This is how legends are made

by CompanyPolicy

Summary

The gods disapprove of the mortal currently destined to be the Dragonborn, so a new one is
found and brought to Skyrim.

Unfortunately, she's from a different dimension and doesn't like the sound of this whole "hero" thing. So, Akatosh gives her a deal she literally can't refuse: she gets sent to Skyrim two years before Alduin's return to prepare herself to fight the World Eater. If the original Dragonborn takes their rightful place, then she gets to go home; if not, Alduin awaits. Sounds like no big deal, right? Well, not so much. Nirn has more to offer than what a video game can show, and Rowan's right in the middle of it.

Alternately: The destination may be your destiny, but how you get there isn't.

Notes

whaddup it's corvid with another oc y'all
The beginning no one will know about

“So, let me get this straight,” the young woman, with a height of 5’5” and weighing no more than one hundred and thirty-five pounds, said. “You—Akatosh, dragon god of time and leader of the divines—brought me—a nobody with no weapons training or fighting experience to Nirn—a separate plane of existence that’s fictional in my world—to be the Dragonborn because the one who’s supposed to be the Dragonborn doesn’t meet your standards.”

Akatosh, in all his ‘dragon shaped like a mortal, wrapped in a shimmering, flowing robe’ glory, stared down at her. “Correct.”

Okay. Freeze frame. Pause, back it up, rewind. Let’s give the overview before we continue, all right?

The woman, who for now shall remain unnamed until she decides otherwise, was just sitting at home—minding her own damn business and staring into the Void because that’s what Depressed Bitches do at home alone—when a hand—that’s right, a hand—came out of nowhere and drug her to where she now stood. Which was . . . somewhere. She was pretty sure it was a pocket dimension of some kind because the entire place was pitch black except for what was illuminated by the hovering lights on either side of Akatosh’s throne. The floor in front of her glittered like wet stone, but behind her was unending pitch blackness; however, despite being unable to see anything except Akatosh, she knew they were alone.

Upon the woman’s arrival, Akatosh had explained that since the destined Dragonborn was unworthy of the title and power, she would be taking their place.

Which was such a fucking bad idea, y’all. Like, she couldn’t even begin to say how terrible a plan that was. It was such a tremendous fuckup that she was trying to argue with a fucking god, for Christ’s sake.

“Uh, look, sir, it’s an honor to be considered, but, um, I’m not the right choice—”

“Are you questioning my judgement, mortal?” Akatosh interrupted.

Her gut twisted into an uncomfortably tight knot. Cold sweat dripped down the back of her neck and along the length of her spine to pool in the dip at its end. Just say it. He’ll either kill you or he won’t.

“I—well, kinda, yeah.”

The god inclined his head towards her silently. He didn’t look angry, so she took it was a sign to continue.

“You need a warrior to fight Alduin. The only time I’ve ever used a knife is when cooking. I’m all soft. I can’t even jog for long distances, let alone fight! Please, I ask that you reconsider. Surely there’s someone better suited to the role. Or maybe the original Dragonborn can be reformed,” she said. She barely stopped herself from grimacing at the formal tone and phrasing her voice had taken on.

Akatosh continued to stare at her, though now he looked amused. “Strength of body can be trained. Strength of spirit cannot.”

Frowning, she said, “Pardon my frankness, sir, but . . . I’m a coward.”

Snorting a cloud of sweet smelling smoke into the air, Akatosh said, “I will make a bargain with you, mortal, because you obviously believe your words and are not attempting trickery. I will send you to
Nirn two years before Alduin returns. You may spend that time how you see fit so that you may adjust to what is being requested of you. However, if by the time Alduin returns and the original Dovahkiin has not taken up the fight against my firstborn, you are to do so. If you are not needed, then I shall return you home. What say you?"

A shudder ran down her spine. That was a steep bargain. She would have to survive in Nirn for two years and, if the original Dragonborn wasn’t good enough, fight Alduin. The knot in her gut became a lead weight. But what would she say? Akatosh’s tone gave no room for argument. “And if I’m needed, what happens afterwards? Will you send me home?”

Akatosh grinned, baring his sharp teeth. “We will see. Now, what say you?”

Heart beating rabbit-quick, she gave the only answer she could, “Yes.”

Akatosh tilted his head again and exhaled a large cloud of smoke that quickly surrounded her.

She coughed and pulled her shirt over her nose and mouth to try and breathe, but as her consciousness slipped through her fingers like water, she stumbled and fell backwards, passing through the floor and falling through the darkness.

The last thing she saw was Akatosh vanishing into the darkness.

She came to on a riverbank in a forest. For a few moments, she simply laid there and listened to the sounds of the rushing river, the wind rustling through the trees, and the crows cawing somewhere in the distance. When she finally decided to face her situation, she opened her eyes, squinting against the sunlight, and sat up. She immediately noticed that she was wearing different clothing; her slouchy sweatpants and t-shirt combo had been switched for comfortable, dark brown trousers, a thick, dark blue, long sleeved shirt, and sturdy boots. Her hair had been tied back in a ponytail with a strip of leather and her blue nail polish was still in place.

She sat up, and several of her joints cracked. Groaning, she spent another minute or so cracking as many of her joints as possible without hurting her stiff muscles.

*Must be a side effect of interdimensional travel*, she thought. She twisted to the side in hopes of cracking the stiffness out of her spine and spotted a large, dark brown leather backpack on the ground a short distance away from her. Figuring the odds were pretty good that Akatosh had given it to her, she grabbed it and pulled it into her lap. She might as well figure out what was in it.

The backpack was like the one she’d used from the Big Leather Backpack mod, not the regular knapsacks in-game. There was a bedroll buckled to the bottom and what looked to be a pelt tent on top. The open side pocket held a map of Skyrim, a compass, a flint and steel starter kit, and a fishing kit filled with line and hooks. The sealed pocket had a medium sized coin purse filled with two hundred gold, a blank journal, and a small bag of charcoal sticks. Inside the pack was several large sacks, each filled with various foods, drinks, or cooking tools, a change of clothing, a hunting bow, a quiver of iron arrows, a steel dagger, a steel war axe, a full set of leather armor, and an assortment of potions.

Her first thought was, *Wow, he really made sure I was prepared.* Her second thought was, *Oh, shit, this pack is totally fucking enchanted.* Because there was no fucking way all that stuff could fit in that small space without magic.

She stared up at the sky with a frown. “All this stuff and you couldn’t give me a coat? Or some gloves? It’s fucking freezing.” Despite being in one of the obviously warmer parts of Skyrim, there
was a chill in the air that reminded her of late fall weather. The cold was already beginning to seep through her clothing, though her fingers and nose were the most affected. Her toes were luckily encased in thick, warm socks inside her boots or else she most likely would’ve felt the cold there, too.

When no answer came, she made a face at the sky and tried to figure out what to do. She didn’t know where she was or what she was supposed to do. All she knew what that she had over a year before Alduin came and that she was on her own.

She settled for following the river. Civilization always started around waterways, after all, and she was bound to come across someone at some point. If she didn’t or it took a while, then she had her supplies for food and shelter, though she knew she’d be fighting with the tent the second she tried to set it up.

The longer she walked, the more apparent it became exactly how out of shape she was. She wasn’t sure how long or how far she had walked, but her thighs were burning, her ankles stung, and her throat burned even though she had made sure to breathe through her nose rather than her mouth.

Panting, she sat on a rock and drank from the water skin she’d hung from her hip. *The sun’s going down. I should probably set up camp before it’s completely dark . . .*

“Excuse me, miss?” a voice said out of nowhere.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she jerked so hard she slid halfway off her rock and onto the ground, catching herself wrong on her wrist.

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear! I didn’t mean to scare you!” The bushes rustled to her left, and an old woman dressed in robes stepped into view.

Blushing darkly out of embarrassment, she awkwardly righted herself. “It’s fine, ma’am.” When she looked at the woman, she had to do a doubletake. Nestled in her chest was a pulsing, dark orb of light. Strings of dripping color arced away from the orb before curling back into it.

*The process isn’t complete,* she thought, dazed. She could feel that whatever the woman was dealing in was old, very, very old.

“Are you lost, dear? This is no place for a sweet thing like yourself to be wandering alone with no protection,” the old woman said as she approached.

The back of her neck prickled. The quote ‘Skyrim is full of people willing to spill your blood’ came to mind, and she was immediately on her guard. She settled her pack on her lap and hoped she could outrun the old woman if the situation turned ugly.

“I, well, uh, yes, ma’am. I’m lost. All I know is that I’m in Skyrim.”

“Well, that’s no good. You’re at the edge of Falkreath Hold. If you keep heading in the direction you’re going, then you’ll be at Riverwood in another day.” The woman frowned. “Though, I don’t suggest traveling at night. The woods are filled with terrible creatures, both beast and man. Do you need a place to stay for the night? My cabin isn’t much, but you’re welcome to stay with me.”

“I . . .”

“Oh, how silly of me! I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Anise, dear. What’s your name?” Anise asked. Her smile was matronly, and she made no attempt to approach when she noticed how
uncomfortable the younger woman was.

She relaxed. Anise wasn’t a hostile NPC unless you stole from her, discovered what was in her basement, or attacked her. That carried over to real life, right? She almost told Anise her birth name out of habit, but then she thought, *Isn’t this the opportunity you’ve always wanted? To be known by a name of your own choosing?* Instead, she said, “Rowan Corvid, ma’am.”

Anise pondered the name. Rowan was beginning to believe she would demand her birth name until she finally spoke.

“A good name. Rowan for power, protection, and balance, and Corvid for the crows and ravens who can be messengers of death or loyal friends depending on how you treat them. It’s well chosen.” Her smile widened. “Come, Rowan. My cabin is up over the hill and hidden by the trees. It won’t take us long to get there.”

Quickly, Rowan gathered her pack and followed Anise, trying not to stumble over the undergrowth.

“So, dear, what brings you to Skyrim?” Anise asked when they arrived at her cabin. The sun had almost completely disappeared, and they were readying for bed. Rowan had spread her bedroll onto the floor of the cabin and was now helping Anise cook dinner.

“Well . . .” Rowan couldn’t exactly tell her the truth, so she settled for something close. “Would you believe me if I told you that an acquaintance dropped me off here with this pack and the instructions to survive two years?”

“If you were anyone else? No. But you’re telling the truth. You’re far too confused and unprepared to have come here of your own desire, and that hair—” Rowan made an aborted movement to touch her dark purple hair. “—though what that acquaintance of yours was thinking, dropping off a girl of noble blood here all alone with no preparation, I’ll never understand.”

Noble? Rowan looked at in confusion and said, “I’m not a noble though?”

Anise gave her a sly look. “No need to hide it from me, dear. I understand the need for discretion since you’re alone, but appearances don’t lie even if you lie about your name. Your hands are too soft, and you’ve obviously never spent much time outdoors. I’m guessing High Rock since you look Breton, though could be Cyrodiil since you obviously have some Imperial in you. Never heard that accent, though, maybe you’re from one of the smaller houses.” She waved her hand. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re alone in Skyrim with only what’s in that pack, no obvious weapon training or skills to your name, and there are too many bandits to count who would take you hostage to ransom you back to your family.”

*Well, she certainly believes it. I guess I could just let her believe it? I mean, there’s no harm in it, right?* Rowan thought. “Thank you for helping me, ma’am. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, dear. Us women have to look out for each other, no matter our differences.”

They went to bed after eating, though Rowan stayed up to write in the journal after asking Anise the date. Writing with only the light of a candle was a strange experience, something she’d only experienced when a hurricane or storm had knocked out power at her house, but not a bad one.

She looked at what she had written, wishing that she didn’t have to think so carefully about what she wanted to write since erasers didn’t exist yet.
First entry of the journal of Rowan Corvid. I’ve never successfully kept a journal or diary before, so I don’t know how much I’ll write in this, but it’ll be a good place to vent since I doubt I’ll ever be able to tell anyone I’m from another world.

I’m no longer in my world. I’m in a video game, or I know it as a video game. Akatosh wants me to be the new Dragonborn since the first one is apparently shit, but he made a deal with me: I get sent to Skyrim two years before Alduin returns so that I have time to train and prepare. If the original Dragonborn does their job, then I get to go home. If they don’t, then I have to fight Alduin. Which is Fucking Up. I’ve got no clue how I’m even supposed to begin preparing for that shitfest but what else can I do? I guess I should start at the bottom and just train, maybe I can find someone willing to help me. Until then, I guess I’ll just wing it. I doubt the supplies Akatosh gave me will last long. I remember renting rooms at inns costs 10 gold, and I only have 200. That would get me 20 days if I don’t work, though I can probably get a job at the mill in Riverwood. I’ve cut wood for the wood furnace back home and bonfires before, so at least I can do that.

I’m staying the night with Anise in her cabin at the edge of Falkreath and Whiterun holds. There’s this dark orb in her chest. I don’t think it’s originally supposed to be that color. Maybe it’s the magic she’s doing. It felt like raw energy but was being coated by something very, very old. Hagravens use old magic, right? And she’s working to become a Hagraven, so it makes sense that the orb—probably the source of her magic—reflects that. I wish I could ask her to be sure.

Anise said I’ll be able to get to Riverwood by tomorrow evening if I start traveling early. She’s very nice. Maybe once I get a job at the mill, I can come back and ask her to teach me magic? Or at least see if I can use magic? There were no spellbooks in my pack. Maybe since I’m from another world, I can’t use magic. That would be my fucking luck. If I can’t use one damn healing or shock spell, I’m gonna call up Akatosh’s ass and bitch for as long as I damn please. That’ll teach him to drop me in a world with magic and not let me use magic, the fucker.

I suppose I’ll see how everything goes when I get to Riverwood.

It wasn’t eloquent, but then again, neither was she. She hoped she remembered to write in it often.

After returning the journal and charcoal to her pack, she blew out the candle and climbed into her bedroll.

Tomorrow would be a new day.

When Rowan left the following morning after breakfast, Anise told her to visit whenever she was in the area. Anise didn’t get many visitors and would be happy to host her again. She accepted the invitation graciously. Anise really was a nice woman. Even if she wanted to become a Hagraven.

Rowan kept up a steady pace along the river like Anise had told her to. “If you stop every quarter mile, you’ll never get there, dear,” she’d said. “The more you travel, the less time it seems to take. You’ll get used to it.”

Rowan doubted she’d ever get used to walking everywhere. She’d have to save up and get a horse because this shit wasn’t gonna fly.

Maybe I should invent the bicycle, she thought. Which wasn’t a bad idea if she could figure out how to build it.
Her eyes trailed to the mountain. The Barrow looked much bigger and more foreboding in real life. Something deep within her being was tugging her towards it. Several times she had caught herself veering off course and nearly stumbling through the river to travel to the Barrow instead of Riverwood. Like each time before, she wrenched her gaze away from the building and quickened her pace towards Riverwood.

Soon enough, she could see the tops of buildings. She crossed the river, stepping on stones so she wouldn’t get her shoes wet, and sighed in relief when she saw Riverwood’s gate. The sounds of other people had never been so comforting.

Though there weren’t any guards, she approached with slight caution. she didn’t want to alarm the residents. People in small towns were always suspicious of visitors, no matter if they appeared harmless or not.

She looked around at the buildings. Riverwood wasn’t much bigger than it was in-game and was just as peaceful. It was . . . nice, if a bit too small for her liking.

“Greetings, traveler.”

She looked to her left to see that Alvor had paused his work and was looking at her. “Hello, sir.”

“I’m Alvor. Who might you be?” he asked with a smile.

“Rowan Corvid.” The name came easier to her this time, though still felt foreign. Her birth name floated to the front of her mind, but she shoved it away. She refused to carry that with her here.

“Are you looking for work, Corvid? Or just a resupply and bed for the night?” he asked.

“Um, both?” She wasn’t really sure what Akatosh wanted her to do, so a job would do for now. Maybe once she had a good cushion of money, she would go to Whiterun; it would be the best place to wait for all the Dragonborn stuff to go down.

“The Riverwood Trader will have what you need, and the inn’s got warm beds. The mill could always use more hands, and I’m in need of an apprentice if you’re interested.”

She was definitely interested. “Would it be possible to work for both you and the mill?”

Alvor nodded. “Speak with Gerdur at the mill first. She’s the one who decides the workers’ shifts.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Just call me Alvor, none of that sir stuff.”

She went to the inn first. The patrons glanced at her when she entered, but no one addressed her except the barkeep.

“Welcome! We’ve got food, drink, and warm beds. What do you need?” he asked as she approached.

“How much for a room?” she asked, resting her hands on the bar.

“Ten coppers for a night,” he said.

Rowan blinked. Coppers? “Um, I have gold.”

He raised his eyebrows. “A gold septim will get you ten nights, stranger.”
Oh. Well, okay. She shrugged off one strap of her pack, pulled a gold septim from the sealed pocket, and handed it to the barkeep.

He took it and flipped it in his hands, as if to check its authenticity, before nodding. “The room’s this way.” He led her to my room and hovered in the doorway as she got settled (though there wasn’t much settling to do).

He cleared his throat and said lowly, “I don’t normally do this, but seeing as you’re new to Skyrim, I’ll make an exception.” He pulled a key ring out of his pocket, removed a key from it, and held the key out to her.

Frowning, she took the key, hoping the man understood her confusion.

He leaned close and said, “That’s a key to the door’s lock. Wouldn’t want thieves thinking they can take advantage of a young girl, would we?”

“Oh!” she said. Her grip on the key tightened, and the barkeep smiled. “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll leave you to it then. If you need something, just yell. I’m Orgnar.”

“I’m Rowan Corvid.”

“Enjoy your stay, Corvid.”

When he left, she placed her pack underneath the bed rather than in the chest and tugged the pelts to hide any trace of her belongings. She then left the room, locked it, and went to the mill.

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After a short negotiation with Gerdur, she was chopping wood with Faendal, who had taken to her with surprising ease. He did most of the talking, though sometimes he asked her questions about herself. She kept to the story she had told Anise and turned the conversation back to him when she couldn’t think of a lie.

Once her shift was over, her went to Alvor with an ache in her arms, shoulders, and back.

Alvor laughed when he saw her sweaty face. “Not used to hard labor, friend?”

“Not yet,” she couldn’t stop herself from saying.

“That’s a good attitude to have. Are you ready to learn the forge or do you want to wait until tomorrow?”

She wiped the sweat from her face, thought about it, and then shrugged. “Might as well start now, but I’ll warn you: I don’t know anything about forge work.”

He smiled. “We all have to start somewhere. We’ll start with leather making. Now, what you do is...”

When she finally trudged back to the inn that evening, sore and exhausted, Orgnar said there was a bath waiting for her in the basement. She bathed after retrieving her second set of clothes and soaked in the water until it was no longer hot. After she had dried off and dressed, she washed her blue shirt, wringing out as much water as possible before returning to her room.

Eating the dinner Orgnar had brought her, she sat at the table and wrote another entry in her journal. She knew if she put it off, she wouldn’t do it at all.
Arrived in Riverwood. It’s peaceful, if a bit too small for me to stay here forever. I got a job at the mill and an apprenticeship with Alvor. I don’t really know how good I’ll be at smithing, but I suppose trying is better than nothing.

Faendal is even friendlier in person. He’s really glad to have another non-Nord in town, even if it’s only for a short while. I asked him about the money system here, and he told me that they mostly used Septims, though he’d heard that those in Windhelm and other Stormcloak friendly places were using Alessias (old Nord money) instead of Septims (though apparently they haven’t completely switched over because everywhere else in Skyrim still uses Septims) because of the war. When I asked what the values of Septims were, he made a comment about people in High Rock using “deer skin notes” along with coins before explaining that a copper septim has a value of 1, a silver septim a value of 25, and a gold septim a value of 100. He didn’t know the conversion rate of Septims to Alessias or vice versa. The different coins make sense. I mean, what society that’s been around for thousands of years only uses gold coins?

I’m not sure how long I’ll stay here. I figure at least a few weeks, maybe even a month. Then, I guess I’ll head to Whiterun. I figure I can get a job at the inn and just wing it from there.
Let's introduce something new

The following weeks settled into a comfortable rhythm. Rowan woke up at about 7:00am, ate breakfast, went to the mill and worked until lunch, took an hour's break, worked with Alvor until about 5-6pm, and then she either (attempted) to practice with her weapons, shopped, or hung out with Faendal or Camilla, who had taken one look at Rowan and proclaimed them the best of friends. Rowan was still half convinced she'd done it to annoy her brother.

While most of the time Rowan had a neat schedule, there were instances that called for said schedule to be adjusted:

“Faendal saw me practicing with my bow today and offered to help me. Thank fucking god because a few summers of archery at camp really didn’t prepare me for this. He also offered to show me how to pitch a tent, hunt, and generally survive in the wilderness for days or even weeks at a time. I tried to pay him, but he refused and just asked that I teach him how to write poetry to impress Camilla. Maybe now I won’t immediately die if I leave Riverwood.”

“The villagers act really weird around me, but I don’t know why.”

“I asked Alvor if it was possible to sew a section of metal in between two leather pieces to act as a hidden, reinforced breastplate. He was surprised by the idea but liked it and agreed to help me experiment with the leather armor I haven’t removed from my bag.”

“Alvor caught me trying to figure out what to do with my war axe this evening. He startled me, and I nearly let go of the axe when I was swinging it. He had a good laugh at that but said he’d help since I really needed it.”

“The villagers think I’m 16 years old! What the fuck!! That’s why they’re so fucking weird! They think I’m a fucking kid! Fuck me and my fucking baby face!

Okay, apparently 16-year-olds are technically adults in Skyrim, but most people don’t really think they’re adults until they’re, like, 20. Which I am!!! I’m 22, so they can all fuck off!”

“Delphine caught me watching her today. I had to make up an excuse on the spot and said that I was trying to figure out if she’d been in the Legion before settling in Riverwood. I didn’t think she’d buy it, but she did and told me some stories from when she still fought. The stories seemed real enough, so they were probably from her days with the Blades. I made sure to ask her some more questions, mainly about why she left and let her rant about the Thalmor for a bit. I don’t think shesuspects me of anything now.”

“I convinced Faendal to try and teach me a bit of magic today. The results were…unexpected. When I couldn’t even produce a spark of magic after reading one of his spellbooks, Faendal tried to show me some of the techniques he was taught to make using magic easier, but when I tried them, the spell attempted was blown completely out of proportion. I blacked out and woke up hours later in Alvor’s house with blood covering most of my face. Apparently, I had made the spell too powerful, which shocked my system, caused me bleed from my eyes and nose, and knocked me unconscious.

All I remember is trying Faendal’s technique and the spell going…wrong. I can’t explain it, but I just knew that wasn’t what the spell was supposed to look like. It felt wrong. And then it just…imploded on me.

Faendal doesn’t know what happened and is terrified of trying again. He doesn’t want to hurt me,
but I want to know what happened. Gerdur and Alvor have given me a week off from work, so I’m going to ask Anise if she knows what went wrong. The only other option I have is going to the College of Winterhold. Hopefully, she’ll be able to explain this to me.”

Anise’s home looked the same as it had nearly three weeks ago. Rowan didn’t see the older woman, so she waited outside and called her name. She heard movement inside the cabin but didn’t move. If Anise was coming up from her cellar, Rowan didn’t want to cage her.

“Hello?” Anise appeared in the doorway. “Oh, Rowan, dear! It’s so good to see you! How are you?”

Smiling, Rowan said, “I’m good, ma’am. How are you?”

Anise frowned. “Much better than you, it seems. What have you been doing? You look awful.”

Sheepishly, she said, “I got my friend in Riverwood to try and teach me some magic, but it went wrong. The spell imploded on me and knocked me unconscious. I bled from my eyes and nose, too.”

Anise gasped. “That’s horrible, dear! Do you know what caused it?”

Beneath the concern, there was a calculating look in Anise’s eyes. Rowan steadied the nerves in her gut and kept going. “No. Faendal doesn’t want to try again. He doesn’t want me to get hurt.” She licked her lips. “I was hoping that you could help me.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Oh? And what makes you think I can help you, dear? I’m just an old woman living in the forest. I don’t know anything about magic.”

“But you do,” Rowan blurted out.

Anise narrowed her eyes. “And how would you know that?”

“I can see it,” she said quickly.

“See it? What do you mean ‘see it’?” Anise asked suspiciously.

