone! But I am here now; you have not lost me! I am real - we are both real! And...'

She lifts her head and gazes up at him, her eyes filled with that enchanting starlit blueness which not even the most masterful illusion could ever quite replicate. It is at this moment that it hits him, with the speed and impact of a Dwemer spinning blade trap. This is not a dream. Or a spell. Or a hallucination. Or a ghost. Umtaz is alive, and by his side, and she knows how he feels about her inner beauty - and by Azura, he does not care if there are people watching!

In the meanwhile, she goes on talking, moving her hands up to clutch at his - and what she says high on makes his jaw repeat the same dangerous motion.
'Oh gods, Drevis - I... I do love you. I think I fell for you the moment I saw you. What you call your "fumbling" is precisely what makes you special! I have never been so... smitten with anyone as with you! But I could never dream that you would like me back... Even a little bit...'

'More than a little bit,' he chokes, pulling them both to their feet - and, with a brief caress of his fingers along the outline of Umtaz's face, gives her a kiss.

He leans away from her almost the very moment their lips touch, his fingertips tingling and his spine coated in a soft layer of warmth that ebbs and flows like an unseen tide. Then, hardly giving him a second to catch his breath, Umtaz yanks him towards her again, and begins kissing him back, in long, thirsty draughts that are interrupted by bouts of inaudible laughter. And her tongue does come into play, after all, touching his in teasing motions that he tries his best to catch up with - while both of them begin to cry again, this time with happiness.

'Yay!' Fjotra sings in the background. 'Dibella is gonna love this!'

Hearing that, both of them have to stop, gaping a bit cluelessly at their surroundings, Umtaz instinctively edging to the front of Drevis, ready, as she always is, to shield him from any ridicule he might face.

But the priestesses, it seems, are not inclined to mock him; Orla even wipes at the corner of her eye. Senna seems less moved - but at least she is no longer yelling at Drevis.

'Well, then, Dunmer,' she says, looking over the rearranged furniture. 'You have done your share of the work to make up for your atrocious behaviour. Go now, with Dibella's blessings. Please do hurry up towards the door'.

'Yeah, about that,' Umtaz comments after she gives Fjotra a parting bear hug, plays a swift but seemingly very complicated hand-clapping and finger-waggling game with her, and heads out by Drevis' side. 'A goat from Rorikstead?'

Oh no. She remembered that bit. Will she hate him now? Will she decide he is beneath her, after all?

'I do not remember any of this,' he says nervously, almost stepping off down the steep drop just outside the temple's walls. 'I do not remember anything except grieving for you... and wanting to... forget...'
'Oh, no, don't give me that look!' she cries out, catching him before he falls. 'I know that feeling - waiting for people to judge you! It is the most horrible fear of all - but around me, it will never come true for you; you can always be certain of that. I only asked because I was wondering if you might want to investigate what exactly happened in Rorikstead. To ease your own conscience'.

'The thought did cross my mind,' Drevis admits - and hesitantly reaches for Umtaz's hand. 'And if you are not too busy... Perhaps we could... Make the journey together?'

'Of course!' she replies.

And grips his hand tighter.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!