Rowan swallowed around the lump in her throat. “There’s this orb in your chest. It’s glowing and has arcs of light surrounding it. It’s dark colored, but it’s not originally that color. You’ve been doing something to make it that color, something very old and very powerful.” Anise became more agitated the longer she spoke, so she added, “I don’t care what you’re doing. It’s your business. What I want to know is why that spell imploded on me yesterday and if it means I can’t use magic at all. I want a teacher. Can you help me?”

Frowning, Anise stood stiffly with her arms crossed over her chest. She was examining Rowan for any hint that she was lying, so Rowan bore her suspicion with as few jitters as possible.

In hindsight, it was probably the lack of weapons that saved her life. Rowan was glad she’d kept them in her pack rather than on her person.

Anise snorted and uncrossed her arms. “You don’t seem to be lying. All right then. Come downstairs, I know a technique that will show if you can use magic or not.” She walked back into her house, fully expecting Rowan to follow.

Rowan took a deep breath. A show of trust, that’s what this was. She entered the house and set her pack down despite the frantic butterflies in her gut. Anise was already in the cellar, and she quickly followed before she could chicken out.
The cellar was only slightly bigger than she expected. Anise was sitting lotus style on the ground and motioned for Rowan to do the same.

“No use wasting time, Rowan. Sit down and give me your hands,” she said. Rowan complied and held out her hands. Anise grasped them tightly. “This is an old technique I learned when I was young. It’s rarely used anymore, but it’s effective. We’ll enter a dual meditation—you don’t have to know how to meditate, you’ll sink into it just fine—and I’ll analyze your spark, the source of your magicka, and its condition and potential. Once I’ve seen it, I’ll know if you can do magic and possibly why that spell backfired. Understand?”

Rowan nodded.

“Good. Let’s begin.”

Rowan closed her eyes when Anise closed hers. Rowan didn’t have to wait long for the process to begin. She could feel the thrum of magic pooling in their conjoined hands and trailing up her arms to the place right beneath her sternum. Her brain slowly sank into a peaceful nothingness, like she was floating in a pool or was lightly sedated.

When they came out of the trance, her butt was numb, and her legs were on their way to matching it.

“Well,” Anise said, “I know what your problem is, and it’s not that you can’t use magic.”

Rowan blinked drowsily at Anise and tried to get her foggy head to clear. “Then what is it?”

She smirked. “You’re a seidr.

“A what?”

“A seidr. It’s originally an Old Norse word, meaning ‘cord or snare’, that referred to a type of magic of seeing and altering destiny by reweaving it. Over a few hundred years, it came to refer to someone who could see magic in its unaltered, unused form. Seidrs are connected to magic in a way other mages can’t be and are said to be chosen by Magnus himself to view Mundus as the Aedra and Daedra see it. Seidrs can see wells of magicka, such as the magicka within places and other people. They can see just how spells and enchantments are weaved without any training and know if weave is wrong instinctively. Their insight into magical study is unmatched. Seidrs are often powerful mages with enormous wells of magicka who are intricately connected to not only Mundus and its magics but all realms, including those of Aetherius and Oblivion. Their potential is thought to be limitless, though I don’t think it’s ever been tested.” Anise’s smirk widened to show more of her teeth. “Congratulations, Rowan, you’re a magical prodigy.”

That sounded too good to be true. She told Anise as much.

She laughed. “It is. You’ve experienced part of the catch yourself. The drawback to having so much power and potential is that it’s dangerous to harness. If you don’t learn to gradually release the magicka, you’ll harm or even kill yourself and others around you. I imagine you’ll be experiencing more side effects if you decide to pursue magic.”

Grimacing, Rowan asked, “What can you tell me about the seidr?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know much about the seidr myself. Most don’t. Your kind is rare, so rare that in four thousand years, there have only been around eighty-nine confirmed cases. Even if you went to the College of Winterhold, you’ll probably only find a few volumes on the subject, though those will likely be firsthand accounts written by other seidrs. You’re more likely to end up being studied yourself.” Her grin took a savage edge. “If you’re truly desperate, you can contact the Daedra or the
Hagravens that live with the Forsworn. I imagine that they would have more information.”

Rowan thought of Sheogorath, Sanguine, and Madanach. “Maybe . . .” she finally answered slowly.

Anise raised her eyebrows, like she hadn’t thought she would be open to the idea.

“Tell me, what exactly happened when your friend tried to teach you that spell yesterday?” she asked.

“I couldn’t access my magic to perform the spell at all, so Faendal showed me a trick he learned to make it easier to access and use my magicka. As soon as I used the technique and tried to use the spell, something in it went wrong. I don’t know what exactly, but then it backfired on me.”

She nodded. “I’m guessing there was a blockage keeping you from accessing your magicka. It happens from time to time, especially in those born with naturally large magicka resources. When you used the trick, it most likely released too much magic at once. That and your general lack of knowledge and experience in spellcasting most likely caused it to backfire.”

“So, how do I fix that?” Rowan asked.

Anise grinned at her. “I’m going to show you, of course! You did ask for a teacher, after all. Now, get off your butt. We’ve got work to do.”

Anise was a strict but understanding teacher. She seemed to always know just how far she could push Rowan until she physically couldn’t go any further. Being someone who was on her way to becoming a Hagraven, Anise’s teaching methods were obviously not . . . entirely socially acceptable. Rowan could feel that how she was teaching was very different from Faendal’s technique, but Anise’s style worked.

They didn’t start with spells. Instead, Anise had Rowan do small things like freeze a flower or leaf and sustain that frost without allowing it to melt or freezing everything in the vicinity. Anise told her that this method would make it easier for her to get a feel for her magicka with less risk of it backfiring on her because she would be using her raw magicka instead of shaping it into a spell. Most mages learned their magicka while learning how to cast spells and building up their magicka reserves, but Rowan had too much magicka for that. Until she learned her magicka, she couldn’t learn to cast spells without fucking up the spell’s weaving or using too much magicka than was necessary. Apparently, the excess magicka that wasn’t used for the spell wasn’t making the spell more powerful; it was flowing outwards and building up, and when she tried to cast the spell, she signaled to both the magicka in the spell and the magicka outside the spell to activate which, couple with the faulty weave, caused the blowback. Taking her time and learning her magicka before attempting a spell would allow her to only draw off what she needed while keeping excess magicka from escaping.

The exercise . . . didn’t go well at first.

“Well,” Anise said, hands on her hips as she examined the damage Rowan had done, “it’s a good thing I don’t care about having a spotless lawn.”

Rowan winced. Several feet of vegetation in front of them was frozen solid with a layer of frost covering the plants. She reached out to grab a flower, and its stem snapped.

Anise laughed. “Got more power than you know what to do with, don’t you? If I didn’t think it so
inconvenient, I might envy you.” When Rowan didn’t respond, Anise clasped her shoulder and took the flower from her. She hummed as she inspected it. “You can at least take pride in how good a job it is. The plants seem to be perfectly frozen and shouldn’t be damaged when they thaw. Try that.”

“Try . . . thawing the plants?” Rowan asked, confused.

Anise nodded. “Imagine a hot, humid day and release your magicka to create it, don’t pull.”

Frowning, Rowan settled into a more comfortable position and closed her eyes. She imagined the sticky heat of July and August back home, how sweat would bead and drip no matter what time of day it was and how the heat clung to everything like a second skin. She didn’t pull on her magicka like Faendal had tried to teach her, instead she released it slowly until it flowed steadily but softly like a leak in an air hose.

The air began to heat up, but she refused to open her eyes. If she saw that it might be working, she would lose her concentration. When she felt that she might be losing her grip of her magicka, she closed the flow off until she felt ready to continue. The process was slow, and Rowan was weakening with fatigue by the time Anise finally squeezed my shoulder.

“Well done, Rowan,” she said quietly. “Slowly release your grip on the air’s temperature and seal up your magicka.”

She did as instructed, this time only pausing when she felt stress on the magic stream. When she was no longer in control of the air temperature and the last of the magic sealed away, she finally opened her eyes. The only hint that the frost had ever existed was the water puddling on the ground. She looked up at Anise, tired but happy.

“Now you’re getting it,” Anise said, tucking the damp flower behind Rowan’s ear.

When the week was up, Rowan returned to Riverwood, promising Anise that she would be back on the weekend once she cleared it with Gerdur and Alvor. She went over the list of exercises Anise wanted her to practice while she was away from her, nearly stumbling down a hill when she didn’t watch her footing. Riverwood was a welcome sight, though she didn’t expect Faendal to rush up and hug her like he did.

“Um, hey?” she said, unsure what to do.

“I thought you’d left!” Faendal said, pulling away to look at her.

Rowan shook her head. “Not for good. Before I got to Riverwood, I met a mage in the woods, so I went to her to see if she could help me with my magic.”

Faendal grimaced guiltily. “I’m so sorry about—”

She cut him off. “Don’t apologize. It wasn’t your fault. I’m a seidr, some sort of extra powerful mage, and that’s why the spell imploded on me.”

“A seidr?! I thought they were just myths, you know, things self-important wizards made up to make themselves look better,” Faendal said. He looked at her in wonder. “What’s it like?”

Furrowing her brows, she said, “Annoying.”
He laughed, the awe in his eyes fading. “I should have expected that. I mean, it makes spells blow up on you. That can’t be convenient. But you’ll be a powerful mage in under a year if you keep practicing, so that has to count for something.”

“What do you know about seidr? Anise couldn’t tell me much, only that they were powerful, rare, and had painful drawbacks,” Rowan said.

Faendal shrugged. “Only legends, really. In Valenwood, we call them Ada-Gei, God-Children, and count them amongst the Ehlnada, the mortal gods. It’s said that the Ada-Gei can communicate with the gods, control the weather, move mountains, and create new land and destroy old. They can see the threads that hold Mundus together and instinctively know how to unravel it. All realms are open to them if they have the power and desire to tread there.”

The more things he listed, the higher her eyebrows climbed on her forehead. “That sounds . . . fake, but if you say so.”

Grinning, Faendal said, “Like I said, most of what people know are legends. I doubt anyone except scholars or mages will know anything different.”

“Anise said the College of Winterhold might have a few books about them, but I don’t want to go there yet,” Rowan said. “Maybe I will after I see how my lessons with Anise go.”

“What has she been teaching you?” Faendal asked.

They walked through the village, waving hello to Alvor who was at his forge.

“How to feel my magicka for now,” she answered. “I’ve got too much magicka for someone who’s never used magic before, so I have to learn how to control the flow or else my spells will implode on me like they did the first time. We’re starting with non-spells since I can’t cast a spell yet without double or triple the amount of unused magicka flowing out of the spell rather than into it.”

“Is that what happened when I tried to teach you?” Faendal asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, the excess magicka ignited when I tried to cast the spell and blew back on me. Anise said that I need to start with a calmer school than Destruction, but that won’t be for a while. Casting spells is beyond me right now. Anyway, let me just put my stuff in my room, and we can head to the mill. I need to talk to Gerdur before we get start for the day.”

Faendal scoffed. “You just got back, and you want to start working?”

“Maybe I missed the routine,” she said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.
Rowan spent a total of three months in Riverwood before the itch under her skin became too much. She had to get moving, had to go somewhere else. Anise had noticed her restlessness around the third month and accelerated her training, stating that channeling the jittery energy into something would help but wasn’t a cure.

“This place is too small for you,” she said. “Your kind has all of creation at their hands. You’re not made for staying in a small part of the world under the tutelage of others. You need to get moving, learn through doing, get your hands dirty. Your blood calls for adventure and wandering. You were never meant for one place, Rowan. Ignoring that will only make you miserable.”

Rowan knew she was right, of course. Anise’s words hit deep in her chest, accurately naming the itch she had fought to ignore.

“I know. I just want to be prepared,” she said. She wasn’t lying, but it wasn’t the whole truth.

Anise scoffed. “You’re afraid. The fear of failure has stilled the hearts of many would-be adventurers. I won’t let that happen to you. You were meant for so much more than the teachings of an old witch like myself.”

Rowan grinned at her. “What about the teachings of an old Hagraven?”

“Perhaps,” Anise said coyly. Her plans were coming along nicely, but she was still trying to convince her niece Helgi to leave her boyfriend. Moira was tying up loose ends in Witchmist Grove and would be for at least another year; it had something to do with coven politics, secret stuff unless you were part of the coven or in-training to join.

Oh well, it wasn’t like Rowan was chasing down the Hagraven path anyway. She could live without knowing.

She was packing up her room at the inn now. It was strange to finally be leaving, but it was time to move on. Alvor and Faendal had nothing left to teach her, and Anise had basically kicked her out once Rowan had made the mistake of mentioning it (though she’d given Rowan a few parting gifts before doing so). She had plenty of money from working at the mill and leftover from her original two hundred gold (it had only cost seventeen gold in total to rent the room for four months), and she was comfortable wearing her armor (modified leather armor with lamellar-style malachite hidden between the leather pieces and with breeches instead of a skirt) and wielding her weapons. Faendal and her had even gotten rid of the bandits holed up in the nearby mine two months ago.

Orgnar knocked on the door. “All ready to go?”


During her training, she had utilized all three of the stones, though mainly the Warrior stone since she lacked in those skills the most, but the Thief stone was what she wanted in the long haul. Charging in to fight enemies head-on wasn’t her style; sneaking around and sniping them from a distance was, no matter how much Alvor joked about her temper giving her the strength to cut down twenty men at once.
It’s strange to see you leaving,” Orgnar said, bringing her back to the present. “In all honestly, I thought you’d start building yourself a house here or that you’d marry Camilla, Faendal, or both of them.”

Rowan shook her head. “I’m not ready to settle down yet. There’s more to see and do in the world. I want to explore for a while, maybe I’ll change my mind in a year or two or ten, but right now I know what I want, and it’s somewhere outside of Riverwood.”

“Yeah, I understand. You know you’re always welcome in Riverwood. You’ll need to come back and tell us all about the adventures you’ve been having in far off places.”

“If I go on adventures, I promise to come back and tell y’all all about them,” she said with a grin. She shouldered her pack. “I already gave you the key, didn’t I?”

He nodded. “Yeah, before you started packing.” Smirking, he added, “I hope your memory improves while you’re away or else you’ll forget your head somewhere.”

She made a face at him but laughed at the long-standing joke. “Only if I’m lucky.”

He pulled her into a one-armed hug. “Take care of yourself, Corvid.”

“You, too, Orgnar.”

The few early patrons in the inn raised their drinks as Rowan passed by; she returned their farewells and exited before anyone could reel her into a conversation.

“Good luck, Corvid!” Alvor shouted.

She waved to him before quickly making her way out of town, hoping to get to the gates before she was intercepted. Faendal and Camilla hadn’t taken her leaving as smoothly as she had hoped and had sabotaged her last two attempts, wrangling her into helping them with some odd task until the sun began to set. But today she was going to leave—

“Corvid!” The dual shouts signaled for her to pick up her pace. “Corvid, wait!”

She heard laughter from the other villagers; she was sure it was hilarious watching Camilla and Faendal chase her as she made a break for the exit.

“Please just let us say goodbye!”

Grimacing, she had a short debate and stopped when she hit the bridge. “All right, but you better say bye this time. No asking for any complicated favors.”

Camilla and Faendal blushed.

“Do you really have to go?” Camilla asked.

Rowan nodded. “Yeah, it’s time for me to move on. I want to explore, and I can’t do that in Riverwood.”

“We’re just going to miss you, that’s all,” Faendal said.

“I’m going to miss you guys, too. But I’ll come back and visit,” Rowan said.

Camilla hugged her. “You promise?”
“I promise,” she said, returning the hug and then Faendal’s when he took Camilla’s place.

“Good luck, friend,” Faendal said. “Don’t forget about us.”

Rowan smiled. “Never.”

By foot, it would take her three days to get to Whiterun if she kept a steady pace. She had gotten used to walking back and forth between Riverwood and Anise’s house, so the distance wasn’t as big a bother as it would have been four months ago, but she still hated having to go everywhere by foot. She would have to see about buying a horse at some point.

That said, her journey to Whiterun wasn’t overly exciting. Some wolves tried to ambush her on the road, but other than that, she was free to practice her spells as she walked.

Thanks to Anise’s training, Rowan’s spellwork was no longer nonexistent. She could cast spells without 1) blowing herself or others up, 2) affecting a broader range than she intended, or 3) doing something she hadn’t intended. While Rowan’s control still needed work and diminished as she grew fatigued, she now had a collection of spells across all magical schools she could competently use. Most of those spells had been learned by observing Anise rather than from spellbooks because Anise didn’t have many spellbooks, and Rowan simply had an easier time casting spells if she had the opportunity to observe them being woven and cast beforehand. While spellbooks were detailed and well-written, Rowan had problems transferring what she read on the page to her magic; Anise hadn’t had a problem with this, preferring hands-on teaching to bookwork. Currently, Rowan was working on duel casting and sustaining spells for longer periods of time, but Anise had theorized she eventually wouldn’t need to watch others cast spells to learn. Instead, she would naturally alter and improve the structure of her spells to perform the spell she desired.

Rowan wasn’t exactly sure about the likelihood of Anise’s theory, but then again, she wasn’t concerned about it currently. What did concern her were the side effects she had begun experiencing almost as soon as her magic training had begun.

Headaches, nausea, vomiting, fevers, vertigo, joint pain, full body shakes, tunnel vision, brief blindness, brief memory loss, chest pains, numbness, heart palpitations, bouts of unconsciousness, hot and cold flashes, bleeding from the eyes and nose, even seizures—all were regular fixtures in Rowan’s life now. While the effects lessened the more control she gained and the less stress she put on her body, they were hell to endure. She didn’t even want to be reminded about the meditation exercises Anise had stressed she practice. Just thinking of the experiences made her feel faint and nauseous. The exercises were meant to strengthen her connection to Mundus and its magic; what they actually did was force her to become aware of every source of magicka in Mundus, to feel how the magicka connected to the existing realms, and to even feel the turn of the planet—all at once. Anise had to stop the exercise and forcibly end the meditation the first time they attempted it because Rowan had started seizing, bleeding from her eyes and nose, and spouting nonsense. She had continued to mutter to herself for close to two hours even after she had been removed from the meditation. The few times they had attempted the meditation again had all ended just as disastrously. There was simply too much information to take in, and Rowan was continuously assaulted by it every time.

Rowan was sure that there were some people out there who would see the side effects as negligible (Neloth specifically came to mind), but she would prefer to do without, thank you very much.

The only magical skill she hadn’t managed to improve much was her alchemy. She couldn’t
remember the recipes or the ingredients’ effects, so she wrote them down in a separate journal instead. Apparently not even legends could do everything.

For the most part, her journey to Whiterun was uneventful; however, she was stopped a few times by other travelers. They had mistaken her for a priest due to the blue robes she had chosen to wear over her armor. At the time, she hadn’t wanted to draw attention of bandits—someone just wearing robes was less likely to have money than someone wearing armor. Though she had to awkwardly tell the travelers that she was a mage, not a priest, picturing Anise laughing herself sick at the situation never failed to improve Rowan’s mood.

Soon enough, the farms surrounding Whiterun—much larger in real life—came into sight. Rowan kept her eyes open for the Companions fighting the giant on one of the farms. While she had no intention of joining them, it wouldn’t hurt to make a good first impression. Fortunately or not, there was no giant in sight, though she had expected that. She was still a year away from the events of the game, so most of the guild events were probably (hopefully) far off.

The farmers and patrolling guards didn’t acknowledge her. The gate guards only asked what her business in the city was and opened the gate when she said she was looking for work.

_Holy shit, it’s huge_, she thought.

From far away, Whiterun had looked more like its original concept art—a massive city on a stone incline, surrounded by huge farms—but in person it was massive. It was easily four or five times as large as it was in-game and bustling with people. Merchants were everywhere, either at stalls or stores, advertising their wares or conversing with customers. After only hearing the quiet of Riverwood for so long, the numerous voices and sounds of Whiterun were too much. Rowan felt like time had rewound, and she was the girl Anise found, lost and very, very alone.

“Good day, traveler!”

She jerked back into reality. Realizing her lungs were burning, she took a deep breath and looked to her right.

The dark-skinned woman smiled knowingly. “Apologies for the intrusion, but you seemed overwhelmed.”

Rowan nodded and shuffled off to the side of the main entrance. “Yeah . . .”

“First time in a large city?” she asked.

“No, but it’s been . . . a while,” she answered. Thinking of the metal skyscrapers that would tower over every building in Whiterun emphasized the isolation nipping at her spine, so she let the thought go.

The woman obviously noticed Rowan’s odd mood—she was observing her too intensely not to—but didn’t mention it. “My name is Adrianne Avenicci. My husband Ulfberth and I own Warmaiden’s, though I work the forge. May I ask your name, traveler?”

“Rowan Corvid,” she said. The name wasn’t as awkward to say as it was months ago. “I’m here looking for work.”

“Rowan Corvid,” she said. The name wasn’t as awkward to say as it was months ago. “I’m here looking for work.”

Adrianne gave her a once over. The corner of her mouth twitched upwards. “I take it you’re a mage?”

“It’s my main focus right now but not my only skill,” Rowan explained. “I’m more of a jack of all
Adrianne hummed in acknowledgement. “You’ll find plenty of work here, Corvid. Hulda always needs hands at the inn; Danica could use another healer at the temple; the Jarl has bounties posted at the message board below Dragonsreach; and, of course, people are always in need of assistance if one asks,” she said, leaning against Warmaidens’s front wall.

Nodding slowly, Rowan mulled over the options. While the message board was new, it and Hulda were probably her best bets for steady work. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Adrianne laughed. “Just Adrianne is fine, young one. Tell me, will you be staying in town long?”

She wasn’t really sure and told Adrianne as much. “I guess it just depends.”

The smile didn’t fade from her face. “I have a feeling you’ll be staying for quite some time.”

Raising her eyebrows, Rowan said, “We’ll see.”

Her smile turned smug. “Good day, Corvid.”

Rowan went to the inn first; she wanted to rent a room at least a month in advance and didn’t want to leave it until the end of the day.

The crowds were surprisingly calm and easy to maneuver through. People shifted out of the way when she excused herself, and nobody expected her to be the one to move out of their way (even men would shift to avoid a collision with her, which was the strangest thing she had ever seen). In a world with magic, misogyny was apparently the real fantasy.

The inn was at least double the size it originally was and stood as a main focal point of the enormous town center. She recognized some of the vendors but not all of them and made a note to explore all the new places in town when she got the chance.

Entering the Bannered Mare, she was immediately enveloped in warmth. She sighed happily, feeling the heat immediately begin seeping into her clothing.

“Come on in! Let me know if you need anything or take a seat and I’ll send someone over,” Hulda greeted from the bar.

Rowan walked over. “I’m looking to rent a room—long-term.”

“Oh? How long?” she asked.

“At least a month.”

“I’ve got a few rooms open. One of them’s yours if you have the coin,” she said.

Rowan reached into one of her pack’s pockets. “How much a night?”

“Ten coppers.”

Nodding, she counted out the right amount (two gold, three silvers, and three coppers) to cover the month and handed the coins to her.

Hulda took the money, counted it, and then paused. She looked up at Rowan. “Are you a healer?”

“Um, I have training in healing, so, yes,” she said, frowning.
“How about I cut you a deal? If you volunteer two times a week at the temple, I’ll give you a discount on the room, say, two hundred for the whole month rather than two hundred and eighty.”

It was a good deal. Saving almost a hundred gold for something she was probably gonna do anyway? Fuck yeah. Rowan nodded. “I’ll take it.”

Smiling, she handed the silvers and coppers back to Rowan. “I apologize for being so blunt. The temple really needs more healers—with the war going on, bandits have been cropping up like weeds. Guards, farmers, travelers, it doesn’t matter to them. Danica, Jenssen, and Ahlam do their best, but there are simply too many wounded and too few healers.”

Rowan pocketed the money and nodded. “Let me get settled in and eat something and I’ll head over there.”

“I’ll show you to your room,” Hulda said. As they walked to the back room, she called to one of the serving girls, “Saadia, go ahead and bring up some stew and bread for our guest.”

“Yes, Hulda.”

Rowan didn’t let her thoughts linger on Saadia. Depending on when the Hammerfell soldiers showed up, she may or may not get involved, but for now, it wasn’t her issue.

“I apologize. I didn’t get your name,” Hulda said, leading the way up the ladder.

“Rowan Corvid, ma’am.”

Hulda looked over her shoulder, eyebrows raised, but let it go when Rowan didn’t explain further. She stopped it front of an empty room. “This one’s yours. Saadia will be up in a moment with your food. Also, if you want a bath but don’t want to wait for someone here to fill a tub, then you can go to the bathhouse. It’s at the West edge of the Plain’s District.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Shrugging off her pack, Rowan sat at the small table and took out her newest journal and a sharpened piece of charcoal. She flipped to a blank page and quickly summarized the events upon arriving in Whiterun. When Saadia arrived, Rowan thanked her, quickly ate, and hid her pack after changing out of her armor and into a clean set of lavender-colored apprentice robes Anise had given her. She briefly shook her hair out of its ponytail before securing it in an upside down, backwards braid with a bone hair stick at the nape of her neck. The hair stick, gifted to her by Faendal, had a carved dragon curling around it. Rowan wasn’t sure if she should find it funny or prophetic. Mostly, she just ignored it.

Once dressed, Rowan left the inn, nodding to Hulda when the woman shouted the temple’s location to her. She passed through the crowd easily and made her way to the Wind District.

The Wind District was full of magic. The temple, of course, was a large source of magic; its golden glow spread like thread throughout the Districts. The Gildergreen had its own aura that anchored and spread its rich brown roots in Whiterun. The Skyforge, though, that was a surprise. The eagle encasing the forge in its wings pulsed with a green fire burning in its chest. Rowan knew it wasn’t a regular forge and that the Gray-Manes worked it but not much else. All three hummed and sang to Rowan, beckoning her forward until she was pressing her hands to the Gildergreen’s trunk. The magic entered her, warming her cold hands and causing her bones to buzz. She could feel something reaching for her, but it was just far enough away that she couldn’t quite reach it—
“Can I help you?”

Rowan was shoved back into her body abruptly. She almost slipped and fell but managed to catch herself on the bench.

“I apologize for startling you,” Danica Pure-Spring said, “but may I ask what you were doing to the Gildergreen?”

“Um . . .” Rowan fumbled for an answer. “I don’t really know? I mean, the magic just kinda reached for me?”

Danica frowned. “The magic reached for you?” She held out her hand. “Let me feel your magicka, child.”

Rowan grasped her hand without complaint. She felt Danica’s magicka probe her own for several long moments. She watched Danica’s expression the entire time; she hadn’t gotten to see Anise’s when she discovered the large well of magicka Rowan possessed and wanted to see Danica’s.

At first, Danica’s expression was one of suspicion, but it quickly became mixed with confusion and then shock. Danica eventually removed her probe and looked at Rowan.

“Well, you have quite the well of magicka, stranger,” she said. “I suppose it’s not impossible for the tree’s magic to have reached out for yours.”

Rowan shrugged. “My teacher said I was something called a seidr, though she couldn’t tell me much about it.”

Gasping, Danica stared at her. “A seidr?! While I wouldn’t have believed you if you had told me, after feeling your magicka, I believe it’s entirely possible.” She smiled. “I apologize. I haven’t even introduced myself. I’m Danica Pure-Spring.”

“I’m Rowan Corvid,” Rowan said, shaking her hand when she held it out. “So, you’re Danica. You’re who I was looking for, actually.”

“Oh, and why’s that?”

“Hulda offered me a discount on a room if I volunteered as a healer,” Rowan said, deciding that honesty was best since Danica would most likely hear about the deal anyway.

Danica raised her eyebrows. “Really? Well, we are in need of healers. Do you have any training as a healer?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“All right. Come with me, and we’ll get started.”

Danica led Rowan into the temple. Unlike in-game, the temple was packed with people in need of healing. Most had flesh wounds and makeshift bandages, though Rowan could see some had infected wounds or some sort of illness.

Danica brought her to a group of wounded people sitting along the wall. “Hello, everyone. I apologize for the wait, but I’ve just gotten a new volunteer. This is Corvid; she’ll be tending to you today.” The people—farmers or travelers, maybe merchants, if their clothing was anything to go by—nodded their understanding and looked from Danica to Rowan; some seemed suspicious while most just looked weary.
Turning to Rowan, Danica said, “I need to tend to my worst patients. If you become fatigued or run out of magicka, feel free to take a break. If you need assistance, Jenssen and Ahlam can help you. Any questions?”

“No, ma’am.” Rowan watched Danica walk away before kneeling in front of the patients and asking, “Who’s the worst off?”

Healing the group didn’t take long (they each had several wounds but nothing life threatening). After an hour or so, Rowan had finished and was wondering what to do next. Danica and the others looked busy, and she didn’t want to bother them. So, after drinking some water and making sure she wasn’t having any side effects, Rowan simply moved on to another group of waiting patients. When she finished healing them and felt only slightly lightheaded, she went to another group. And another. And another. She cast healing spells until she was doing so mindlessly. She cast until her hands were raw from the continuous use of magicka and her vision began to blur and fade at the edges. By the end, she wasn’t registering who she was healing, just that there was a wound in need of mending. The temple fell away, and Rowan’s physical form ceased to matter. Her magicka and its flow through her were all her mind could process.

A hand on her arm jerked Rowan out of her concentration. Her magicka popped and hissed as it continued to roll over her hands.

“Godsdammit, girl! Rest! You’re shaking worse than most of the injured here!”

The world tilted abruptly. All the side effects Rowan had been able to ignore before hit her all at once. The tunnel vision that had crept around the third group of patients and never left became darker. The migraine threatening to split her head open came into sharp focus. Her heart pounded at a tempo so quick and heavy that it stuttered in her chest. A deep, flu-like ache assaulted her joints and made every minute movement painful. Her knees buckled. Rowan tried to steady herself against the wall, but her arm gave out when she put pressure on it. She couldn’t focus on the pain of her shoulder hitting the stone wall; she was quickly putting a hand over her mouth to futilely stop herself from vomiting.

The woman from earlier quickly shoved a bucket into her face. Rowan vomited into it. She didn’t release the bucket even when the woman—another patient—helped her sit and lean back against the wall. The bucket rattled in her violently shaking hands; it nearly slipped from her grip, but the woman took it from her at the last moment and set it aside.

Taking a deep but shaky breath, Rowan fought to steady her magicka. She had managed to cling to control so far, but exhaustion was setting in and more magicka was slipping past her grip. The only reason her spells hadn’t imploded on her was because she had switched to weaving her spells slowly and in short bursts rather than all at once. Finally, she managed to cut her magicka stream off completely. The golden tendrils creeping around her fingers and wrists faded away; they left a throbbing, raw pain Rowan knew from experience wouldn’t leave for days.

“Danica, come check on this kid, will you?” the woman called out.

Danica looked up from her work. She seemed baffled by the temple’s emptiness but didn’t comment on it as walked over and knelt in front of Rowan. “What happened?” she asked, placing her hand on Rowan’s forehead.


“Jalkja, don’t be ridiculous. She didn’t heal all those people by herself,” Danica reprimanded. She frowned deeply at Rowan. “You have a fever.” She looked over her shoulder. “Jenssen, bring me a
bowl with cool water and a rag.”

“No offense, Danica, but you weren’t watching her. She never took a break,” Jalkja said. “She just kept healing people.” When Danica’s face screwed up in disbelief, Jalkja said, “How else do you explain why almost everyone’s been healed? At noon, the temple was packed with people needing healing. You, Ahlam, and Jenssen have all been busy with the worst patients. The kid’s the only other healer here.”

Danica’s mouth pressed into a thin line. Jenssen arrived with the bowl and rag, as well as a pitcher of water. Danica took the items, thanking Jenssen, and turned to Rowan. “Corvid, did you heal all those people by yourself without a break?” she asked, her voice tense.

Rowan gave a single nod.

Exhaling heavily, Danica said, “That shouldn’t have been possible, but I suppose if you really are a seidr, you don’t exactly follow the same rules every other mage does. But why? You had to know this would happen. Burnout happens to everyone, regardless of innate talent or not.”

“I—” Rowan’s voice cracked. Jalkja found a cup and poured her some water. Rowan took the water gratefully and slowly drained it before trying again. “I just got in the zone.”

“The zone,” Danica repeated incredulously.

“Uh-huh. You know, that place where nothing matters but your magicka and the spell?”

Danica’s expression became one of realization. She asked, “Where your physical body melts away, and you’re a vessel with one purpose, to channel magicka? That place?” When Rowan nodded, Danica spat out several curses.

Jalkja scowled and began wiping at Rowan’s face and neck with the cloth. “What does that mean? What are you two talking about?”

“The Mage’s Demise,” Danica said. “It’s a sort of mindset—not fully understood—that mages can fall into when casting spells, especially during lengthy spellcasting sessions. The magicka wants to be released, and the mage tends to lose all sense of self when they fall into it. They see themselves as only vessel and channel for their magicka to flow from Aetherius into Mundus. Inexperienced mages or those with large wells of magicka or stronger connections to magicka are more susceptible to it. Which is why it’s important to take breaks while casting or at least breaking the rhythm by casting varying spells.” The last part was directed at Rowan.

Rowan wanted to defend herself but instead reached for the bucket and vomited up the water she had just drunk.

Danica’s scolding expression softened. With a tired sigh, she said, “I suppose I can’t hold it against you too much. If you really are a seidr, then it makes sense you would be more at risk.” She eyed the bucket in Rowan’s shaking hands. While the shaking wasn’t enough to make her drop the bucket this time, it was still cause for concern. “When was the last time you ate?”

“Before I came here.”

“No wonder it’s hitting you so hard,” Danica said. “We’ll see if you can keep some broth and crackers down. If you can, I won’t keep you here for overnight observation.”

“Overnight? What time is it?” Rowan asked after spitting into the bucket. Sitting down and vomiting twice had cleared up some of the side effects, but the tunnel vision, migraine, and joint pain were still
“It’s evening, kid,” Jalkja said. “Go get the kid some food, Danica. I’ll sit with her.”

Rowan washed her mouth out and spit into the bucket. “You know I’m not a kid, right?”

Jalkja scoffed. “Just because you’re legally an adult at sixteen doesn’t mean you’re not still a kid.”

“I’m twenty-two,” Rowan said. She hoped she wouldn’t have to explain to everyone she met that she wasn’t sixteen. The novelty of it was going to wear off fast.

As Rowan expected, Jalkja didn’t immediately believe her; she allowed Jalkja to observe her as long as she desired, taking careful sips of water while she waited.

“Huh,” Jalkja finally said. “Still not sure I completely believe you, but you’re definitely not as young as I first thought you were.”

“I have a baby face,” Rowan said helpfully.

Jalkja laughed. “That you do.” She submerged the rag in the water, wrung it out, and then tilted Rowan’s head forward to place the rag on the back of her neck. “Hey, so, what’s a seidr?”

Rowan sighed happily when the cool rag began soothing her hot skin. She hummed. “I don’t really know a lot. No one does. Most people think they’re just legends since not even a hundred have been confirmed over four thousand years. Apparently, it means that I’m a super powerful mage with a whole lot of potential to do things others can only dream of, like, traveling to different realms and stuff. And I guess I see Mundus, the other realms, and magic like Aedra and Daedra do? I’m not sure. My teacher didn’t know a lot, and others who’d heard of ‘em only knew myths and rumors.”

“And using your magic too much does this to you? Sounds like a pain in the ass,” Jalkja said.

Rowan shrugged, careful not to dislodge the cloth. “Eh, this isn’t that bad. Well, it’s bad, but not the worst thing that’s happened. The first time I tried to cast a spell, it imploded back on me, knocked me unconscious, and made me bleed from my eyes and nose. And every time I try to meditate and view Mundus’ Web, I bleed all over the place, have seizures, and go into this weird trance and talk gibberish,” she said.

Jalkja grimaced and said, “It sounds like utter shit.”

Rowan laughed roughly. “Yeah, it is.”

Danica returned with a steaming bowl and a side of crackers on a tray. “Here. Eat this, slowly, and drink more water. I need to check on my patients. Have that finished before I get back or I’ll keep you here overnight,” she instructed.

“Yes, ma’am,” Rowan said, setting the bucket aside and taking the tray and putting it in her lap. She nibbled on a cracker and asked Jalkja, “So, am I allowed to ask what happened to your shoulder?”

Jalkja’s shoulder was covered in bandages that were spotted with blood; Rowan assumed it was the reason Jalkja was at the temple.

Jalkja scowled and made a harsh gesture with her hand. “Trolls are what happened! You see, my farm’s close to the border with Eastmarch. With a bit of know-how, the soil there’s great for growing crops that aren’t native to Skyrim, but the trolls! They’re everywhere, and they’re constantly invading my farm and destroying everything! Until now, I’ve been able to keep them at bay with traps and some warnings, but a few days ago, a group ambushed me and one of them managed to
claw my shoulder up real bad before I could get to my horse. I’ve reported it to the guards multiple times, but they’re busy protecting the farmers closer to town from bandits,” she explained with a huff.

Rowan slurped at her chicken broth and mulled over the problem. “I could help you,” she offered after licking her lips.

Jalkja stared at her, eyebrows raised incredulously. “No offense, kid, but you don’t look like you could take down a rabbit, let alone a bunch of trolls.”

“I helped my friend Faendal clear out a bunch of bandits in a mine about two months ago,” Rowan said around a mouthful of cracker.

Jalkja hummed in what could have been agreement or amusement but thought about it. After a few moments, she said, “How about this? If you feel up to it tomorrow, then I’ll mark my farm on a map, and you can give it your best shot. I’ll pay you if you get rid of all the trolls.”

Nodding, Rowan said, “Sure.” The worst of her burnout session would be gone by then, and she could work through anything leftover.

Jalkja smirked, and Rowan got the feeling she was being laughed at.

Rowan was released from the temple after she had finished the broth and crackers with instructions to eat something solid and rest. What Rowan really wanted was a bath; she hadn’t bathed before going to the temple and was still covered in road dirt and sweat. Fortunately, luck seemed to be on her side.

“By the Eight, what happened to you?!?” Hulda squawked when Rowan stumbled into the inn long after the sun had gone down.

“Overextended myself,” Rowan grunted. “Can I get a bath? Or is it too late for that?”

“I—well, sure. Saadia, start a bath!” Hulda said. She ignored Saadia’s ‘yes, ma’am’ in favor of settling all her attention on Rowan. “What do you mean you overextended yourself? Were you carrying people around? I didn’t think Danica would have you doing stuff like that.”

Rowan gave her a confused look. “Uh, no, I was healing people. With magic. What food do you have?”

“Dinner was roasted chicken with rice and baked potatoes. I’ll get you some, and then you’ll tell me exactly what happened today,” Hulda said and went to the back room.

The inn was strangely empty that night. Rowan could hear Hulda calling down to Saadia about the bath and then clinking dishes. The steady roar of the fire was comforting and very nearly lulled Rowan to sleep on her stool.

Someone gently shook her shoulder. Rowan forced her eyes open and looked up at Hulda’s concerned face. “Sorry.”

“I just don’t want you falling off your seat,” Hulda said. She set a plate of food and mug of water in front of Rowan and went behind to bar. “So, what happened? You said you were healing people, but why do you look so terrible? Using magic isn’t that tiring, right?”
Rowan shoveled herb rice in her mouth and chewed slowly before answering. “Yeah, it is. I don’t know how much you know about magic and spellcasting, but it’s a very involved process. It takes a lot out of a person to do it. I have it both better and worse than most mages because I’m something called a seidr, which is this ultrapowerful type of magic user that’s born with a large pool of magicka. It means I don’t have to train to have more magicka, but I’m also closer to Mundus’ magic than other people. What happened today was I fell into this mindset called The Mage’s Demise. Basically, I cast spells for too long with no breaks and became so focused on my magicka that it was the only thing that mattered. I ended up with magical burnout, which is most dangerous for me because while most mages run out of magicka before it gets too bad, I have a near-endless supply of magicka. I would’ve kept casting until I died of exhaustion.”

“Oh, wow. I didn’t know it would be that bad. I thought using magic was easy or at least didn’t have any side effects like that.” Hulda gave Rowan a sheepish look. “Shows how much I know about magic, huh? But you’re all right, now, right? You’re not going to die in your sleep or anything, are you?”

Chewing a mouthful of chicken and rice and swallowing, Rowan shook her head, “No. I’ve had magic burnout before—it’s actually pretty common for me—so I’ll be better by tomorrow. I’ve gotten used to it.”

“It sounds terrible. I know I could never get used to it,” Hulda said. She frowned. “You said something about being a seidr, right?”

Rowan nodded and shoveled more food in her mouth.

“It’s just that I’ve heard of seidr. Nothing about them being connected to mages, just that they’re favored by the gods,” Hulda said.

Rowan drank some water. “Know anything else? The only things I’ve been told are about how much power and potential I have and how dangerous it can be if not harnessed properly.”

Hulda shook her head. “No. The stories are old and mostly forgotten. I think the last full legend I heard was told by my great-grandmother, but she passed when I was young, and I’ve forgotten most of her stories. I only remember seidr were favored by the gods and powerful. Sorry.”

“That’s all right, most people don’t seem to know anything. Thanks anyway,” Rowan said, returning to her meal. She finished eating right after Saadia came to say her bath was ready and barely managed to stumble upstairs for new clothes and back down to the bath.

After nearly falling asleep in the bath, Rowan clumsily climbed out of the tub, dried off, dressed, and staggered up to her room to collapse on her bed. She barely stayed conscious long enough to blow out the candle Hulda had been gracious enough to light for her before falling into an exhausted slumber.
first solo fights rarely go well

Chapter Notes

lmao sorry this took so long y'all. i've had most of this written for the longest time, but i took a break from writing to work on the story's timeline. i made a lot of progress on it! i've fleshed out a lot of the second half and organized the entire timeline. i still need to add lots of stuff to it (minor things i didn't add in the first draft), but i'm hoping i'll be able to write a lot quicker now that i know most of my thoughts are somewhere other than my head.

there's now a playlist for this fic!
http://thefandomhoarder.tumblr.com/post/171972064440/via

anyway, hope you like the chapter! as always: i'm thefandomhoarder on tumblr, so come talk to me!

A full night’s sleep did Rowan a world of good. While she woke up stiff, nearly all the side effects from the day before were gone; only the raw state of her hands, a lingering fatigue, and a sharp headache remained.

Rowan lingered in bed, unwilling to relinquish the body heat she had built up during the night just yet.

A knock at the door disturbed her.

“Corvid?” Hulda asked quietly.

Rowan grumbled and rolled over to squint at the door. “Yeah?” she grunted, her voice thick with sleep.

Hulda let out a relieved sigh. “Oh, thank the gods. I worried you were dead.”

“I told you I’d be fine,” Rowan said. She cleared her throat. “Well, since I’m up, can I get breakfast?”

Hulda laughed. “Of course. I also brought some water for you.”

Rowan stumbled out of bed. Her foot tangled in the blanket and nearly sent her crashing to the floor. Righting herself, she opened the door to take the water pitcher from Hulda. “Thanks,” she said.

“Of course. I also brought some water for you.”

Rowan filled the basin on the side table with water, washed her face with an available rag, and then poured herself a mug of water. Saadia arrived shortly after with a plate of steaming food. Rowan gave her thanks and went over her plans for the day as she ate.

Okay, so I'll go to the temple and talk to Jalkja, then I'll go clear out the trolls from her farm, she thought. She would have to be careful. Trolls were resistant to melee weapons and fast. Her best bet would be to summon a flame atronach and constantly move around, preferably under cover, and fire
arrows at a distance to make sure she didn’t get immediately overrun in case the trolls spotted her.

After eating, Rowan checked her supplies and made a list of what she would need. She needed to stop by Arcadia’s; no way was she going after a bunch of trolls with only the small number of potions and poisons she had on hand. She would check at the Drunken Huntsman and Warmaiden’s for arrows, too; Her steel arrows were good, but higher quality was always better.

Mind made up, she changed into her armor, weapons, and robe, shouldered her pack, and went to the temple.

The temple was much quieter than it had been yesterday. The few people still waiting to be healed gave Rowan welcoming smiles and waves. Some even thanked her for her hard work, though they asked her to be careful and not overwork herself again. Rowan blushed and nodded at the praise, steadily making her way to Jalkja, who was being healed by Ahlam.

“Morning, kid,” Jalkja greeted. “You look a lot better than yesterday. How do you feel?”

“Not like I’m about to die,” Rowan answered.

Jalkja laughed. “That’s good! I honestly didn’t think you’d be walking around today after what I saw yesterday.”

“I’m used to magicka burnout; it happens all the time for me, so I’ve learned to bounce back quick from it,” Rowan said. “I’m here about the trolls. If you’ll mark it on my map, I’ll go ahead and get to work.”

Raising her eyebrows, Jalkja said, “Wow, you were really serious about that, huh? Well, all right. Give me your map.” Rowan handed her the map and a piece of charcoal. Jalkja marked her farm on it and handed it back. “You be careful now, you hear me, kid? There were a lot of trolls, and I don’t want you getting hurt helping me.”

Rowan smiled. “I’ll be careful. You take it easy, and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Jalkja stopped her before she could walk away. “Wait. It’ll take you two days to get to my farm on foot. Do you have a horse?”

“No,” Rowan said.

“You got some paper? I’ll write you a note so Skulvar will let you use my horse. Oh, and hand me that pack there? Yeah, that one,” Jalkja said, taking the pack Rowan handed her.

“You really don’t need to do that. I’m all right walking,” Rowan said while handing Jalkja the requested paper and charcoal.

Jalkja waved her off. “It’s no problem. You’re helping me, so I’ll help you. Here.” She handed Rowan a hastily written note and a small wrapped package. “These are a few lavender and honey sugar cubes. Feed Wheat one, and she’ ll know you’re a friend and let you ride her. And just tell her ‘hold’ if you want her to stay somewhere without tying her up. She won’t budge unless it’s an emergency.”

Rowan took the package and placed it and the note in her robe’s pocket. “Thank you. I’ll try to be back before nighttime.”

Jalkja scoffed. “Just come back alive, kid.”
A few hours later, Rowan was sitting astride Wheat, a golden colored horse with a slightly darker mane, and steadily trotting to Jalkja’s farm. She kept on the lookout for Cicero because there was no need to be on bad terms with any of the Dark Brotherhood members, but he was no where to be seen.

“Maybe I won’t have to deal with the various Guild nonsense at all,” Rowan wondered aloud.

Wheat snorted and flicked her tail.

“What? You think I’m wrong?” Rowan asked the horse playfully.

Snorting again, Wheat picked up the pace.

Rowan smiled and watched the surroundings, keeping a lookout for the sign Jalkja said marked the road to her farm. Rowan didn’t want to miss it. She still had trouble reading maps and relied heavily on signs, whether formal or informal, to find her way around.

When she saw the sign, she slowed Wheat’s trot to a walk, tightened her thighs’ grip on the saddle, and readied her bow. She had never fired a bow from horseback, but if Wheat wasn’t running, she should be able to manage.

Movement in the distance caught Rowan’s attention. She couldn’t see the farm yet, but there was the slightest movement through the trees. She held her breath as it moved towards her. Just past the trees, she saw a troll, but it hadn’t spotted her or Wheat. The troll paused at the tree line, huffed and snorted, and then turned its back.

Rowan dipped an arrow into a vial of poison attached to her belt while watching the troll. Its rough breathing was harsh and loud to her ears, even at such a distance. She readied her arrow and carefully lined up the shot; Faendal had taught her how to shoot through small gaps in the trees, but it was a lot different with a living target.

She let the arrow fly.

Her arrow hit its mark—the troll’s head, and the troll let out a guttural howl, recovered, and began running towards her.

She was already loosing a second and third arrow, allowing the muscle memory Faendal had ingrained into her take over and ignoring the panic bubbling beneath her ribcage. Both hit the troll in the head and throat, but it kept coming. Rowan cast fireball, which knocked the troll off its feet and set it on fire. She fired another three arrows while it was distracted. When the troll stopped moving, she cautiously dismounted and approached the corpse to examine it. There was no movement or breath, so Rowan exchanged her bow for the skinning knives Faendal had taught her to use. She set to work extracting the troll fat while trying not to vomit from the overpowering stench of burning fur and troll.

She cleaned off her knives when she was done, packed the troll fat away, and climbed onto Wheat.

“Forward, Wheat, but slowly,” she said quietly.

The horse obeyed, slowly edging closer to where a house was peeking out above the trees. Rowan kept one hand off the reigns with a fireball spell at the ready in case any trolls suddenly charged before she saw them.
Spotting a trail cutting through the trees across from the house, Rowan gently pulled the reigns to divert Wheat towards it. Wheat took the trail and stopped a short distance from the house when Rowan told her to. Rowan listened for the telltale sounds of trolls grunting and shuffling around, and when she heard them, she dismounted.

“Hold,” she told Wheat. She checked her equipment again before carefully making her way back to the farm. She kept to the trees, creeping through the bushes to stay hidden.

There were two trolls near the house, one in front and another at the edge of a trampled lot of tilled dirt. Rowan didn’t want to risk trying to take down one troll and both noticing her. With her bow in one hand, she readied a flame atronach spell, aimed it within the trolls’ sight but far away from her, and cast it.

The trolls startled at the sound of the spell being cast, but their attention was on the atronach throwing fireballs at them, not on Rowan’s possible location.

Rowan poisoned her arrows and began firing, making sure to move positions after firing a few arrows to confuse the trolls. When the atronach died, Rowan summoned another one. Her hands stung when she forced her magicka through them, but Anise’s training allowed her to easily ignore the minor pain.

Both trolls eventually fell. Rowan didn’t leave her cover immediately; she waited for any sign more trolls had been attracted by the sounds of the fight. When the only sounds came from her atronach (and her own heart had finally calmed), she tiptoed to each of the troll carcasses, harvest their fat, and began investigating the farm.

The trolls had obviously trampled everywhere, even going so far as to try and break the door down, and though it was worse for wear, it still stood and was solidly locked. Rowan didn’t believe any trolls were inside, so she moved on, her atronach bobbing along behind her.

There was a mill just behind the house. Beyond it, Rowan could see multiple glass structures covering sectioned off fields of crops and trees.

*Greenhouses?* she thought curiously, trying to place the familiarity of the structures. She could see movement inside two of the structures, but heavy breathing inside the windmill drew her attention first.

Readying an arrow, she crept closer to the entrance. Windmills were larger than in-game and meant the space inside was also larger and darker. The troll blended in perfectly with the shadows; if not for its breathing, Rowan wouldn’t have known it was there at all.

Of course, she knew the minute it noticed her.

The troll charged her. Rowan scrambled back, awkwardly firing her arrow reflexively. The arrow hit the troll but didn’t seem to affect it. Instead of standing her ground, Rowan did the smart thing and ran, letting the atronach take the immediate brunt of the troll’s wrath.

Knowing she wouldn’t make it to the tree line before her atronach died, she made a break for the house and, with a little help from the cabin’s protruding logs, climbed onto the roof. She felt the moment the threads holding her atronach in Mundus were severed and the atronach died. While she was out of range of the explosion, she still felt its heat.

The troll let out a furious howl as it was engulfed in flames. Rowan looked over the edge of the roof and grimaced at the flames spotting Jalkja’s property. Ignoring the screeching troll for now, she fired
off several ice spells to stop the fire from spreading. Once she was sure the place wasn’t going to burn down while she tried to do her job, she focused back on the troll. It snarled and screeched as it stomped around the house, trying to find a way up to her, but apparently Rowan had some luck because it didn’t try to climb onto the roof with her. Maybe trolls couldn’t climb? Oh well, it didn’t really matter. All that mattered was she was in the best position to kill the troll without being in danger.

She fired an ice spike this time, not wanting to do more damage to the farm. The close range, coupled with the troll not expecting the attack, didn’t leave any time to dodge, and the troll died easily.

Okay, so now do I try and lure the other two out or do I go to them? Rowan thought. She had been sure the noise would’ve lured the other trolls out of hiding, but they remained in their separate greenhouses. Let’s try Option One first.

She used her iron arrows instead of the steel or orcish and fired a few so they passed in front of the greenhouses’ entrances. The movement inside the greenhouses increased. Rowan took it as a sign and summoned a familiar in the middle of the greenhouses. The familiar wandered through the greenhouses, sensing but not seeing the danger.

One of the trolls roared and dove from its hiding spot to attack the familiar. While they fought, Rowan switched back to poisoned, steel arrows. She missed several times; the troll was moving too quickly for her to hit it every time, but it eventually died after killing three of her familiars.

“Okay, just one more to go,” she muttered, grabbing her iron arrows again. She fired several arrows as close to the entrance of the last troll’s hiding place as she could, and while the troll screeched at the arrows, it didn’t leave the safety of the greenhouse.

Rowan scowled. “Well, fuck.” Plan, plan, I need a plan. Obviously, I have to do this up close, but how to ensure I don’t get mauled to death immediately? Maybe, start with Muffle, get where I can see the troll, and then use Ice Spike? That could work.

After putting away her iron arrows, she carefully climbed down from her perch and cast Muffle once she was on the ground. She readied Ice Spike in one hand and her axe in the other and crept towards the troll’s hiding place.

The troll had gone strangely quiet, especially since it had been making a hell of a racket just a minute before. The pounding of her own heart set Rowan on edge; she grimaced, wishing there were some other sound to distract her from it but continued forward. Muffle wasn’t known for being long-lasting, after all.

She kept low and soft-footed like Faendal had taught her, as if she were hunting deer. The troll appeared unaware of her approach and continued its steady pacing inside the greenhouse. Rowan paused at the greenhouse’s entrance and, after charging her spell, leaned inside the greenhouse and fired her spell. Her aim was off, so instead of hitting the troll’s head or chest, she hit its shoulder.

The troll let out a howl and charged her. Rowan quickly backed up, casting Lightning Bolt and reveling in how the electricity skittered across her fingers and concentrated in her palm. The troll screeched as the spell connected but barely slowed down until after Rowan shocked it with a near-continuous stream of lightning.

Panting, she watched the corpse collapse to the ground. Her hands felt like they were on fire, and the pain leached up through her wrists to her forearms. When she inspected her hands, she half expected them to be raw and bleeding, but they were intact, though obviously raw from the constant use of
Rowan sighed. Maybe she should take a break from magic, at least for a day or two. Maybe she could work on her alchemy. God knew she needed to work on—

A howling brick wall crashed into her. Rowan was knocked to the ground; her head connected unluckily with a rock poking out of the ground. Her vision became a mess of blurry color. She could only process pain and the feeling of something massive tearing into her. She couldn’t move, could barely think under the onslaught. Panic froze her lungs and forced adrenaline into her already rabbit-quick heart.

*You’re gonna die! Do something! Anything!* she thought desperately. She did the first thing her instincts told her to do.

She reached.

Not physically but metaphysically. She reached past all physical limitations to the seat of her magicka, grasped part of it, and pulled it outside her body. The action was clumsy but effective. Magicka flooded the surrounding area. Rowan could see the beast behind her in her mind, and she didn’t hesitate. She concentrated her magicka inside its chest and shoved outwards.

Bones cracked, flesh ripped and split open, the snarling cut off with a choked whine—Rowan was showered in warm blood, flesh, organs, and bits of bone. She heard the corpse fall but didn’t shift to look at it. She couldn’t. She had been flayed open, and though the lingering adrenaline was keeping her from knowing the full extent of her injuries, she knew they were severe. She had to heal herself. Now.

Forcing magicka through her fried channels was agonizing. Left without enough energy to even scream, she bore the pain with wheezing breathes and small, pathetic sounds. The healing magic felt like slow-creeping fire in her veins, but it worked. Areas she thought were numb from adrenaline knitted back together in explosions of agony—*Damaged nerves,* she thought dully—until the flesh was raw but whole.

Despite the lingering ache, she didn’t allow herself to linger. She had to heal the worst damage first, and then she would try and heal the rest.

She couldn’t stop herself from crying when the first of her ribs began healing. Hot tears left stinging paths down her cheeks to settle in the dirt beneath her face. The new mud stuck to her cheeks like thick paste. A cool breeze swept over her prone form, chilling the raw nerves, and rustled the trees. Nothing distracted her from the pain.

The flesh along her back regrew like fire. Entire sections of muscle slowly regenerated and crept towards each other. Blood continued to flow from the wounds, enlarging the massive pool already surrounding her.

She blacked out at one point. When she woke up, the sun was much lower in the sky. Cautiously, she attempted movement and was relieved to find the wounds mostly healed. Make no mistake, agony nearly overcame her with every twitch of her muscles, but at least her body had been mended back together, for the most part. The new, raw scars, which would surely be bright pink or red if she could see them, burned and stretched tight across almost her entire back.

She ignored the heady thrum of magicka at her center. She couldn’t use more magic today or even the rest of the week; her streams were fried and attempting any spell at this point would kill her.

Her magicka well pulsed and thrummed, begging to be used. She shuddered. *Is it like this for everyone, or am I just special?*
Rowan turned away from the bleak thought. She had to find her pack; it held her potions, and she would need to drink two to even get to her feet. She shuffled on her belly but could not see where her pack had been thrown by the troll. After minutes of fruitless searching at ground level, she rose up on shaking arms to get a better view. Finally, she spotted her pack several feet behind her. Now to get to it.

Lowering herself back to the ground, she waited until she had caught her breath to start crawling.

Every muscle screamed when she turned her body around; her arms quivered with the strain of supporting her body; the burning pain in her back flare with every movement; pain and exhaustion forced her to pause nearly every half minute, but eventually, she reached her pack.

The pack’s straps were ruined, but otherwise, the pack seemed unharmed. With shaking, bloody fingers, she unbuttoned the pack and reached inside to pull out two large potions—one healing and one stamina. No matter how badly she wanted to down as many potions as her stomach could hold, she remembered Anise’s warning: Potions could save your life or end them. Potions were stimulants; they kicked your body into overdrive to produce more, whether it stimulated healing, stamina, or magicka. They didn’t replenish any of those things. In fact, they did the opposite. Potion usage had massive kickback the next day with side effects ranging from headaches and nausea to organ failure. The most potions you drink, the worse the side effects. Drinking more than four in a five-day timespan basically guaranteed death.

She drank the potions in painful, slow swallows and let out a groan when the potions soothed a chunk of her pain and exhaustion. With her pain now a dulled throb, all she wanted to do was lie down on her belly and sleep, but she resisted. Instead, she struggled to her feet—wobblingly dangerously as she did so—and staggered back towards where Wheat was, hopefully, still waiting for her.

She paused only to take in the last troll’s mangled corpse. Well, what was left of it. Most of its torso had exploded, leaving only the head, arms, legs, and some of its pelvis intact. Blood, bone, and flesh littered the area. Even where she had laid wasn’t unmarred, though most of that blood was probably hers, rather than the troll’s.

*Hope Jalkja doesn’t charge me for that,* Rowan thought wearily before continuing towards the woods.

Rowan left Wheat at the stables and drug her exhausted body into Whiterun. A few of the guards greeted her. Some commented on her ripped and bloodied clothing, but none demanded answers about her whereabouts or why she looked like she’d been mauled by something.

Adrianne, however, was curious.

“Well, it looks like you found work,” Adrianne said, looking up from her grindstone to take in Rowan’s appearance. Her eyes lingered on the gore nearly covering Rowan from head to toe, but she didn’t ask about it.

Nodding, Rowan grunted. “Yeah.”

“How’d it go?” Adrianne asked, her tone neutral but curious.

Rowan thought of the troll nearly ripping her to pieces in the dirt, of its nearly destroyed corpse, and what her magic was capable of. “I won,” she finally answered. *I’m alive,* she meant, and that was all
that mattered right now.

Smiling, Adrianne said, “Excellent news, friend! You’ll have to tell me the story some time.”

The corner of Rowan’s mouth tilted upwards. “Yeah, some time.”

“Well, you look like you need a bath and lots of rest, so I won’t keep you,” Adrianne said. “Stop by again when you have the time.”

“I will, thank you.” Rowan turned to leave but paused. She turned back to Adrianne. “Would it be possible for me to use your forge tomorrow? I need to repair my armor.”

“Hm? Oh, yes, of course! So long as you have the materials and don’t interrupt my work, I’m glad to share my workspace.”

“Thank you. Have a good day.”

Adrianna smiled. “Remember to take a bath, young thing. While those robes aren’t salvageable, the rest of you might be.”

Rowan manage a small but genuine laugh before bidding Adrianne goodbye and trudging to the marketplace.

Turns out, Whiterun’s civilians weren’t as discreet as its guards.

People running their evening errands fill the marketplace. The hustle and bustle of day’s end came to an immediate halt as soon as the first person caught sight of Rowan. The person, someone Rowan had never seen before, dropped their basket, signaling for other people to investigate. Soon, nearly everyone in the market had stopped to gape at her; some even exclaiming to the gods in their shock.

Rowan, who was well versed in ignoring uncomfortable situations, acted like strolling into a city while covered in gore was the most natural thing in the world to do. She ignored the stares and tiredly approached Hulda when she spotted her amongst the gawking crowd.

“Hello, Hulda. I know it’s getting late, but would it be too much of a bother for me to get a bath?” she asked, steadily refusing to acknowledge the crowd’s growing murmurs.

“I—well—I, no. No, it wouldn’t,” Hulda managed to say. “I’ll get it started right away.” Her eyes roamed over Rowan’s figure, lingering on her shredded clothing and the blood and bits of flesh littering her body.

“Thank you. I have to go to the temple, but I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Rowan made her way from the Plains District and to the temple, sidestepping two women who might have been Companions, but she was too tired to confirm it.

A group of slightly different people waited inside the temple this time. No one noticed Rowan’s entrance until Jenssen let out a squawk of surprise.

“What in Oblivion happened to you?!?” he asked, jolting forward to inspect her for injuries.

Everyone’s attention snapped to Rowan. Several people gasped or cursed at the sight of her. Jalkja nearly dropped the vase of water she held.

“Trolls,” Rowan answered simply. She sat down when Jenssen directed her to, and he helped her peel off her ruined clothes and armor.
Danica and Ahlam are the first to recover from their shock, followed by Jalkja. All three women hurried to Rowan; Danica and Ahlam joined Jenssen in inspecting Rowan for wounds while Jalkja scowled fiercely at Rowan.

“I told you not to try and get yourself killed!” she snapped, setting the vase down to cross her arms over her chest.

Dressed in only a ripped shirt and pair of trousers, Rowan stared up at her. “I didn’t. I thought I’d gotten them all, but—” She hissed when Jenssen prodded at her newly healed wounds. “—but one came out of nowhere. It’s fine. I killed it, so your farm’s clear.”

Jalkja’s scowl deepened. “Damn the farm! And damn you, too, for being a fool!”

Rowan really couldn’t find any way to argue with that, given that she was a fool. Luckily, the healers were too invested in her wounds to care about the argument.

“Danica, look at these wounds,” Jenssen said. “Look at how cleanly they’ve healed. It’s amazing! I’m not even sure if they’ll scar.”

Humming, Danica ran her fingertips over the raw skin. She pulled away when Rowan flinched at the touch. “You’re right. It is remarkable. From where I’m standing, you should have much more damage. Even with healing magic, you should’ve needed at least two or three weeks to recover from this sort of wound, but I expect you’ll only have a week or two at most. It might scar, and it might not. You obviously pulled too much magicka. There are sigils burned all around the wounds. Only time will tell if they’ll fade, but I’ll make a poultice to put on it. That will help the scarring if it does occur.”

Rowan slumped in the chair. She tried to stay alert, but her eyes just wouldn’t stay open. “Wanna sleep for forever. Won’t be using magic for at least a week, maybe more. Streams are fried.”

Danica’s magic washed over Rowan, inspecting the depth of physical and magical damage. “I’ll give it around the same timespan as your wounds, but after that, you should be fine. You need to take it easy. If you healed all this with your own magic—and I suspect that’s the case—then the next few weeks are going to be very unpleasant for you.”

Rowan gave a distracted hum, too busy nodding off to really care about how shitty she would feel in the morning.

With a sigh, Danica gently shook Rowan awake. “I know you want to rest, and you will, but only after you eat something. We have some beef broth. Let’s see if you can get that and some bread down, then Jenssen will help you to the Bannered Mare.” She nodded to Ahlam, who went to a backroom, presumably to get the food.

“Bath,” Rowan mumbled. “At the inn.”

“Don’t both, Jenssen. I’ll help with that,” Jalkja said. “Can’t have her drowning before I pay her, can I?”

Ahlam returned with a tray filled with a bowl of broth, herb bread, and water. Carefully, she placed the tray in Rowan’s lap. “Here you go. Do you need help?”

Rowan’s immediate response was to say no, but when she thought about it, she said, “Maybe. Give me a minute.”

She ate slowly; there wasn’t any reason to rush, and she was almost falling asleep in the chair
anyway. Sooner than expected the tray was empty. Rowan drowsily handed the tray off to Ahlam. Her belly was full; her back stung slightly less; and she was ready to sleep for eternity.

“Not as good as I had hoped but good enough,” Danica said, giving Rowan one last check with her magic. “Jalkja, we’ll help her dress, and you can get her to the tavern. If she feels like eating, get her something solid but easy on the stomach.”

Jalkja shouldered Rowan’s pack and waited until Rowan was dressed to lean down and pull Rowan’s arm over her other shoulder. “Up we go, fool.”

Rowan tried not to lean too heavily on Jalkja as they walked to the tavern and, for the most part, succeeded. Her body moved sluggishly, but she was sure she could’ve made the trip unassisted if needed.

Hulda helped them both into the basement, looking slightly less shocked than she had in the marketplace. She left them once Jalkja assured her she wouldn’t let Rowan accidentally drown herself.

“You need help with your clothes? Or do you want privacy?” Jalkja asked. She snorted when she looked over her shoulder and saw Rowan struggling with her shirt. “I guess not.”

Rowan made a curious noise at Jalkja’s statement but was only half listening. Her limbs were sluggish and uncooperative.

Jalkja helped her remove her clothing and step into the bath. “It’s just I heard you Bretons cared about who saw you naked, that’s all.”

Relaxing into the hot water, Rowan mumbled, “Can’t speak for all Bretons, but I don’t care.”

Jalkja laughed. “I noticed.” She patted Rowan’s shoulder. “I’m going to wash your hair first, all right? Then, we’ll get your back. Tell me if it hurts too much, and we’ll stop for a minute.”

The bath went well despite Jalkja having to fetch buckets of clean water because the bathwater became too filthy to use. Rowan almost nodded off once, but Jalkja began asking her questions about the fight with the trolls to keep her awake. When Jalkja deemed Rowan clean enough, the bath water was a dirty shade of red, and the scent of rust and dirt permeated the damp, warm air.

“You hungry?” Jalkja asked. She helped Rowan dress in a loose tunic and soft pair of trousers.

Rowan shook her head. Even if it would’ve been wise to try and eat something, she was still full of the broth and wouldn’t risk vomiting.

“Well, it you’re sure,” Jalkja said,

Jalkja helped Rowan up to her room and into bed before returning downstairs to retrieve Rowan’s belongings.

“What do you want me to do with this stuff, kid?” she asked when she returned. “The armor—really great idea by the way, ya know, wearing it under robes—well, it might be salvageable, but the robes are a lost cause.”

“Put th’ armor on the desk wrapped in—yeah, that sack. Just put the clothes in a bucket of water,” Rowan mumbled, face halfway mushed into her pillow. “They’re prob’ly ruined, but I’ll look at ‘em later.”
“I’ll do that. Now, you go ahead and . . .”

Rowan passed out before Jalkja finished speaking.

The next two weeks were absolute hell for Rowan. She slept for nearly four straight days, only waking when a hysterical Hulda had gotten Danica to force her awake.

What followed Rowan’s waking could only be described as divine punishment. While she wasn’t experiencing the expected organ failure, feeling like, well, like she’d nearly been kill by a troll and then caught the flu held absolutely no perks. Rowan was also under nearly round the clock observation by the healers after Jalkja returned to her farm.

She was lucky, though. By the end of the second week, she didn’t feel like she was dying and could move around her room freely, though she took it easy under Danica’s watchful stare. She took another three days to slowly reintegrate herself with her magic. No point in taking unnecessary risks by rushing. While she was out of commission, she wrote down her adventures and observations about Whiterun in her journal. She tried to be as descriptive as possible when writing the fight with the trolls, but parts of her memory nothing but sensation and pain. How did you transcribe the feeling of being torn apart? Or of your own power looming ever higher and threatening to eat you alive if you gave it an inch?

Rowan refused to dwell on it. She made blunt notes in her journal and turned her attention to her ruined armor. The robes were easily replaced—though she hated to trash a gift from Anise—but the armor was a different matter. The malachite sections had mostly survived, though Rowan would have to restring them. The cuirass needed to be entirely re-forged; the troll had shredded the original’s back and sides completely open.

“Maybe I should remove the leather entirely?” Rowan wondered aloud. She sat at her room’s desk to inspect the stained and ruined armor. “But then what? Glass is stronger than elvish gear, but the glass armor is too bulky to hide under robes. Maybe I could redesign it? I guess it depends on how malleable glass is. I could make it sleeker, more efficient.”

She made a few notes on a scrap of paper. “Adrianne can probably help. I’ll get her opinion before I make up my mind.”

Adrianne could in fact help. While glass wasn’t her specialty, she had worked with it enough times to know what it could withstand. Apparently, it became extremely malleable when heated and could even be shaped by hand if the right gloves were worn.

As the last days of her recovery ended, Rowan sketched and planned a new set of armor. She wasn’t any good at designing intricate armor, so she modeled the design on other light armors until she had a final design—an almost bodysuit-like armor that would be modeled to her measurements. No part of the original glass armor was left untouched except for the gauntlets; everything had been slimmed down, unnecessary pieces that stuck out or hindered movement removed completely. She even redesigned the helmet, so a hood could easily cover and hide it.

Rowan began work on the armor as soon as she was physically capable. Gathering the supplies necessary was easy; she melted down her old malachite pieces and bought moonstone and leather from Adrianne, used tools she already had, and even bought a suitable set of gloves Belethor managed to find buried in his stockroom. Since she had little practical experience with glass, she worked carefully under Adrianne’s instruction. Rowan burned herself many times with the molten
glass or just by standing a bit too close to the forge, but it was nothing a bit of healing magic couldn’t fix.

With Rowan working days and even some nights, the armor came together much quicker than she anticipated, though much credit was due to Adrianne’s assistance with the armor fittings. The armor set would be complete in the next day or two, and Rowan was thankful for that. Despite knowing she needed to take it easy due to her injuries, she felt that familiar itch beneath her skin again. The need to leave Whiterun, if only for a few days on a job, and do something frustrated her to no end, and she would be glad to finally be rid of the feeling again, if only for a time.

When Rowan sat down in the tavern to eat dinner in nearly a month, she expected a quiet, uninterrupted meal. Imagine her surprise when one of the patrons approached her table to ask if she was available for her.

“Pardon?” she asked eloquently. Her next spoonful of stew was frozen halfway to her mouth.

“I saw you in the market a few weeks ago and heard how you cleared those trolls from Jalkja’s farm. Well, I’ve got a sabercat that’s been hanging around my farm and killing my goats and sheep. You available for hire?”

“Um, yeah,” she said.

The man grinned. “Great! I’ll mark the location on your map and will pay you when the job’s done.”

After the farm’s location was marked and the man returned to his seat, Rowan sat at her table, completely befuddled but refusing to question the situation.

Well, at least that takes care of the job problem.
Hi, everyone!! First off, I want to thank everyone for their comments and kudos! I know I don't respond to them individually but that's because I get really flustered when I see that people like my writing and don't know how to respond! It really means a lot to me to hear what you guys think and that you like my fic!

Second, there is now art of Rowan! It's on my tumblr at: http://thefandomhoarder.tumblr.com/post/173014597810/aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh-my-commission-from or just go to rowan corvid's tag on my tumblr and it'll be there! More art will be posted as the artists complete them, so be on the lookout for more!

Word that Rowan was available for hire spread quickly. Maybe a bit too quickly. Rowan came back from killing the sabre cat to several people clamoring for her attention. She'd taken the jobs, of course, but organized them so she could complete the ones farthest from town first and gradually work her way back to Whiterun as she completed jobs along the way. She'd gained quite the reputation in the Hold, even meeting the Jarl briefly after she'd accidentally—yes, accidentally—completed a bounty on a group of bandits nearby. She'd nearly stumbled into their spike pit and been so pissed off, she'd summoned a fire atronach in the middle of their camp that night and then rained arrows down on them.

Balgruuf had laughed when she'd awkwardly told the story in his court after being brought there by an excited guard. He'd congratulated and thanked her afterwards, gently dismissing her with a large payment of gold. She had quickly sidestepped the inquisitive nobles to take shelter in Farengar’s alcove. While there, she bought several spell tomes and requested to use Farengar's enchanting table. Amused and slightly intrigued, Farengar had agreed, though not before suggesting she join the College of Winterhold.

Rowan had taken today off, choosing to work at the temple rather than retrieve another lost item; however, when she got to the temple, she was surprised to find Danica and Jenssen arguing.

"I know, Jenssen, but what can we do about it?" Danica said tiredly. "We're busy with the injured. We can't go out in the wilderness looking for hagravens."

"But the Gildergreen—" Jenssen tried to protest.

Danica cut him off. "I know. Believe me, I know. It pains me to see it in such a state, but there is nothing we can do about it."

"About what?" Rowan piped up. Of course, she already knew they were talking about the Gildergreen. It had recently been struck by lightning and was slowly dying, its flowers turning brown and its branches withering more with each passing day.

"The Gildergreen. As much as it pains me to say, I believe there's nothing we can do for it," Danica said.

"Absolutely nothing?" Rowan asked.
"Well, it might be possible to rejuvenate the tree with sap from the mother tree, but that would require finding the Nettlebane, and it's in the possession of those filthy hagravens," Danica said, shuddering.

Rowan raised her eyebrows. "I could get it for you."

Frowning, Danica said, "I couldn't ask that of you. Killing trolls and sabercats is one thing, but hagravens? They use magic at a distance and their claws up close."

Rowan's mind went to the keepsake Anise had given her and its dark, pulsing magic. "I can handle it."

Danica opened her mouth to speak, but Jenssen interrupted. "Let her go, Danica! If anyone can go toe to toe with the hagravens, it's a seidr, right?"

Danica sent him a reprimanding look. "She's mostly untrained, Jenssen. I can't send her into a hagraven nest in good conscious."

"But she's gotten a lot better!" Jenssen argued. "She hasn't fallen into the Mage's Demise since that first time, and her only severe injury was the one from the trolls last month—and she healed that while bleeding to death! She's learned more spells, too! I've seen her control. I know she can do it."

Rowan stood silently as Jenssen made Rowan's case. When he finished, she looked at Danica with smile that was only slightly smug.

Danica sighed. "All right, but on one condition: if for any reason, you get second thoughts while you're traveling, you turn around and come back. I don't want you risking your life for this. If the Gildergreen dies, then so be it. A life is worth more than a tree."

"I'll be fine, Danica. I can handle it."

Rowan set off for Orphan Rock the next day. Now alone, her bravado gave way to nerves. She continuously fidgeted with the token Anise had given her, a small crow skull carved from obsidian attached to a pewter ball chain. Several black, iridescent feathers decorated the chain. A steady, dark magic pulsed within the token, reminding Rowan of the magicka within Anise. The token had been created with hagraven magic, no doubt about that, but Rowan didn't know its purpose, only that Anise had looked particularly pleased when she'd handed it over.

Rowan just hoped it would be enough to keep the hagraven from attacking her.

The path to Orphan Rock appeared too soon. Rowan couldn't smother the anxiety growing in her chest. She had to be prepared to fight but didn't know how well she could hold up against a hagraven, let alone one paired with two hags.

_I should probably go back_, she thought yet continued on anyway.

She paused at the edge of the woodland to take a deep breath. It didn't calm her, but she pretended it did. As she moved forward, she made no attempt to mask her presence; she merely straightened her spine and tried to seem like she was meant to be there.

Something crashed through the bushes and grass towards her. From somewhere hidden in the trees, a woman shouted, "Halt! Who goes there?"
Rowan stopped. "My name is Rowan Corvid. I'm here to bargain with the hagraven who lives here."

Another voice scoffed. "Like we'd believe that."

"It's true," Rowan said in the most even voice she could manage. "I'm here to bargain for Nettlebane."

The hags' only response was silence.

Rather than relying on the hags, Rowan turned to the rock where the hagraven was. She removed the token from her neck and held it up high. "I was given this by Anise in Riverwood. She trained me for four months. I have no quarrel with the hagraven who lives here," she called out.

No response came from Orphan Rock. Rowan began to believe the hagraven would have nothing to do with her until a green light pulsed in the darkness.

The hags stepped out of the trees. "Come. Mistress Senna wishes to speak with you," the blonde one said.

Slowly lowering her arm to her side, Rowan nodded. She held the token tightly in her hand as the hags escorted her up the hill. There was no telling what would happen now.

The hagraven awaited them outside her nest. Even in the dim light, Rowan could see her hunched figure.

The hags halted before they crossed the log, motioning for Rowan to do the same.

The hagraven wheezed out a breath. "Approach, child. Show me the token you have been given in good faith. Then, I will decide if you are worth speaking to."

Rowan licked her lips and looked to the hags. Both had their arms crossed over the chests and were scowling deeply at her, but the redhead jerked her head towards the log bridge. Rowan took it as permission and nervously made her way across. She paused a few feet from the hagraven and hesitantly held out the token.

The hagraven took it and inspected it, turning it over in her hands and rustling the feathers with her claws. Finally, she let out a sandpaper-like laugh and handed the token back to Rowan. "What is your name, girl?"

"Rowan Corvid," Rowan said, placing the token around her neck again.

The hagraven hummed. "A good name. I am Senna. Tell me, why have you come here?"

Rowan's heart pounded in her chest. Her palms were sweaty, and she was glad she wasn't still holding the token or else it might've slipped through her fingers. "I would like to bargain for Nettlebane."

"Nettlebane? And what need would you have for it?" Senna asked. While her tone was bland, it wasn't aggressive.

"The Gildergreen in Whiterun is dying. I need Nettlebane to get close to the original tree," Rowan answered.

"Ah, the Gildergreen. I wondered how long it would last. And what would you bargain for it? It isn't something I would give up lightly."
Rowan blurted out, "I'll return it afterwards." Senna snickered, and Rowan's cheeks colored. "I mean, I only need it for the Gildergreen. Afterwards, I won't have any use for it. And as for bargaining . . . what would you want for it?"

Senna grinned, though it was more a baring of her many sharp teeth than a smile. Her black eyes glittered in the torchlight like a shark's. "You should not ask that question unless you are willing to go through with it, child."

Rowan licked her lips again. Time to be brave. "What's your price?"

Throwing her head back, Senna let out a shrieking cackle. She shuffled forward, close enough for Rowan to see the blood staining her claws and smell the rot on her breath. She tilted her head upwards to look Rowan in the eye. "I believe a vial of your blood will do rather nicely, don't you think?"

Rowan frowned. "My blood?"

"Blood is always powerful, but yours? Oh, the things I could do with blood like that," Senna cooed, stepping ever closer.

Rowan itched to put space between the two of them but stayed in place. "Because I'm a seidr."

Senna smiled again. "The Nord word for it, but yes, because you're a seidr. Such a rare treat to meet one of your kind, and even better to have the opportunity to bargain with one. So, what say you to my offer?"

Rowan chewed on her bottom lip as she thought. Under normal circumstances, she might've agreed immediately, but these weren't normal circumstances. "What would you do with it?"

Senna's grin widened. "Such a smart little god-child. You know not to trust the intentions of others. As for your question, I wish to revive my Arcane Enchanter. Its power has been declining these past few years and with it, the quality of my enchantments. Your blood will allow me to revive its dread spirit properly, so I won't have to make due with soul gems or go through the trouble of acquiring a new one."

"So, it wouldn't harm me in any way? No taking control of me or enslaving me or draining my magic?" Rowan asked.

"No harm will come to you nor will you suffer any ill effects from the ritual. I swear it on the Old Gods and their wills," Seena answered easily.

Her gut still fluttering with nerves, Rowan quickly nodded. "Yes, I agree. My blood for Nettlebane. How much do you need?"

Grinning victoriously, Senna turned her hunched form away from Rowan and entered her tent to rummage in her chest. When she turned around, she held a small vial in one hand and Nettlebane in the other.

Rowan zeroed in on Nettlebane. Its aura was like nothing she had seen before—thick, dark, and somehow possessing a razor-sharp edge all around, completely unlike that of the Whiterun temple, the Gildergreen, or even the hagraven holding it. Rowan could feel its teeth and reaching, whispering fingers where she stood.

"Do you wish for me to make the cut or to do it yourself?" Senna asked, not unkindly.
Forcing herself to focus, Rowan said, "I'll do it." Though Senna had been remarkably pleasant so far, Rowan didn't trust her to take a knife to her flesh. She took her own iron dagger in hand and, in one swift movement, sliced the palm of her left hand. She knew it would be better to slice her forearm instead, but that would require her to remove her robes and parts of her armor. Besides, she would simply heal the wound when the vial became full.

Senna held out the vial, her expression eager and her eyes trained on the blood pooling in Rowan's palm.

Carefully, Rowan held her palm close to the vial and tilted her hand, so the blood steadily dripped inside. The vial didn't take long to fill—it really was small—and once it was fully nearly to the brim, Senna cast a healing spell on Rowan's hand and stoppered the vial.

Rowan jerked her hand back in surprise. "Oh! Um, thank you," she said awkwardly. She took a rag from her pocket and wiped her hand off with it.

Snickering, Senna held out Nettlebane. "As promised," she said. "Keep it if you wish or return it for a favor."

"A favor?" Rowan asked. She lightly took hold of Nettlebane's handle. The blade hummed appreciatively as it settled perfectly into her palm; she could feel the teeth of its handle prickling her flesh, as if teasing itself whether to take a bite of her or not.

“You trained with Anise of Riverwood. She is amongst the youngest of our kind, not fully made yet. She taught you as well as she could, but I could teach you more,” Senna said. She pointed a claw at the token around Rowan’s neck. “I could show you how to use your token properly.”

Rowan touched the token with the fingertips of her free hand. “What is it? Anise didn’t tell me when she gave it to me.”

“A symbol of your trustworthiness and your potential as a student. If you wished, you could become a hagraven.” Senna snickered when Rowan’s face twitched in displeasure. “But that is not its only use. You do not have to become a hagraven to learn our ways. It merely helps in providing protection from the more . . . hostile forces of our magic.”

Rowan nodded slowly. She remembered the feeling of Anise's magic and could feel Senna's now. The black orb in Senna's chest emitted a thick, hungry energy; while there was no obvious malice in it, Rowan knew its neutrality could curdle into malevolence at the drop of a hat.

But she also remembered the thrill of its song running through her veins. Anise had only allowed her to study a small portion of hagarven magic, but Rowan couldn't shake the craving it had stirred within her. In her eyes, the "proper" way to study magic paled in comparison to the hagravens' ways; it did not satisfy her ever hungry magicka the way it should have.

"I'll think about it," Rowan answered softly, still toying with the token.

Senna grinned. "Take your time, child. I have time, and so do you."

Rowan returned to Whiterun lighter than when she'd left but with her head in the clouds. Nettlebane hung at her hip, reaching out to gently gnaw on her magicka for attention every so often. Honestly, the blade was more like a vicious, wretched sort of dog than a blade, tugging at her pant leg whenever it wanted to be petted or scratched behind the ears.
She liked its presence; it was like traveling with someone without the worry of them judging you.

But I don't know how to use you, she thought, patting Nettlebane to listen to it purr. I could probably ask Senna, but I think it would be best if I returned you after I fix the Gildergreen. I'm not exactly in the best situation to go around sacrificing spriggans.

The guards greeted Rowan as normal. A few asked where she'd been and became excited when she said she was helping Danica with the Gildergreen, quickly sending her on her way towards the temple.

Nettlebane quieted as they neared the temple. Rowan almost paused to ask the blade what was wrong but realized it would look strange if she stopped in the middle of the market to talk to a knife. So, she ignored the sudden silence and entered the temple.

"Hello, Jenssen," Rowan greeted. "Is Danica busy?"

Jenssen grinned. "You're back! So soon! And in one piece, too!"

Raising an eyebrow, Rowan said, "Well, don't sound so surprised. Where's all that confidence you had in my abilities?"

Jenssen flushed. "Oh, I mean nothing against you, Corvid! It's just that hagravens are very dangerous foes. I would have worried about anyone who'd gone."

"Uh-huh."

"Anyway, it's good to have you back. Did you get the Nettle . . . bane . . ." Jenssen caught sight of the dagger at her hip and subtly cringed away. "I'll, uh, I'll go get Danica. She's in the back room, taking stock."

"Sure thing. I'll be right here."

With a pronounced grimace, Jenssen turned around and quickly walked to the storage room. He returned with Danica not a few moments later.

Danica smiled as she approached Rowan. "It's good to see you in one piece, friend. Jenssen tells me you have the Nettlebane."

Nodding, Rowan plucked Nettlebane off her waist and held it up for Danica to see. She, too, cringed away. The blade hissed in Rowan's hand, lashing out with tendrils of jagged energy and swiping in the priests' direction. Danica and Jenssen jumped backwards, wide eyed and fearful. A ward appeared in front of them, seemingly instinctively cast by Danica.

Rowan jerked Nettlebane away from them in alarm. "No," she hissed to the blade, her magicka flaring up to block its reach. Nettlebane curled back like a startled dog. She immediately regretted her sharp tone but couldn't apologize in front of the priests. She attempted to soothe it. Behave. You can't blow our cover.

Nettlebane's wounded aura became subtler and, seemingly placated, retreated back into the blade.

Rowan looked back to Danica and Jenssen. They were still staring at Nettlebane; when nothing happened, they looked at Rowan. Slowly, Danica dropped her ward.

"Sorry about that," Rowan said. "I didn't know that would happen."
Danica straightened and cleared her throat. "You couldn't have known. Nettlebane is known for being unpredictable. I should have warned you. I'm glad you seem to have control over it."

Rowan kept her face neutral. No use giving more information than was needed.

"Well, the next step is to go to the Gildergreen Sanctuary and retrieve some sap," Danica continued. "I'll mark it on your map. You can go as soon as you're ready."

Rowan didn't rest long in Whiterun. With Senna's invitation, she had slept and ate at Orphan Rock. Instead, she replenished her supplies, ate lunch, and left for the Sanctuary, Nettlebane buzzing at her hip the entire way.

She snuck past the giant camp with her heart pounding in her chest. She had barely survived the trolls. No way could she take on a giant. She doubted she would even be able to outrun it unless she found a place to hide. Luckily though, she snuck past them without incident and continued towards the Sanctuary, looking out for bears and sabrecats as she went. Nettlebane's excitement became progressively obvious the closer they got to the Sanctuary; Rowan's hip had nearly gone numb by the time she finally entered the cave.

Immediately, she felt eyes on her. She froze. Nettlebane shone like a beacon, putting her on display for all to see. She no doubt had the attention of the spriggans; they would be ready to attack her the moment she harmed the Gildergreen.

Rowan didn't exactly run through the Sanctuary, but it was a very near thing.

"Whoa there, friend. Where're you off to in such a hurry?" a man called out, laughing.

Rowan paused her powerwalk to look across the small river. A nord, half dressed in armor, was sitting on a rock and staring at her in amusement.

"Uh, I'm a quest. So, I need to get this done," she said. She kept her hip turned away, so the man wouldn't catch a glimpse of Nettlebane.

He laughed again. "Does it need to be done so quickly that you cannot take in the beauty of this place?"

Rowan looked around the Sanctuary, barely swiveling her head to take it all in. "It's very pretty," she said tensely.

"'Pretty'," the man quoted in disbelief. "This is a place of wonder! The work of the gods! Pretty does not begin to describe it."

"Listen, sir, I'm not currently in a position that allows me to appreciate the beauty of this place," she said diplomatically. "Perhaps I'll be in a different position when I return another time."

He man let out a disgusted 'humph' sound and turned away. Rolling her eyes, Rowan skedaddled up the path until she faced the first roots blocking her way. She frowned. In game you couldn't maneuver around the roots, but this was real life. Couldn't she just . . .

She stepped over one of the roots and bent down to dodge the ones above it, straddling the root until she could shimmy between the other roots and to the other side. She looked back at the still in place roots and grinned. Easier than she thought, and she didn't have to risk angering the spriggans!

She continued up the path, squeezing between roots as she went; some of the roots were a tight squeeze, and she heard her armor scraping against the bark even through her robes. She was lucky
she had a slim build. If she were any larger, she wouldn't have been able to make it through the gaps.

Nettlebane buzzed in annoyance at her side; it wanted to cut, to slice through the Gildergreen, to feel its energy leak into the air like vapor. Nettlebane nipped at her spine, asking, begging for her to take it in her hand and use it.

With a shudder, Rowan carefully ignored it. She approached the Gildergreen, licking her lips. She would try to ask the tree for a cutting or a sapling first, like the priest guy did in one of her playthroughs. Then, she wouldn't have to harm the tree and fight the spriggans.

But how could she communicate with it? With Whiterun's Gildergreen, it had reached for her. This Gildergreen in front of her seemed wary of her, not curious; it felt Nettlebane vibrating at her hip, reaching with teeth and fingers to grip and tear and eat.

Rowan laid her hand over Nettlebane to try and soothe it. She could feel the spriggans creeping closer. The faint buzzing around her grew with the tension in the Sanctuary. Heart pounding in her chest, she took a deep breath and slowly placed her hands on the tree.

At first, the Gildergreen cringed away from her. Nettlebane hissed in pleasure, once again reaching forward. Gulp, Rowan flared her magicka, encompassing Nettlebane's and using herself as a buffer between the two opposing magical forces. Nettlebane raked itself across the barrier. Rowan muffled her cry of pain and squeezed her eyes shut. Nettlebane's displeasure felt like razors slicing into her flesh and brain. She could almost feel blood coming from the—no, wait, there was blood. She opened her eyes just enough to watch several drops of blood drip from her nose and to the ground.

Another bolt of pain laced through her skull, and the world tilted. Her spine curved sharply and painfully enough to crack audibly when Nettlebane turned its attentions on her; it dipped past her flesh to pluck at her ribs and ghost threateningly over her lungs. More energy entered her, spreading and digging as if it were thorny roots taking up residence inside her body.

I can't do this, Rowan thought, screwing her prickling eyes shut. She would rather risk the spriggans than endure this violating sort of agony.

She began to pull away when the Gildergreen reached for her.

She paused with only her fingertips touching the bark. Blood steadily dripped from her nose; some trailed down over her mouth and chin while even more leaked into her mouth. Her spine still bowed and the thorns creeping along her lungs, she waited.

The Gildergreen did not make her wait for long. As soon as it seemed sure it was safe from Nettlebane, it connected its magicka with hers. Images flashed inside Rowan's head, worsening her migraine and causing her neck and shoulder muscles to cramp. Still, she did not move as the Gildergreen asked why she had come.

When the Gildergreen finished, Rowan sent back her own images – sloppier and much slower than the Gildergreen had, but it got the job done. The Gildergreen understood and barely took a moment to make its choice. It tapped at her barrier, gently asking permission to enter and take. She didn't know what it meant, but she was covered in her own blood and just wanted this ordeal to be over, so she gave her consent.

The Gildergreen reached for her core – the same place Nettlebane was trying to get to – but this time, the Gildergreen didn't cringe from Nettlebane's energy; instead, it speared past the thorns as if they weren't there at all, entered her magic's center, and pulled.
Oh, she thought, her eyes widening and her mouth falling open in a silent scream. Tears flowed down her cheeks. *That's what it meant.*

The Gildergreen drained away part of her magicka – not enough to make a difference. She doubted anything could do that – but the drain was there, and that shit hurt. It hurt so badly her vocal chords strained, but she couldn't scream, no matter how desperately she wanted to.

The blood pool beneath her was too large. She closed her eyes, so she wouldn't have to see it. Impassive to the torment it was inflicting on her, the Gildergreen continued its task. All Rowan could do was wait and endure.

It was almost underwhelming when the Gildergreen gently pulled out of her core and away from her. Before leaving her barrier completely, it sent more images, telling her it was over and that all would be well once she returned to the dying Gildergreen before falling silent.

With the Gildergreen's withdrawal, Nettlebane also retreated. It still crackled with fury, but its thorns abandoned their quest – and, more importantly, her lungs – and allowed her to breathe again.

When Rowan was sure the ordeal was over, she slowly unbent her spine, whimpering as sharp new pains made themselves known. She leaned forward to press her forehead against the Gildergreen's trunk. The smooth bark offered no sanctuary for her painfully throbbing skull or the blood still slowly flowing over her mouth and chin. She let out a heavy breath and inhaled a stuttering one. She exhaled and inhaled again. And again. And then one last time. She opened her eyes when she was sure she had control over herself and grimaced at the large blood pool beneath her. Slowly, she pulled away from the Gildergreen and straightened up. And immediately had to steady herself against the tree when a wave of lightheadedness nearly overcame her.

“Fuck,” she hissed. When the lightheadedness left, her throbbing migraine worsened, and fatigue settled into her bones.

In jerky movements, she collapsed at the Gildergreen’s base, managing to avoid the puddle of blood, and rested against its trunk. She panted but couldn’t seem to get enough air into her lungs. Her vision darkened at the edges, and she cradled her head in her hands while she waited for the tunnel vision to pass. Once it had cleared, she slowly crafted a healing spell and cast it. She felt the warmth wash over her body, but nothing happened. Her hands still shook; her bones still ached; blood still dripped from her nose; her migraine stayed; and her fatigue remained.

“Fuck,” she choked out.

She fumbled with her pack. Maybe a potion would work. If not, then she would have to spend the night in the Sanctuary because she wasn’t going anywhere like this.

She sipped at a health potion, not wanting to waste it if it didn’t work, but soon swallowed it down when her pains began to heal. When the health potion was gone, she drank a stamina potion before stumbling to her feet. With both potions working their magic, she was able to gather her things and leave the Sanctuary. The man from before tried to speak to her, but his voice died in his throat when he caught sight of her. Rowan didn’t care what she looked like with her wide, bloodshot eyes, undoubtedly blown pupils, and pale, blood-covered face, she wanted to get back to Whiterun before any other magic could ensnare her. She rushed from the Sanctuary as quickly as her still-rubbery legs could take her, unaware of the silence filling the cavern.
Rowan’s return trip to Whiterun was two days shorter than her trip to the Sanctuary. She had barely stopped to rest, let alone make camp and sleep. Something underneath her skin was restless, buzzing with the need to escape, but she couldn’t concentrate long enough to try and figure out what it was. Instead, she’d preoccupied herself with keeping her feet moving and absentmindedly scraping the dried blood from her face.

Rowan stumbled into Whiterun halfway into a dissociative state and desperately wishing for a bed. The guards took one look at her and decided an escort to the temple was in order. Rowan couldn’t recall if she’d agreed to the escort or if they had even asked her if she wanted one. She remembered a guard gently supporting her and saying . . . something, and then she was at the temple. Danica fusses over her, but Rowan couldn’t hear what she was saying. Rowan simply stared up at the worried priestess and let herself be inspected and manhandled.

At some point, she was placed in a bed. She guessed that meant she was supposed to sleep, so she did. Or tried to. At some point she drifted to a place between sleep and . . . somewhere. She didn’t know where she was, but it wasn’t wakefulness or sleep nor was it entirely Mundus.

Through the darkness, something gold and glowing reached for her. She felt fear wash over her, but it was far off and connected to her by only a single thread. Was it possible to dissociate while sleeping? Maybe for her it was.

The tendril reached through her chest and into her core. Rowan tried to brace herself for the pain she knew would come, but her body wouldn’t respond.

Seeming to sense her discomfort, the Gold whispered to her. Nothing she could truly understand; the words weren’t words, and the projected feelings were as distance as her own fear, but she was comforted nonetheless.

With her fear receding, the Gold entered her core, following the path carved by the Gildergreen hours earlier, and pulled.

Rowan gasped and arched as the Gold took, but she felt no pain, only her magicka moving from her core into the Gold. She stayed frozen while the Gold drank from her, eyes wide but unseeing.

The Gold let her when it had its fill, and Rowan, exhausted and drained, finally slept.

Rowan faded in and out of that strange darkness and sleep many times. Each time Rowan recovered from the previous session, the Gold would return to drink from her again. She came to expect its wordless comfort and voiceless, appreciative coos. Strangely, she remained distant from the Gold despite its near-constant presence, like a border stood between them that neither could cross.

Wishing for the thousandth time that her brain would stop buzzing in her skull, Rowan drifted.

Instead of waking to the in-between space again, Rowan woke to a wooden ceiling and a sweat-covered body.

She tried to swallow but nearly choked on her sandpaper tongue. Her coughing drew attention, and not a second later, the blurry figure of Danica hovered over her.

“Corvid? Corvid, can you hear me? Blink once for yes and twice for no,” Danica said. She pressed a cold cloth to Rowan’s forehead.

Rowan blinked once.

“Oh, thank the gods.” Danica pulled away and reached for something on a table. Her hand came
back holding a cup with a grass straw in it. “Drink this, but not too quickly.”

Rowan drank, pausing to catch her breath several, until Danica stopped refilling the cup. Settling back against the furs, Rowan stared dazedly up at Danica.

“What happened?” she asked.

Danica sighed. Leaning back in her chair, she pushed back her hood and ran her fingers through her hair. “You restored the Gildergreen,” she answered, face and voice tired.

Rowan almost asked what she meant, but then she remembered the Gold and how it took and realized what had happened. “Oh.”

Danica let out a soft, breathless laugh. She may have sounded the slightest bit delirious. “‘Oh’? That’s all you can say? Gods, girl, I thought I’d sent you to your death!”


“ Barely,” Danica scoffed. “You’ve been in and out of consciousness for a week and a half. We’ve tried to keep you hydrated and get you to drink some broth, but that’s about it. Couldn’t risk anything else.”

Rowan stared at the ceiling. That explained a few things at least, like the cramping pit in her gut and the creaking aches in her bones. “I’d really like a bath,” she croaked out.

Laughing, Danica said, “That will have to wait until you can move on your own a bit, friend. Ahlam and I have been wiping you down with wet cloths, but we know it isn’t the same as a bath. Let’s see if you can eat something first.”

“Got any soup? Like actual soup, not just broth?”

“There’s tomato and herb soup simmering. Think you can keep that down?” Danica asked, standing.

“Yeah, especially with crusty bread if you’ve got it.” Rowan slowly shifted on the bed, cracking her joints and stretching her stiff muscles. “Have you been giving me any potions? Healing spells didn’t work when I used them at the Sanctuary, but potions gave me some relief.”

“No. To tell you the truth, we were afraid what would happen if we gave you any. We stopped using healing spells when we noticed they weren’t making any difference,” Danica said. She reached down and moved the sweaty hair out of Rowan’s hair. “I’ll get you a few small potions, but no more. If they work, we might give you another in a few days. Hopefully your recovery will be quicker this time. Now, rest. I’ll be back with food.”

Rowan hummed and relaxed into the bed. “Thank you, Danica.”

“You’re welcome, Corvid.”

Danica’s hope proved correct; Rowan recovered much quicker than her last stint in Danica’s care. In only a few days, she was working in the temple, healing light wounds and prescribing tonics for illnesses (with Danica’s approval, of course).

During her mandatory breaks, she would go outside and watch the Gildergreen. Its branches were in full bloom again and gave off a healthy sheen. The Gold hadn’t tried to communicate with her since she’d woken up. Rowan wasn’t sure if she missed its presence or not. While she didn’t like that it had
taken what it had wanted from her magicka, the Gold had understood her in a way she still couldn’t process.

For now, thoughts of the Gildergreen and the Gold were pushed out of Rowan's mind as a bloody, filthy Athis rushed through the courtyard. He cradled an unconscious and obviously wounded Njada in his arms.

Rowan watched him disappear into Jorrvaskr and briefly heard shouting from within until the door slammed shut. Moments later, Farkas came barreling down the stairs. He rushed past her and into the temple. Rowan raised her eyebrows when shouting immediately started up inside.

Farkas exited the temple, looking frantic. His eyes darted first to Heimskr, then Dragonsreach, before settling on her. Mainly, her chest.

Furrowing her brows, she looked down. Oh. Right. She wore the standard Apprentice Restoration robes, a gift from Danica.

Farkas approached her in only a few short steps. "Are you a healer?" He asked tensely.

Craning her head to look him in the eye rather than stare at the silver beast in his chest, Rowan nodded. "Yes, I help at the temple when I can."

"Can you help us? Danica's busy, and Njada needs healing now," he said. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, and he shifted from foot to foot constantly.

Rowan picked up her pack from the ground and slung it over her shoulder. "How badly is she wounded?"

Farkas led the way up to Jorrvaskr. "I don't know. Kodlak was trying to get Athis to explain when I left, but he just shouted a bunch of stuff that didn't make sense. She was unconscious and pale, like death, though. Looked like she'd been that way for a while. There was a lot of blood, too."

He opened the door for her and led her down the staircase to the sleeping quarters. Seemingly everyone in Jorrvaskr was crowded around the entrance to the whelp's sleeping quarters. Several people turned to look when the doors opened, but most kept their attention on what was going on in the room.

Aela finally spoke. "Farkas, who's this? We sent you for Danica, not a pup."

Rowan bristled at the way the warrior spat 'pup'. What was it with people and thinking she was so young? Were Bretons all young-looking here, or was it just her?

"Danica's busy." He motioned to Rowan. "She said she's a healer."

Aela huffed and looked down at Rowan. "Listen, girl, I'm sure you're doing very well assisting Danica, but we need a full-fledged healer, not—"

"I'm twenty-three, thanks," Rowan interrupted. She firmly ignored how all the wolves' attention snapped to her. "And I am a healer. Just because I'm young doesn't mean I can't do the job. Now, if you would kindly move out of my way so I can see the patient, that would be great, thanks."

Aela reeled back, eyes wide. A grim laugh came from inside the room.

"She has spunk. Bring her here, Farkas."
Rowan shifted to walk past Aela and through the crowd, but Farkas gripped her under her armpits, lifted her into the air, and carried her into the room. To Rowan's credit, she kept her face free of surprise and gave no indication that Nords bodily lifting her was any way out of the ordinary.

When Farkas placed her feet on the ground, Rowan looked up at Kodlak, who stood on the right side of the room with a still-filthy Athis.

"I am Kodlak Whitemane, Harbinger of the Companions," Kodlak said. "What may I call you, healer?"

"Rowan Corvid," she answered.

"And you are indeed a healer?"

"Yes, sir. I help at the temple when I'm in town."

"We thank you for assisting us," Kodlak said.

Rowan waved off the formalities. "No problem. What happened?" She pulled a chair over to Njada’s bedside and sat down. Tilma was also there, steadily wiping at Njada’s forehead and throat with a washcloth.

"We were ambushed," Athis spat out. "That’s what happened. We were hired to get rid of some bears in a cave south of here, but it was filled with bandits instead. We managed to fight them off, but one stabbed Njada, and she stepped in one of their traps."

Rowan peeled back Njada’s tunic to inspect the stab wound. She frowned at the swollen flesh and black veins. "Has she been poisoned?"

"I think so. The blade was enchanted – I didn’t get a real good look at it, but it was definitely enchanted. I tried giving her healing potions, but they only relieved the pain for a short time," Athis said.

Rowan’s frown deepened. Healing potions should’ve helped, even if they wouldn’t actually cure poison. Concentrating her magicka in her palms, she slowly moved her hands over Njada’s body to examine the internal wounds. Sure enough, she felt a concentrated, toxic mass in Njada’s abdomen, nestled in front of her liver.

"How many potions did you give her?" she asked. The enchantment’s strong, so it may be resisting the potions, especially since her foot’s in such bad shape. When Athis didn’t answer, she looked up at him.

The Dunmer refused to look at her and shuffled nervously under her stare. After a sharp nod from Kodlak, Athis answered, “Five. Four small healing and one cure poison.”

Rowan’s eyes widened. ‘Five,’ she mouthed in astonishment. “In how many days?”

Grimacing, he reluctantly said, “Four.”

Mouth twisted into a sour grimace, Rowan turned back to Njada. While not good, it could’ve been worse. But why isn’t it healing? She examined the wound again. Oh. Well, fuck me then. She reached for her pack and pulled out the healer’s satchel she’d had commissioned during her first recovery period. As she removed tools from the bag, she said, “I’ll need a few buckets of water, a bowl, and rags. And make sure the water’s drinkable.”
“Do as she says,” Kodlak ordered the others when they didn’t immediately comply. He eyed the scalpel in Rowan’s hand. “May I ask what you’re going to do?”

“I believe that a piece of the blade broke off inside her when she was stabbed. If the blade is enchanted, then it would explain why the potions haven’t worked.” She examined a long, slim plier-like tool and nodded to herself. “I have to remove it.” Methodically, she pulled out several small jars and vials and lined them up on a table Tilma helpfully cleared off.

The others returned with the requested items. Vilkas and Aela set the buckets of water on the floor near Rowan, close but not underfoot. Farkas set a bowl filled with varying-sized cloths on a bedside table.

Absentmindedly thanking them, Rowan took a small vial of clear liquid and placed a few drops in one bucket. She stirred the water with her hand before removing the cloths form the bowl and pouring water into the bowl.

“What did you put in the water?” Skjor asked.

“A cleanser. It sterilizes the water,” she said while washing her hands and tools in the bowl.

The silence that followed was one of confusion. Rowan stayed quiet. She needed to focus, and if they had questions, they could ask.

“Ma’am,” she said, addressing Tilma. “Can I ask you to hold the wound open after I make the incisions?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.” Rowan cleaned the wound as best as she could. Blood continued to flow from it even as she applied a numbing poultice with a brush. “Would you also be able to wipe the blood away while I work, or do we need another set of hands?”

“I’ll do it,” Skjor said. He approached and waited for further instruction.

“Good. You’ll be on my other side. Wipe up as much blood around my hand as possible.” When Skjor was ready, she said, “I’m going to make the cuts now, so, ya know, nobody panic.” Before the Companions could comment, she steadily widened the wound a half inch on each side. She dropped the scalpel into the bowl and grabbed the pliers. She waited until Skjor wiped up as much blood as he could before she placed her hand on Njada abdomen. She used magic to locate the mass again and slowly inserted the tool. Carefully, she felt for the sword shard. It was slow going; she had to delicately maneuver around organs or else she was in danger of puncturing them.

After what felt like an eternity, the tool connected with something decidedly not flesh. Rowan gently tapped it a few times and, when she was sure it was the shard, grabbed hold of it and began maneuvering back out, her pace even slower than before. Skjor helpfully switched cloths to wipe her brow. With murmured thanks, she continued pulling her arm back until the tool – and more importantly, the shard – were free from Njada’s body.

Grinning victoriously, Rowan held up the faintly glowing piece of metal for the Companions’ inspection. “There it is. Now I’ll be able to cure the poison and get her abdomen stitched up.” She dropped the shard into a different bowl, to be disposed of later.

“You’re not going to use healing magic?” Vignar asked.

“It’ll be easier to heal if it’s stitched, and I have to use magicka sparingly. I’ll have to use it to purge
the wound, but since she’s already had too many potions, using more magicka than absolutely necessary will kill her.”

Rowan shifted her position in preparation for purging the poison. She relaxed her muscles, closed her eyes, and took several slow, deep breaths, as if she were preparing to attempt meditation. Ever so carefully, she pooled her magicka in her palms and placed them over Njada's wound. She had to be as noninvasive as she could; under normal circumstances, allowing healing magic to stay in a patient was no big deal, even beneficial, but in Njada's case, it could cause her body to exert itself until dying from exhaustion. Best to leave as little trace of her presence as possible.

Rowan reached for the poison, wrapping her spell around it until it gave way under the pressure and fractured. Rowan's spell chased the poison shards and swiftly dissolved them before they could latch on again. Now came the hard part. Rowan withdrew her magicka, continuing to maintain the spell lest the magic take hold in Njada's body. Sweat poured down Rowan's face and back, and her heart stuttered in her chest at the struggle of maintaining such a slow pace. Her hands shook from their position above Njada. Still, she held the position until she reclaimed all of her magicka, only then did she allow the spell to drop.

Panting, Rowan collapsed back in her chair and wiped her brow, face, and neck with a clean rag. "That's it for the poison,” she said after she'd regained her breath. "I'll stitch her up now and then examine her foot."

She tensed her arms to get the shakes out of them before reaching for her bag and pulling out her suture kit. After that, sewing Njada up was merely muscle memory.

Halfway through the sutures, Njada began to stir. Njada blearily blinked her eyes open, and Rowan’s eyebrows shot high up her forehead.

“Fuck me. You’re a tough fucker, aren’t you?” Rowan muttered. She paused her stitching long enough to grab a leather strip from her pack and place it between Njada’s teeth. “Bite down on that.” Then, she went back to work.

Njada, still not completely lucid, sucked in a breath through her teeth as the needle penetrated her skin. “Fuck, that fucking stings,” she muttered around the leather.

Without comment, Rowan paused her needlework to add a bit more numbing poultice around the wound and waited for it to go into effect, taking the break to stretch her hands. When Njada had become sufficiently numb, Rowan resumed her stitching. She quickly finished, not wishing to cause her patient any further discomfort. She knotted the last thread and pulled away to clean the wound.

“There, that’s finished. Now let’s look at your foot,” Rowan said.

She shifted her chair to the end of the bed where Njada’s foot had been propped up. Her boots and socks had already been removed, so Rowan had a clear view of the mess of blood, puss, and rotting flesh that made up the sole of Njada’s foot.

“How does it look?” Athis asked nervously.

“Well, it looks bad. Real fucking bad. Can you remember what happened? What sort of trap it was or if it was rusty or poisoned? A regular bear trap wouldn’t do this. It’s like she’s been stabbed through the foot,” Rowan said. She took a wet rag and began cleaning the foot as best as she could. Njada moaned and hissed in pain with every gentle swipe of the cloth.

“No, it was some sort of spike. I don’t remember more than that. It might’ve been rusty, but it was
dark, and we were fighting for our lives. I didn’t get a good look at it, sorry.”

“Better than nothing. Bring me one of those buckets.”

Skjor picked up one of the buckets of water and set it by Rowan’s chair. Thanking him, she readied a flame spell, placed her hand in the bucket, and slowly released the spell but never let it fully form. Rowan let the water’s temperature steadily increase until it was hot but not boiling. Killing the spell, she removed her hand from the bucket and dried it on her robes.

“All right, here’s what I’m gonna do,” Rowan said cautiously.

Njada grunted. “Don’ like tha’ ‘one.”

“Yeah, well, you’re gonna like this even less. I have to purge your wound. There’s too much puss and blood for me to see it clearly. So, what I’m gonna do is put it in this bucket of hot water.” She paused when Njada tried to shake her head back and forth. “It’s either than or I sit here and press it until I get as much puss out as possible.”

Grimacing, Njada thought over the options. Rowan waited patiently, watching her face flit through several expressions before stopping on exhausted resignation. Njada weakly nodded her consent.

“I’ll try and make it as quick as possible, but it’ll take as long as it needs.”

Rowan carefully lowered Njada’s foot from its propped-up position to the bucket. Njada screamed through the leather in her mouth when her foot made contact with the water, thrashing as much as her worn out body allowed.

Rowan resolutely held Njada’s foot in the water, her mouth set in a firm line. Njada’s squirming did nothing to dislodge her. She only removed Njada’s foot from the water when she was sure it would do no more good and then efficiently pressed on the edges of the wound to remove any of the remaining pus.

Njada spat out the leather and howled. She spat and cursed, shouting Rowan’s soul to the deepest pits of Oblivion and how she would kill her herself. Rowan gave no mind to the abuse. She cleaned and dried Njada’s foot before returning it to its propped-up position. She waited while Njada calmed down and caught her breath.

“On a scale of one to ten, with one being the least and ten being the most, how close to death do you feel now?” Rowan asked, like she was talking about the weather.

Njada let out a breathless, partially delirious laugh. “Fuck you.”

Rowan raised an eyebrow. “That’s not an answer.”

“Six. Like shit but not like I’m gonna die anymore,” Njada said. She glared at Rowan. “Your bedside manner is shit, priest.”

“I’m a bitch, not a priest, so it should suck,” Rowan replied. She leaned down to properly inspect the wound.

Njada laughed again. “Nice to know not all mages have sticks up their asses.”

Rowan hummed. “Can’t say the same about you warriors. A few of you seem as arrogant as I expected.” She heard a few of the Companions grunt irritably, but none spoke against her. “I’m not gonna lie, your foot’s bad. If you’d been a few more days away from Whiterun, I’m sure it would
need to be amputated.”

Njada swallowed thickly. “How bad is it? And don’t spare me the details.”

“Infection rotted a lot of tissue around the wound. I can’t see much of the deeper damage, but I expect it’s the same, if not worse than what I see here since it’s where the infection most likely started,” Rowan explained.

“So, what’s the plan? How’re you going to fix it?” Njada asked tensely.

“I’ll have to remove the dead tissue before I can use any sort of healing spell. If I use it now, the dead tissue will become thick scar tissue. You’ll lose most of the sensation in your foot, and I’d guess that would mean you would have to retrain yourself to compensate for it while fighting,” Rowan said. “For the removal, I’ve got two choices for you. I can cut out the tissue, or—” She picked up her satchel, rummaged around in it, and pulled out a palm-sized jar. Holding it up for Njada’s inspection, she said, “I can use these.”

Njada eyed the jar suspiciously. “What’s in there?”

“Maggot larvae.”

“Maggots?! What do you need maggots for?!” Njada shouted, immediately trying to curl up and away from Rowan.

“They eat dead tissue,” Rowan said delightedly. She smiled at the jar. “They’re really useful for cleaning wounds and preventing further infection.”

“You want to put maggots on my foot and let them eat me? Are you crazy?!”

Rowan paused. After thinking over the accusation, she said, “That’s debatable. However, they are the better option.”

Still on guard, Njada frowned, asking, “Oh? How so?”

“They only eat dead tissue and can get rid of much more of it than I can with a blade,” Rowan said. “Using them also means no risk of living flesh being accidentally removed. The process wouldn’t be painful for you, either. The only discomfort you’d have is feeling the maggots moving, which will itch and tickle.”

Njada scowled at her like Rowan’s argument pissed her off, which is probably did. “Fine, just do it already,” she spat, collapsing back onto the bed.

“Glad you see reason,” Rowan said cheerfully while opening the jar. “The maggots are going to take a few days, maybe a week to eat all the dead tissue since you have so much. So, I’m going to place them in the wound, and I’ll check on their progress each day when I come check on you.”

“Yeah, about that, how bad is tomorrow gonna be?” Njada asked. No doubt she had experience with the aftereffects of too many potions.

Rowan frowned and thought. “I expect you’ll have a fever if you don’t already, joint and abdominal pain, muscle cramping, headaches, and potential vomiting. We’ll need to get you as hydrated as we can today since you’ll most likely have trouble keeping anything down the next few days. Think you can eat anything?”

Njada nodded. “Yeah, if I don’t need to chew much.”
“Good. Can someone get her thinking? And bring her water, no alcohol,” Rowan instructed.

Tilma stood. “I have a few things already made that she should be able to eat, but I’ll also start a chicken stew.”

“Thank you. I need someone to help her sit up, so she can drink something.”

Skjor stepped forward from where he’d been standing off to the side. Murmuring soothing words to Njada, he gently scooped her in his arms. He tried to move her up the bed, but she let out a brief scream before stifling it. Skjor immediately set her back down.

“What’s wrong?” he asked Njada.

“My—my ribs,” she choked out.

Magicka concentrated in her palms, Rowan examined her again. “You’ve got one broken rib and two cracked ones on your left side.

“Fuck. Must’ve been from that orc that charged me. Fucking bastard.”

Rowan sighed and rubbed her face. “I’d rather not use a healing spell on you. You’re still at risk of dying from magicka exposure, but it’s your call.”

“Just leave it. I’ve had broken ribs before. I can deal with it,” Njada said.

Rowan nodded and motioned for Skjor to gently prop Njada against her pillows. Njada hissed and grunted in pain but refused to scream again. Skjor made sure she was comfortable before stepping away with a murmured apology.

“All right, I’ll put the maggots on your foot, and I’ll stay long enough to make sure you eat and drink something. After that, you need to rest. Which means you stay in this bed and move as little as possible,” Rowan said.

She opened the jar and used tweezers to place the maggot larvae on Njada’s foot, making sure the larvae weren’t in danger of falling off. She was just finishing when she heard voices from the hallway.

Frowning, she called out, “Danica?”

“Rowan! Thank the gods.” Danica appeared in the doorway not a moment later, looking harried. Her gaze first looked to Rowan, then at Njada. “Is everything all right? I came as soon as I could.”

“Yes, everything’s good, though you can look over my work just in case,” Rowan said. She closed the jar and placed it back in her satchel, writing a brief note to herself to get more larvae from Arcadia on a scrap of paper.

Frowning, she called out, “Danica?”

“Rowan! Thank the gods.” Danica appeared in the doorway not a moment later, looking harried. Her gaze first looked to Rowan, then at Njada. “Is everything all right? I came as soon as I could.”

“Yeah, everything’s good, though you can look over my work just in case,” Rowan said. She closed the jar and placed it back in her satchel, writing a brief note to herself to get more larvae from Arcadia on a scrap of paper.

Danica walked to Njada’s bedside and examined her. “What’s her condition?”

“Stab wound in the side. The blade had a poison enchantment, and the tip broke off inside her. I removed it, purged the poison, and stitched her up. She’s also got a broken rib and two cracked ones. She stepped on some sort of trap, so her foot’s in bad shape. It’s definitely infected, but I purged it, so hopefully the maggots will do the rest of the work. She’s had five potions in four days.”

Danica grimaced. “I apologize for not being here. Thank you, Corvid. I was wrapped up in a surgery. You’ve most likely saved Njada’s foot.”
Rowan waved her hand dismissively. “Don’t apologize. You have to finish with one patient before you can help the next.”

Smiling, Danica said, “Yes, well, thank you again. You’ve done a wonderful job, especially when you purged the poison. There isn’t a trace of your magicka left. Even I would’ve had trouble with that.” She directed her grin down at Njada. “You’re lucky, Companion. Corvid here is a natural at healing. There’s no one else I would’ve trusted with your delicate situation. Now, Corvid is going to go rest while I take over.”

Rowan frowned. “But I’m fine.”

“Your hands are shaking, and your nose is bleeding,” Danica said blandly, not looking up from her inspection Njada’s foot.

“What?” Rowan looked down at her hands which were, indeed, shaking. She reached up to touch her nose and felt that, yes, she was bleeding. “For fuck’s sake,” she muttered. Wiping her nose with a bloodstained handkerchief from her pocket, she began packing her things. When her plyers appeared in front of her face, she looked up.

Farkas held the tool out to her. “Figured I could at least help you pack up,” he mumbled shyly, eyes flitting between her face and off to the side.

Rowan smiled and took the tool. “Thank you.”

He shrugged and kneeled to help her gather her things. “We should be thanking you. Njada would’ve died if you hadn’t helped her.”

Rowan gave a slow nod. No doubt his wolf could smell the extent of the poison and rot in Njada’s body; she’d probably smelt like death when Athis brought her to Jorrvaskr.

When Rowan’s things had been safely put away, Rowan and Farkas stood. She smiled at him again.

“Thank you, Companion,” she said, shaking his hand. Farkas seemed baffled by the action but went along with it anyway. “I’ll be back tomorrow to check on Njada’s progress and help with her recovery from the potions.”

“The name’s Farkas. And we’ll be expecting you.”

Kodlak gripped Rowan’s shoulder as she made her way out of the room. “Thank you for your assistance, Healer Corvid. We are most grateful.”

Rowan wiped more blood from her nose. She caught Kodlak’s nostrils expanding as he scented her. She wondered what she smelt like to him; did he only smell her blood? Or did she smell like magicka, like crackling lightning, ozone, and something so sharply, painfully sweet it stung? Maybe she could ask him one day if the Companions ever trusted her with their secret.

“It’s no problem, really, Harbinger. Have a good evening.”

With that, she left Jorrvaskr and returned to the inn for her own rest.
Let's get some Lore™ up in this bitch

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this chapter took so long y'all. I fell into a Depression Pit and felt like garbage for 2 or so weeks and whatever energy I had got used up for work

Rowan spent the next week flitting in and out of Jorrvaskr. She spent her time checking in on Njada's progress and even checking on the odd wound or hurt any other Companions might have decided wasn't worth the trouble of seeing a healer for. She'd already had to reset a badly healed finger for Skjor and pull two of Torvar's back teeth.

"For warriors, you all don't seem to put much stock in healers," she scoffed, forcing Torvar's mouth open to inspect his other teeth. Through her magic, she could practically feel them rotting, though they weren't nearly as bad as the ones she'd had to pull.

"Warriors should be able to bear the hurts they earn," Aela said from where she leaned against a banister.

With another scoff, Rowan pulled her gloved hands from Torvar's mouth. He winced, closed his mouth, and rubbed at his jaw.

"There's a difference between having a high pain tolerance and just being an idiot," Rowan said. She glared at Torvar. "Drink more water and less mead. The sugar's rotting your teeth." She shoved a cloth bag into his hands. "Those are some pastes and dental thread for you to clean your teeth with. Do it. If you don't, I'll be pulling the rest of your teeth in a few weeks."

Sulking, Torvar took the bag and slunk outside but not before dropping a bottle of mead when Rowan hissed at him through her teeth.

Aela laughed. "You won't stop him. He would dunk his head in a barrel of mead and stay there given the first opportunity."

"My condolences for when he drowns," Rowan said dryly.

With a grin on her face, Aela pushed off the banister and plopped down in the chair Torvar had just vacated. Rowan looked up at the movement but quickly returned her gaze to cleaning her tools. If she didn't keep herself busy, she would stare at the wolf spirit intertwined with Aela's soul. She hadn't expected werewolves to be so intricate; rather than merely one soul, there were two spirits in Aela's chest, lovingly cradled together until the lines between them blurred to almost nonexistence. The same, of course, could not be said for every wolf in the den. Kodlak and his wolf were almost completely separated, held together only because they shared a body; Farkas' wolf was more connected to him, though it was restless and tended to snap at random, causing Farkas' eyes to flash silver and his body to tense; Vilkas was the worst off. He fought his wolf constantly. The two circled each other, trading near-blows over the simplest of matters. Rowan wondered how he managed to live inside his own head without going insane.

"You aren't like any mage I've ever met," Aela said thoughtfully.
Rowan paused her work and looked up at Aela, an eyebrow already raised. "And you've met plenty of mages?"

Aela's lips quirked into a smirk. "You have me there. Perhaps we have judged your kind too quickly."

"You probably have. Maybe you should think about actually researching who you're talking about before you make judgements," Rowan said simply. She pulled out disinfectant, a rag, and stitching supplies. "Now, let me see your shoulder. Farkas said you got hit by a sabre cat this morning."

Though Aela rolled her eyes, she didn't protest and pulled the shoulder of her loose tunic out of the way.

Rowan cleaned, stitched, and bandaged the wound. She finished just as Danica entered Jorrvaskr.

"Hello, Danica," Rowan said. Aela mirrored her greeting.

"Good afternoon, Corvid, Companion," Danica said. "Are you ready to examine Njada? Hopefully the maggots will have finished today."

Rowan nodded and began putting away her cleaned tools. "Yes, and since she's recovered from the potions, I'll be able to use healing spells on her. Think she'll want her foot or ribs healed first?"

"Probably best if we concentrate on her foot. It's in the most danger. Her ribs will heal in time, but the foot won't completely heal to its original state without magic. And I would like you to be the one to heal it while I supervise. That way, I'll be able to take over in case something happens."

Rowan nodded. "Sounds good with me."

Aela tugged her shirt back into place and led the healers downstairs. Many of the Companions were once again hovering outside the whelp's room, though this time with a significantly less tense air.

"Njada, you must lay still. Even if Corvid and Danica are going to heal your foot today, your ribs still need time to heal," came Kodlak's patient but long sugerring voice.

"Ugh, I know, but I'm tired of resting! I need to get up!" Njada grumbled back.

Eyebrows raised, Rowan stepped into the room with Danica right behind her.

"Do I have to tie you to the bed, Companion?" Rowan asked dryly. "Apparently, it's the only way to keep you there."

Njada bared her teeth in a wicked grin. "Didn't know you were into women, mage, or I might've taken a chance earlier."

Smirking, Rowan sat near the bed to inspect Njada's foot. "I might be inclined to take you up on that, but alas, you're only half my type."

"And what is your type?"

"Headstrong, fierce, and clever but not a complete fool. Someone with personality but not arrogant."

"I fit that description."

"You fit the complete fool part," Athis said from the other side of the room.
"Fuck off, bastard!" Njada barked back.

"Is that how you thank your savior?" Athis teased.

Njada scoffed. "You've been ragging on me all week about that. I'll break your jaw when I get out of this bed."

"You have to catch me first, wench."

"Children, please," Rowan said wearily. "I'm trying to see if the maggots are done. Can I get a bit less shouting? Not like you aren't in the same room together."

The two fell silent with only slight grumbling. Rowan inspected Njada's foot wound. The maggots had done their job exceedingly well; all dead flesh had been cleared from the wound, and there was no sign of infection.

"Looks good to me. What do you think, Danica?" Rowan asked, peering over her shoulder at the priestess.

Danica was already nodding with a wide smile on her face. "Clean and free of infection, a perfect wound for healing. I'll let you do the honors."

Rowan nodded, absentmindedly plucking out the now-fat maggots and placing them into the same jar they came from. Though healing the wound would be an extensive task, Rowan knew she could do it. Purging the poison had taken more control and skill than a healing spell would ever need. Potentially, she would be able to heal Njada's ribs, as well, if Njada's condition allowed it.

"All right, Njada, let's get your foot healed," Rowan muttered. She pooled her magicka in her palms, called upon a strong healing spell, and allowed the healing trance to take her. Njada's flesh regenerated and mended together almost too easily. Rowan remembered when she couldn't even heal small cut without nearly blowing herself up; now, she was Danica's most trusted healer. Amazing how things changed with time.

When Njada's foot was whole, Rowan withdrew her magicka and released the spell. She felt Danica lightly grip her shoulder to inspect both the healed wound and Rowan. A finger dangled in front of Rowan's face, and she followed it with her eyes as it moved but otherwise paid the inspection no mind. The deeper trances always kept her disconnected for a few minutes after she'd ended her spells.

"Corvid, how do you feel?" Danica asked.

Rowan hummed and blinked lazily. "Disconnected. Floating. No pain."

"Do you want to heal Njada's ribs? Doing so won't harm her."

"Sure." Rowan slowly stood from her chair and stood over Njada to reach her ribs. She healed them quickly and without incident, probing them gently to make sure Njada was in only minor pain. Some bruising would remain for the next few days, but other than that, only her stab wound was left, and Njada had elected to let it heal naturally.

"There," Rowan said, sitting down to concentrate on breathing while she came down from the spells. "All done."

Danica helped Njada stand. "Don't move too quickly. We don't want you damaging your foot again
or ripping your stitches. Now, the tissue will feel strange at first since it's brand new, but that will fade in time."

Njada grunted when she placed her foot on the ground. "Stings a bit. But other than that, it feels fine."

"Good. Walk a few steps for me. How do your stitches feel?"

Rowan only half listened to the conversation. It was one she'd heard Danica have with many patients, and while she knew it was important to be attentive as a healer, her brain felt too fuzzy to pay it any real mind at the moment. Instead, she leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and waited for the fog to clear.

She hadn't noticed she'd fallen asleep until a hand gently shook her awake. She expected it to be Danica, but the hand was too large for it to be the priestess. Grunting, Rowan opened her eyes and blearily looked at whoever had woken her.

"Oh, hey, Farkas," she said, yawning right afterwards.

"Danica said to let you rest, but since it's been a few hours, I figured you might want something to eat," he said. He motioned to the bedside table, where a plate of smoked salmon, leeks, and diced potatoes sat.

Stretching, Rowan said, "Thank you." After checking on a sleeping Njada, she gratefully took the plate when he handed it to her. She didn't pay it any mind, if he wanted to talk, he could.

After a few moments just watching her eat, Farkas asked, "So, that doesn't always happen?"

Rowan paused her chewing. "Huh?"

"Uh, the bleeding. From your nose. It happened yesterday but not today."

"Oh, no, it doesn't happen every time. Just when I overextend myself, which, honestly, is most of the time."

"Because you're an apprentice?"

"Nope," Rowan said, reaching for the glass of wine he'd brought her. "I'm a seidr." At his blank look, she explained, "An extremely rare, extremely powerful sort of magic user. Basically a legend at this point. Barely anyone knows anything about them, and the ones that do only know half-remembered tales from their grandparents."

Farkas didn't seem to fully understand what she'd told him but didn't ask for clarification. "Do you want to spar?"

Rowan furrowed her brows in confusion. She chewed and swallowed her mouthful of food. "What?"

Farkas shrugged, suddenly bashful. "Danica said you took out some trolls on a farm a while back and that you dealt with a hagraven a few weeks ago. I figured you'd like to spar with someone, if you're up to it that is."

Thinking about it, Rowan gave a nod. "I'd like that, though I'll warn you that I don't have a lot of experience in close combat and haven't sparred with anyone since coming to Whiterun. So, I'm
probably rusty."

"That's why it's good to have someone to spar with. Keeps you sharp. And I'll help you with the close combat. I figured you mostly used magic," Farkas said, relaxing.

Rowan nodded. "That and archery."

"You'll get along with Aela, then. Archery's her preference," Farkas said.

"Are you sure about sparring with a mage?" Rowan asked. "You all seem pretty suspicious of mages in general."

Farkas hesitated, like he was trying to find the right words. Or maybe he was just trying to explain their distrust towards magic without giving away the whole 'werewolf' thing.

"The Companions don't have the best history with magic," he finally said. "Just don't set me on fire, and we'll be fine."

Rowan snorted and continued eating. "I won't. I prefer lightning anyway."

His wide eyed, startled look caused her to laugh and almost choke on her food. Farkas smiled and laughed at her, leaning over to pat her back as her coughing subsiding.

"You're kind of ridiculous," he said. He leaned back in his chair, still smiling.

She coughed, cleared her throat, and drank some of her wine. "Only kind of?"

"Maybe more than that . . ."

With a snort, she finished up the rest of her food and wine. "That's more like it. Now, how're we sparring? If we're going full out, I need to go get my armor . . ."

"Nah, don't bother. We'll do slow stuff today. I figured we could teach each other how to block and evade each other's attacks. We don't fight a lot of mages, and it's probably best to be prepared."

Rowan nodded. "All right, lead the way."

Farkas stood and led her upstairs and to the training yard. The many of the others Companions were sitting outside, either eating, drinking, or conversing. Aela paused her conversation with Skjor when she spotted Rowan.

"Healer Corvid, how nice of you to join the living!" she said with grin.

Rowan gave her a friendly sneer. "Get fucked, Huntress."

Aela threw her head back and cackled.

Skjor snickered at her side. "And what are you doing with Farkas? Our dear Icebrain isn't bothering you, is he?"

Farkas' wolf's ear flicked backwards briefly. Rowan's smile dimmed slightly, but she kept her eyes on Skjor.

"No, he isn't. We're going to spar, sort of. He's going to teach me a bit about close combat, and I'm going to give him experience fighting a mage. He said you all rarely fight magic users and wanted to prepare himself in case he does," she said, her tone friendly but more distant than before.
"A good idea," Kodlak said from where he reclined at a table by himself. "Always good to prepare for any situation, no matter how distant it may feel. May we spectate?"

Rowan looked at Farkas, and he shrugged. She looked back to Kodlak and shrugged. "If you don't mind watching me fail at close combat, sure."

"I'm sure you aren't as terrible as you think," Kodlak said kindly.

She shrugged again and followed Farkas down the steps, replying, "I dunno. I try to practice, but since I only have a few months' training with my weapons, it doesn't feel like it's helping."

"What weapons do you normally use?" Farkas asked, looking over a weapon rack.

"I prefer using a bow or magic, though I practice with an axe and dagger. Swords and shields throw me off balance."

Farks picked up a steel axe and handed it to her. "We'll start with this and see how you do. I prefer using a greatsword, but since you don't have much experience, I'll use a regular sword." He took a steel sword for herself and motioned to the empty yard space. "Show me your stance first."

Rowan walked to the center of the space and fell easily into the stance Alvor had taught her; it was one thing she didn't have to practice since she used it to steady herself as she cast spells or use her bow.

"Your legs, hips, and shoulders are good, but your arms aren't placed correctly. Move them like—"

Farkas adjusted her arms and then her grip on the axe. "Don't grip it so tightly and loosen your wrist. You'll just hurt yourself if you swing it like that. How does that feel?"

"Good."

"Show me your swing," he said, backing up to give her room.

She stretched her muscles before going through the exercises she'd been taught by Alvor, swinging at an invisible opponent.

"Not bad," Farkas said. "But put a little more force behind it. Like you have a real opponent."

She did as he instructed and swung more forcefully at her invisible opponent. Her left hand felt empty, so she readied a ward in it, just to fill the space. Farkas noticed but didn’t mention it.

"Better. You didn’t tense your wrist, either. Let’s see how you do against me."

Pressing her lips into a thin line, she nodded. She’d have to dodge. There was no way she could match Farkas’ strength.

He drew his sword and charged her, sword raised. Her first instinct was to raise her left arm and catch the blow on her armored foreman. At the last moment, she remembered she wasn’t wearing armor under her robes and hastily dodged to the side.

"You all right?" Farkas asked as she adjusted her stance.

"Yeah, just forgot I’m not wearing armor," she said.

"Again," Farkas said before charging her again.

Rowan ended up in the dirt more times than she cared to count. Farkas finally called it quits when
she twisted her wrist trying to deflect his swing with her axe.

“You were better than I expected,” Farkas said.

“Doesn’t feel like it,” Rowan said. She cast a healing spell on her wrist and rolled it a few times to be sure there was no pain.

“Hey, you got back up when I tossed you down and tried to match my swings. You just need to spar against an actual opponent and get used to your axe. Next time we’ll wear armor. That way we won’t have to worry about hitting each other.”

“Sounds good.” Rowan rolled her shoulder to relieve the cramping. “You ready to practice against spells?”

“Sure,” Farkas said slowly, though he looked uneasy.

She grinned. “Don’t worry. I promise not to set you on fire or shoot you with lightning. Not until we use armor, at least. I wanted to start with showing you how to spot a mage that’s about to cast a spell and how to tell how much magicka they have.”

“Why would I need to know how much magicka they have?” Farkas asked.

“The less magicka a mage has, the fewer spells they can cast and the lower powered those spells will be,” Rowan explained. “Which means there are fewer spells you’ll have to plan for them using.”

Farkas nodded.

“Now, a good way to guess a mage’s magicka level is based on how they cast. Novice mages use stiffer, fuller casting movements. They go by the book or how they were instructed to cast the spell because they aren’t used to casting it. They aren’t used to the spell, so they compensate with thorough movements. Their stance will be stiffer, like this.” Rowan demonstrated a wide-footed, rigid stance. “They need this to brace themselves against the rush of magicka and the blowback of the spell. The force of casting a spell can easily knock a mage on their ass if they aren’t prepared for it.

“They can’t cast while moving, either. If they do manage to cast a spell while moving, it’ll be sloppy and weaker than it should be,” she continued. She shifted to a stance resembling the one she used. “The stronger a mage is, the more magicka they have and the more in tune with that magicka they are. They won’t need to use the stiff stances to compensate against their spells. Some won’t even need to fall into a stance at all. The mage who taught me could cast spells like fire cloak, frost astronach, and fireball while lounging on the ground. Mages with even more experience won’t need to make any movements for lower class spells like sparks, wards, or summoning familiars.”

She looked at Farkas. “Are you following?”

“Stiffer stance means the weaker the mage. Looser stance means a stronger mage. Weak mages can’t cast while moving. Strong mages don’t need to move to cast weak spells. Weak mages run out of magicka quicker than strong mages,” he recited.

“Good. I’m going to show you the different casting stances and motions and recite the spells aloud. You don’t need to remember every detail about them, just a few main motions that will tip you off to what type of spell the mage is about to be cast. Each School of Magicka has its own motions, and each spell in that School will generally follow the same pattern with only a few changes. Watch closely.”
Rowan demonstrated the standard motions for each School, repeating them several times until Farkas looked only moderately confused rather than completely lost.

“The longer the sequence of motions, the more powerful the spell being cast is; however, powerful mages don’t need to use the full sequence,” Rowan said. “In fact, once mages reach Adept level, they’ll rarely use the full motions, especially if they have enough knowhow of a particular School and enough magicka to cast the spell.” At Farkas’ grimace, she asked, “You good?”

He scratched the back of his head. “Yeah, it’s just . . . a lot.”

“I’m probably making it seem more complicated than it is. Just remember that mages specialized in a specific School can compensate for form with magicka and their knowledge of the School. For example, a necromancer can reanimate multiple corpses without repeating the sequence for each reanimation because their specialization is Conjuration. They don’t need to focus on the spell like, say, a Destruction mage would. Of course, if they don’t have enough magicka to reanimate as many corpses as they want, then the spell will fail.”

Vilkas grumbled something from his spot at one of the tables. Rowan’s attention snapped to him. The warrior had been shifting and muttering under his breath throughout the entire lesson, his arms crossed over his chest as he glowered at Rowan.

“You have something to add, Companion?” Rowan asked blandly.

Vilkas raised his head. “Perhaps you should skip all the pointless dribble and tell him how to kill mages, hm? There’s no need to know all that nonsense.”

Rowan gave him a thin smile, saying with thinly veiled hostility, “I just thought it was important that he know how to survive long enough to kill a mage, but I suppose I was wrong. Tell me, Companion, when’s the best time to dodge a bout of flame coming for your head? I’m sure you know. You had a run in with a Destruction mage recently, right? I smelt the burnt hair when you came in.”

Vilkas glared at her. She could see him grind his teeth.

“And yet, I’m the one who left that battle alive,” Vilkas bit out. “No matter how many tricks you mages have, you cannot compare to a true warrior.”

Something inside Rowan turned to cold stone and sank to the bottom of her chest. Her smile slowly faded. She held his stare for several tense, silent moments.

In one movement, Rowan grabbed the axe she’d hung from her belt and flung it. It embedded itself in the table Vilkas sat at, knocking his mug of ale into his lap.

Vilkas leapt from his seat, cursing and snarling and trying to wipe the ale from his trousers. The Companions jumped; some halfway out of their chairs before anyone had processed what had happened.

“You—!” Vilkas snarled. He started towards Rowan, but Skjor held him back.

“You should learn to watch your tongue, dog,” Rowan spat. “Not every mage is willing to let you off so easily.” She turned to Farkas and gave him a friendly smile, her cold demeanor melting away.

“Thank you, Farkas. I had a great time sparring with you. Hopefully, we can do it again. I’d really like to practice close combat and continue to teach you about fighting mages.”

Farkas gaped at her. “Uh, well, yeah . . . sure. I had fun, too. We’ll . . . figure something out.”
“Great!” Rowan said. She picked up her pack from where Tilma had placed it near the steps and gave a nod to the other Companions. “It was a pleasure, as always.”

As she walked away from Jorrvaskr, she heard Aela say, “Got to give her credit. She’s got good aim for a novice.”

Farkas frowned as he watched Corvid leave Jorrvaskr. When she had disappeared, he turned to his still enraged twin.

“Why’d you do that, Vilkas?” he asked, confusion plain in his voice. He and Corvid had been teaching each other valuable skills, and even if hers were mostly going right over his head, she was patient and simplified what she could. He didn’t understand what Vilkas was upset about.

“She’s a witch, Farkas,” Vilkas spat. He scowled at the axe imbedded in the table. “Nothing good can be learned from her.”

Farkas’ frown deepened. "She wasn't teaching me magic – not like I could learn it anyway – but how to fight mages. That's useful."

Vilkas’ face twitched in the way that showed he knew Farkas was right, but he wouldn't willingly admit to being wrong. Instead, he turned on his heel and entered Jorrvaskr, slamming the door behind himself.

Farkas sighed. He placed his sword back on the weapons rack and walked to the table to retrieve the axe. He had to agree with Aela: Corvid had excellent aim for a beginner. Maybe they'd work on that next time they trained together.

"Don't mind him, Farkas," Aela said. "Vilkas is simply on edge because of how much magic she uses. You know how he is."

Farkas did. Ever since Vilkas had begun ignoring his wolf, his tolerance towards magic – and his temper – had become shorter and shorter. He would tolerate healing magic; he had too much respect for Danica for his attitude to be anything less. But all other forms? He loathed them. Even magelights sent him into a curse-spitting fit these days.

On some level, Farkas understood his brother's anger. The whole Circle knew the story of how Companions came to be werewolves, and all of them had a distaste for witches and their magicks, even Skjor and Aela who lived as if they'd sprung from their mothers' wombs already covered in fur, but Corvid was different. She was a mage and healer, not a witch. She'd saved Njada's life and even managed to fix the Gildergreen. He thought back to Danica's story, of how the Gildergreen had reached out to Corvid and taken some of her magic to heal itself. If the Gildergreen – a gift from Kynareth herself – thought her worthy of its trust, then who were they to question it?

"Careful there, Icebrain. You'll get lost in all that empty space if you keep thinking so hard," Aela teased. She grinned behind her mug.

Farkas shook his head and paid no mind to Aela's comment. "Vilkas will see reason soon enough. Corvid may be a mage, but she's honorable."

Kodlak smiled. "Thinking of inviting her to join, pup? Can't say I'm against the idea. The girl's got a fire in her, and she'd make a good shield-sibling."
Farkas wouldn't say he hadn't thought about it. What Corvid lacked in experience with physical combat, she made up for in cleverness. If he'd been less experienced or they'd been fighting for real, her axe would've connected several times. She had potential; all she needed was lessons.

"It's too soon," Farkas said. He looked down at the axe in his hand. "She isn't ready to settle somewhere. And even if she were, Vilkas left a bad impression."

Kodlak nodded in that way he always did, like he understood what was currently being said, what hadn't been said, and things no one knew to speak of or keep quiet about yet. "In time, perhaps. For now, don't let Vilkas' attitude sway your judgment."

Farkas nodded, though he couldn't help but wish his brother weren't so stubborn.

With Njada healed, there was nothing keeping Rowan in Whiterun any longer. She took off the next morning, bundled against the cold of Sun's Dusk, a list of jobs (one even came straight from the Jarl!) and Nettlebane in her pack, and a need to calm the buzzing beneath her skin. The farther she got from the city, the easier it was for her to breathe. Rowan had been so preoccupied with Njada’s care that she’d barely realized she’d grown almost as anxious as she’d been at the end of her stay in Riverwood.

Now, as she watched her flame atronach cause chaos amongst a small bandit camp and shot arrow after arrow into bandits, she felt free.

“‘You bitch! I’ll kill you!’” howled an Argonian mage. She cast flames and drew her dagger, advancing on Rowan’s now revealed position.

Sneering, Rowan summoned a ward to block the flames. She placed her bow in its place on her back and began to cast sparks when an idea came to her. With a feral grin, she rushed the mage. She drew her axe at the last moment and, giving the Argonian no time to draw her dagger, swung it at her skull. The blade connected with thick sound, and the Argonian crumpled. The axe, while not buried too deeply, was wedged in the skull, and Rowan couldn’t remove it before the body collapsed. So, she let it fall with the corpse. No sense in being dragged down with it.

Looking back to the battle, Rowan saw that the bandits had killed her atronach, and the ensuing explosion had killed them. She shrugged, placed her foot on the corpse, and jerked her axe out of its skull. Bits of brain and blood splattered her robes, and she sighed. She’d have to get new ones soon. Blood didn’t come out of cloth as easily as it did armor. Maybe there was a stain resistant charm that could help her?

Farengar might know. Rowan quickly took out a loose piece of paper from her pack and made a note to ask him when she returned to Whiterun. She wiped the blood leaking from her nose, looted the camp, and went on her way. If she had no other run ins, then she should arrive at Orphan Rock by sundown, though she still hadn’t decided if she would spend the night there. Mostly, it depended on how the hagraven and hags received her. She most likely had nothing to worry about but being cautious wouldn’t hurt.

_I wonder what sort of favor Senna meant_, Rowan thought. She hoped it would be more hagraven magic or information seidr, but knowing a hagraven, a favor from one of them could mean anything and have any sort of consequences.

_Guess I'll only know when I get there. If it's anything dangerous, I can just say I'll use it in an_
emergency. Hopefully that won't be viewed as an insult.

Rowan approached Orphan Rock with less dread in her belly than the first time but with twice as much nerves. She hated not knowing what to expect. With Anise, she'd known, but Senna . . . Senna was unpredictable. She had an old flame in his belly, something terrible and great and it stretched towards the sky and spread its roots deep into the ground, searching and reaching and always hungry.

Subconsciously, Rowan gripped the robes covering her chest. The path both Nettlebane and the Gildergreen had burrowed there no longer gaped open, but it throbbed like raw scar tissue when pressed. She wondered if it would ever fully heal, though something told her it wouldn't. Experiences like that left permanent marks, even if they couldn't be seen.

The hags were waiting for Rowan. With soft smiles on their faces, their greeted her and escorted her up to Senna. They asked how her task with the Gildergreen went and when she didn't immediately answer, shared a look between each other.

Senna quickly waved them across the fallen tree. She immediately embraced Rowan, who froze at the unexpected contact. Hesitantly, Rowan returned the embrace, lightly patting the hagraven's stooped back and forcing her body to relax.

Senna pulled back and grinned up at Rowan; while the grin was teasing, Rowan felt no maliciousness from it.

"Come, sit around the fire so we may speak," Senna beckoned.

All four women sat around the campfire. The two hags tossed more kindling into the flames while Senna turned her attention to Rowan.

"I am glad you've returned so soon. I didn't expect to see you again for a long while, God Child," she said.

"I wanted to return Nettlebane," Rowan said. She shrugged off her pack, reached inside it, and pulled out the blade.

Nettlebane sang in Senna's presence, becoming that eager dog again as if it hadn't been pouting for the past few weeks.

Senna laughed and took Nettlebane, looking unsurprised. "It seems you didn't need Nettlebane anyway, hm?"

"No, I didn't."

"And how did you fix Whiterun's Gildergreen?" Senna watched Rowan with giddy fascination. "Something no one would expect to do? Or perhaps something that would have taken years of study to even grasp the concept of . . ."

Looking at her feet, Rowan said, "Both, I guess."

"Would you share your experience with us? Perhaps I can provide insight to help you understand your situation," Senna said.

Frowning, Rowan said, “First, tell me what you know about what happened with the Gildergreen, and don’t say you don’t know anything. I know you do.”
Senna grinned. “I felt the Gildergreen marking you for Whiterun’s tree. I also felt Whiterun’s tree taking energy from you and healing itself. I don’t know the details.”

“How do you know that?” Rowan asked. Had the hags followed her to the Sanctuary to spy on her for Senna?

“I listened to the pathways,” Senna answered. “Do you know what the pathways are, God Child?”

Rowan nodded. “They’re like rivers of magicka that flow from Aetherius to Mundus. Magicka enters Mundus through the sun and stars and then travels along the pathways to every living and nonliving thing, like veins pumping blood in a body. Without the pathways, magicka would flow without order and inhabit whatever vessel it could without restraint. Inevitably, this would destroy the mortal world.”

“Very good,” Senna said. “But too passive. The pathways are alive, just as magicka is. I’m sure you already know this.” Senna eyed Rowan’s tense nod. “But not the point. As I said, I listened to the pathways. Experienced or particularly strong magic users can connect or tap into the pathways. Doing this can accomplish many things. You can utilize the pathways’ endless supply of magicka if your body can handle the strain; you can learn information without doing it the mortal way; you can do what I did and view the flow of magicka at a far-off location; or—” Her grin widened. “You can even learn how to travel between the planes of Aurbis, which I’m sure you’ll be learning to do soon enough.”

Rowan itched for her journal of notes. Senna was giving her too much information; how was she supposed to remember it all? Maybe this was a test.

“Tell me about what you did,” Rowan said. She knew about the first option, and while the second and last options were more interesting, they seemed to require more explanation.

Senna nodded. "It's the simplest of rituals regarding the pathways – and make no mistake about it, these are not spells. They are rituals and must be treated as such, or else you're asking for trouble. It is also the least invasive. You connect your magicka with the pathways and either ask the pathways for what you want or seek it out yourself."

"You make it sound easy," Rowan said.

Cackling, Senna said, "Simple isn't the same as easy. Communing with the pathways is much different than the magicks practiced by mages. A lesser being would need years of study before even attempting what I describe, but you, you have been blessed with great potential. With the proper training and dedication, you can achieve in mere months what it has taken others decades to master."

Rowan couldn't withhold a snort.

Senna's smirk didn't fall from her mouth. "You doubt my words?"

"Maybe not doubt, but . . . everything you're saying counts on my magic not trying to kill me every time I use it. I can't even meditate without having seizures and bleeding from nearly every orifice."

"Hm, yes, that much power is bound to be a burden, especially with such little training and experience." Senna scratched her chin with a long claw. "Perhaps the gods can be of use to you."

"The gods?" Rowan asked. She frowned. The only god she'd spoken to was Akatosh, and they hadn't exactly gotten off on the right foot.

"I don't call you God Child for nothing, Rowan," Senna chastised. "From the moment of your birth,
you had the gods' attention. You have more in common with them than you do with mortals. Even now, they watch you and wait."

"Wait for what?"

Senna grinned. Her teeth were bloodstained. "To see what side you will choose."

Rowan's frown deepened. So, they were talking about the Aedra and Daedra, not just the Princes. "And if I don't want to choose?" she asked slowly.

"Then, you are going to be very interesting."

Rowan chose not to comment. "Will you tell me about the other rituals? And how much do you know about seidr?"


Perking up, Rowan asked, "World Walker? Whose term is that? I've never heard of it before."

"It is the proper mortal term for and was the first name given to your kind. While universal, knowledge of it and its usage has been lost. No one knows who first used it, though I believe that honor belongs to the gods. The College will surely have some information on it, but most will be regular mortals' accounts or theories. Nothing from the World Walkers themselves. They either kept that knowledge to themselves or it has been destroyed," Senna said. "But bits of the knowledge you seek are everywhere. Everyone has their own legends of the World Walkers, whether they acknowledge them or not. You will hear whispers of God Children and Half Gods if you know when and where to listen. People may forget the details but never the awe and fear."

Senna motioned between the hags and her tent. Both hags walked to the tent and began rummaging through the chest.

"The second simplest is the ritual of connecting your magicka to the pathways so that you may access to unlimited magicka. This is a very dangerous process; only exceedingly skilled magic users should attempt it. I'm sure the reason is clear."

"They could easily die from the overload of magicka or the Mages' Demise," Rowan said. She took the mug of mead one of the hags handed her with a soft 'thank you.'

"The third ritual resembles the first but is much more involved. To accomplish it without your brain leaking out of your ears is quite the task. In essence, you must connect to the pathways in such an intricate and intimate way that they allow you to search through the raw information stored within themselves. Doing this without a set goal rarely ends well. You must know what you seek. If you don't, you could become lost within the pathways, endlessly taking in information until you die."

Drinking her mead, Rowan nodded her understanding. "That makes sense. My magicka's pull is already so strong. I can't imagine how strong the temptation of the pathways is."

Senna nodded somberly. "Even hagravens die under the strain. Most choose vessels to filter the raw magicka through to make it safer, though that method limits their immediate understanding of the information."

"Now, the fourth ritual, that is what your kind is meant to do. It's what you're named for, after all," Senna said. A near maniacal grin slowly split her face as she continued speaking, her tone becoming reverent. "Walking freely amongst the gods' domains as if you were born there. Mortals have died in pursuit of that power."
Rowan wrinkled her nose. “I don’t understand why. I mean, if you get in good enough with one of the gods, or at least the Princes, you have a good shot at seeing at least one realm. I guess I just don’t see what the fuss is about.”

“Aye, if the gods are feeling particularly merciful or perhaps just amused, a mortal might be able to get a glimpse of a gods’ realm without having to die,” Senna said. “But at the cost of their soul.”

Rowan stilled. Her face slowly slacked. “Oh . . .” she murmured. It hadn’t occurred to her that she would be risking her soul if she interacted with Daedra. She couldn’t really be blamed for it, though; the games treated the Princes owning a mortal soul as a tiny, insignificant thing. A player could devote themselves to every Prince without consequence, so she hadn’t needed to treat it seriously until now. Now she had to face the very real reality of a god being able to own her soul, but . . .

"What does that mean for me?" she asked.

Senna hummed and stoked the fire. "What does that mean indeed. I cannot tell you facts, Rowan, but I'll tell you what I believe.” When Rowan nodded, she continued, "The gods' rules mean nothing to you. Yes, they have the power to kill you or bend you to their wills, but you have the power to stand before them as an equal. You are mortal but only through flesh alone, though that flesh limits you. You see the cosmos as the gods do, but your brain and body cannot process it. But, in time, you will be able to. Given enough time, you shall have all of creation at your fingertips; mortal limits will no longer apply to you.

I believe the gods view you as both a potential asset and a potential threat. They covet your power yet are wary of your unpredictability. Mortals are always a gamble. Some are good investments while others destroy hundreds or thousands of years of work. In short, you are a game piece with the potential to hand Nirn to the gods on a silver platter or to forever keep it out of their reach."

"Are we talking about just the Daedra or the Aedra, too?" Rowan asked, her voice far off. Her mind spun with the new knowledge; how was she supposed to process this? Supposedly, she was a valuable tool to the gods – especially the Daedra – but none had interacted with her except Akatosh, and even for him, it had only been that first meeting and there had been no talk of her being a World Walker. He’d only been interested in her as the Dragonborn. Was it not important to him? Were all the gods just watching and waiting for the right time? For when she was weak and vulnerable to persuasion? Her skin prickled and itched. Were they watching right now?

"Both. But mostly the Princes. They have always been more involved in the mortal world than the Aedra, and I doubt things will change when it comes to you. The Aedra will keep their distance unless certain conditions are met; the Daedra will wait for a sign and then seek you out. On their own terms, of course," Senna said.

Rowan didn't like that. She didn't like that at all. What was she supposed to do if Daedra started coming after her? She doubted she could talk her way out those situations. Maybe she just had to avoid them? For the most part, a player had to go out of their way to find a Prince and do their quest. The only exceptions Rowan could think of were Hermaeus Mora, Nocturnal, Hircine, Meridia, and Sanguine, and she could avoid those easily enough – she might not be the Dragonborn, so avoiding Mora was easy; if she didn't join the Thieves Guild, then she wouldn't encounter Nocturnal; she wouldn't become a werewolf, so Hircine wouldn't own her soul; if she found Meridia's beacon in a chest, she wouldn't touch it; and if she met a guy named Sam who wanted to have a drinking contest, she'd say no. She would simply avoid the other Princes' quests; she didn't like most of them anyway, so it was no hardship. There. Easily said, easily done. Problem solved.

Then why did it feel like she was lying to herself?
"I would tell you to use caution when interacting with the gods, but you aren't stupid – young and a bit of a fool, yes, but not stupid. Instead, I shall tell you this: if you attempt any of these rituals before you have better control over your magicka, you will die," Senna said.

Grateful for her bluntness, Rowan shook the worry from her head and said, "I doubt I'll be attempting any of them, but thank you for your honesty. Whenever Danica warns me against something, she never outright states that I could die. She says I could hurt myself, but that's as far as she goes."

"Too many mages of today believe magic is safe. They believe that since they have moved away from our type of magic – the original magics – they have no reason to fear magic. Yes, they understand their experiments could end in death, but they believe those to be mistakes of their own making. The truth is they underestimate magic. They forget it lives and breathes and has a will of its own. They think all they need is to have control, and everything will be fine. But that is a lie. Using magic is a partnership between yourself and your magicka. To think of magic as simply a tool is to forget its very nature, and that ensures death, no matter the skill level."

Rowan thought of Nettlebane, the Gold, and the spindly claws of her own magicka. No, she thought, I won't be forgetting that anytime soon.

"You wish for more information," Senna said. She motioned to Rowan’s pack. “Gather what materials you need, and I shall teach you what I can. It has been many years since I have needed to speak of these topics, and my memory, like those of many others, has faded. I cannot guarantee much of the information I give you about World Walkers will be accurate or even true. Do not take my words at face value. Seek your own answers.”

Nodding, Rowan said, “I understand.”

“Good. We shall talk while Anya and Brenui make dinner and then break to eat. After, if you are up to it, you shall spar with my apprentices. I can sense your endurance hasn’t improved much since you were here last.”

“Not for fighting. My Restoration has improved, though,” Rowan said, gathering a blue journal and charcoal sticks from her pack. The journal wasn’t her personal one, but a new one she’d bought specifically to have a place to put her magical notes; its pages were filled with her messy scrawling of half-formed ideas, questions squished wherever they would fit, and arrows connecting it all together.

Senna eyed the dried blood splatter on Rowan's newest set of healer’s robes. She didn’t say anything, but Rowan could sense her teasing in the curl of her mouth.

“If you are ready,” Senna said instead.

Rowan flipped to a blank page and waited for Senna to begin.

“I won’t claim to know the origins of the World Walkers – those secrets have long belonged to the gods and the dead – but I have lived long enough to hear Nirn rejoice with each birth of a new Chosen Child and mourn their sudden, early deaths. I shall gift you with what knowledge I can and hope it will help you survive as long as you can . . .”

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Midyear 24, 4E 199 (June 24, 2017)

Dear Journal,
I am completely and utterly fucked.

Sincerely,

Rowan Corvid
Rowan returned to Whiterun several days later, Senna’s lectures still bouncing in her head. She’d expected to feel lighter after Senna had been so helpful, but instead, she felt the exact opposite. The itch to move had returned in full force; her head felt fogged and heavy; her magicka buzzed and twisted inside her chest, sitting there like a heavy weight; and her skin felt too small to contain the frenzy building in her core. She felt that if she moved wrong she would split apart, that her flesh would peel from her bones as her brain dissolved.

She didn’t understand what was wrong but that was all right. It was the only normal thing about her life anymore.

A guard greeted her, and she responded absentmindedly. Maybe she needed to sleep? Sleep was like the human reset button. Maybe if she slept, her magicka would stop fucking moving, because that was distracting as fuck and maybe she could figure something out—

“Hello, Miss Corvid.”

“Hm?” Rowan blinked and looked to her left. “Oh, hello, Ysolda.”

Ysolda smiled and paused her walk towards the Khajiit caravan. “I’m surprised you know my name. We haven’t formally met before now.”

“Hulda’s mentioned you a few times. She said you’re interested in buying the inn,” Rowan said. It wasn’t exactly a lie but not exactly the truth either.

“Yes, though that won’t be for a while now, not until I believe I’m ready for the responsibility – and have enough money to buy it, of course. In fact, I’m going to speak to Ma’bar at the caravan right now. He said he’d teach me the basics of running a business but only if I could get him a mammoth tusk. I’m hoping to talk him into a different price. I mean, who just has a mammoth tusk on hand?” Ysolda rambled.

“I have one you can have,” Rowan said automatically.

Ysolda looked taken aback. “I—what?”

Rather than answering, Rowan shrugged off her pack and rummaged through it until she found the tusk. She held it out to Ysolda with an expectant look.

Ysolda eyed the tusk like it would bite her. “Oh, I, well, I didn’t mean . . . You really don’t have to . . .”

“Take it. I don’t need it, and I have too much junk to sell anyway,” Rowan said. It’s not like I was specifically holding onto a mammoth tusk because I knew you needed one or anything, ha ha ha.
Looking like she wanted to protest, Ysolda finally caved. She took the tusk and said gratefully, “Thank you, you don’t know how much this means to me. At least let me pay you. I know this is worth a good amount of coin.”

Rowan waved off the offer. It wasn’t like Ysolda had asked her to find a tusk, after all. “You don’t need to pay me. It’s fine.”

Ysolda’s face fell briefly before lighting up again. “How much do you know about haggling?”

“Not a lot,” Rowan said with a grimace. While embarrassed she had little knowledge of what was a basic skill in Skyrim, arguing over prices felt wrong to her, even after living in Skyrim for so many weeks.

“Then let me teach you,” Ysolda said, leaning forward eagerly. “It’s the least I can do.”

While not entirely comfortable with the situation she’d gotten herself, Rowan reluctantly nodded. She shouldered her pack—Was the knot in her gut nerves or magicka?—and followed Ysolda to the caravan. With animated hand movements, Ysolda explained the basics of haggling.

"You see, you always ask them what they're asking for their goods, that way you know how to lower your offer. For most goods, you can't go too low, obviously, or else the seller won't take you seriously and will just tell you to pay full price. If the goods aren't high quality, you can lower your price further. If you're really gutsy, you can call them out on selling inferior goods at exorbitant prices, but that hinges on you being able to point out the inferiorities, so we'll get to that later," Ysolda said as they approached the caravan.

Several Khajiit looked up from what they were doing; a few greeted Ysolda by name. An older Khajiit with a braided beard and mane looked up from where he was taking stock next to his tent and grinned.

"This one greets you warmly, Ysolda," he said.

"Thank you, Ma'bar. It's good to see you, as well." Ysolda motioned to Rowan. "This is Rowan Corvid. She's become quite the problem solver around town. In fact, she helped me just a moment ago." She held up the mammoth tusk for Ma'bar's inspection.

He nearly dropped the scroll in his hands. "Where did she get that? Forgive Ma'bar's rudeness, but new friend Corvid is so small. She did not kill a mammoth for this tusk, did she?"

Rowan shook her head. "No, there was a bandit camp that had a spike pit. Mammoths, deer, and people would fall into it, and the bandits would take whatever was valuable. I cleared out the bandits a while back because I almost fell in the pit and got pissed off."

Ma'bar let out a burst of raucous laughter. Ysolda placed a hand over her mouth to hide her smile, but she also giggled.

"I didn't know that was the reason," Ysolda said. "I knew you'd cleared out the camp, but I thought you'd taken the bounty the Jarl put out."

"No, I didn't even know there was a bounty until one of the guards recognized me and brought me to Dragonsreach to speak to the Jarl," Rowan said.

Ma'bar chuckled good-naturedly. "This one apologizes for his laughter, but surely friend Corvid understands the humor in what she speaks of."
Rowan waved the apology off. "Yeah, believe me, my life is nothing but ridiculousness. So, ya know, laugh all you want . . ." She trailed off as she caught a familiar scent. *Coffee? Does coffee even exist here?*

Ma'bar noticed her distraction. "Ah, friend Corvid smells the brewing coffee. Would you like to try some?"

"What type of roast is it?" she asked without thinking.

Raising his brows, Ma'bar said, "A darker one, though the beans are from outside of Pellitine and have a mellower flavor. Good for drinking with sugar and won't keep you up all evening and night."

"Sure, I'd love some," she said. No way would she pass up coffee. Not after not having it for so long; the caffeine crash she'd suffered from her first few weeks in Skyrim still made her head hurt.

"You have had coffee before, yes?" Ma'bar asked after requesting two cups be brought to him.

Rowan nodded. "Yeah, it's been a while since I've had it. I didn't think I could get it in Skyrim."

"Most coffee is grown in Elsweyr or Hammerfell. Most other races have not acquired a taste for it, outside of Altmer and some Imperials," he said. Another Khajiit, who resembled a Eurasian lynx, approached with two cups in their hands. They handed one cup to Ma'bar and one to Rowan.

"This one thanks you, Qa’Jhan," Ma’bar said.

“Thank you,” Rowan said. She inhaled the aroma of the coffee, letting the dearly missed scent wash over her and the warmth thaw her chilled nose. Taking a sip, she hummed in satisfaction and smiled softly.

*Even better than tea,* she softly contently. Even though she normally took her coffee with cream and sugar, whatever brand she was drinking was smooth and flavorful with minimal traces of sour and bitter.

Ma’bar grinned behind his own cup. “Good, yes? Qa’Jhan’s family owns one of the largest coffee farms in Elsweyr. They grow many varieties, somehow managing various soil types without souring the fruit. They are masters of their craft.”

Qa’Jhan’s ears twitched. “This one thanks you for your kind words, Elder. Qa’Jhan’s family has spent many decades perfectly their knowledge. Their craft is hard-won.”

“You don’t happen to sell this, do you?” Rowan asked, because eloquence was a hidden talent of hers.

Qa’Jhan turned his golden gaze on her, his eyes curious but cautious. “Yes, though there are few buyers this far from Elsweyr.”

“Well, I’d like to buy some. You sell the whole beans, right? Do you sell bean grinders? Are the beans already roasted? How do you grade the roasts?” Rowan blurts out before she can stop herself because this is the first time she’s had coffee in five months and she can’t let it slip away.

Qa’Jhan’s ears flicked forward, and she swore he was amused even though he kept his face blank. “Anyone who sells pre-ground coffee is selling a subpar product. Yes, Qa’Jhan sells coffee grinders. He has roasted and non-roasted beans. The beans are graded by how many defects they have, from zero to more than eighty defects and with grades from one to five with one being the highest—Qa’Jhan’s family does not deal in coffee graded less than three. Once the beans are roasted,
they are then packaged depending on type of roast, labeled, and ready for sale.” He cocked his head to the side. “Does friend Corvid have any more questions?”

Rowan shook her head and quickly drank more of her coffee to stop herself from blurring out something again. She was grateful for her embarrassment in one respect – she could concentrate on it rather than her freaky magicka squirming inside her body.

“Do you wish to see Qa’Jhan’s stock? It will take a moment to unpack. Like Qa’Jhan said, there are not many buyers in Skyrim,” Qa’Jhan said.

Rowan nodded. "Yes, I would. Do you have any light roasts specifically? If not, then medium roasts?"

"Yes," Qa’Jhan said. He motioned for her to follow him to a wagon still stacked with crates. After climbing into the wagon, he began organizing the crates. "Qa’Jhan keeps darker roasts on top because that is what he and the others like to drink, but he has plenty of light and medium roasts." He opened one of the bottom crates, revealing the rectangular metal tins inside. "The beans must be kept out of sunlight and in a cool place or else they will spoil." His ear flicked and he gave Rowan a sly look. "In this, Skyrim is perfect."

Rowan smiled. "True. You could probably bury a few of those tins in a snowbank, and they'd be fine all winter."

He bared his teeth in a friendly grin. "Here. Smell these. You will not drink the coffee if you do not like how the beans smell."

They spent a few minutes figuring out which beans Rowan preferred and then hashing out prices for three full coffee tins and a coffee grinder. Once Rowan paid, Qa’Jhan restacked the crates.

"Will you also be needing a coffee pot? Qa’Jhan has several styles available," Qa’Jhan offered. He pointed to a stack of crates behind the coffee crates.

"Sure. What types do you have?" Rowan asked. She'd already stowed her purchases in her pack and watched Qa’Jhan with interest.

"Kinds to suit anyone's needs." He opened one crate and presented her with a small copper pot with a long handle. "This is a traditional brewing pot. Coffee grinds, sugar, and hot water go in the pot. The grounds settle at the bottom during brewing. Though they can get into the drinking mug, one can simply strain using cheese cloth or place the grounds in a linen bag before brewing. It is good for those on the go or if you feel you might break something more delicate."

She took it when he handed it to her and weighed it in her hands; it felt heavy and solid but not like it would be a hindrance. "Easy to use, though not a lot of volume."

Qa’Jhan snorted from where he was bent over another crate. "Humans use such large mugs. How do you get anything done when you are constantly full of liquid?"

Rowan immediately burst into a loud bout of giggles, careful not to drop the pot. She cackled for a few minutes while images of several of the Bannered Mare’s most familiar customers came to mind.

"That's one way to put it," she wheezed when she'd finally calmed down. The lingering tension left her shoulders, and she handed back the copper pot. "What else ya got?"

Qa’Jhan placed the copper pot back in its crate and pulled a taller pot with three chambers from a different crate. "This is a flip pot, popular in Hammerfell. Water goes in the bottom, grounds in the
middle. The pot is placed on top of a stove or fire, and once the water heats, the pot it removed from
the heat, flipped, and the coffee brews. Convenient for separating the grounds from the finished
coffee, but a bit too much of a fuss for Qa'Jhan's taste."

Rowan inspect the pot and nodded. "Yeah, I don't like the whole 'flipping a very hot piece of metal'
thing. Got anything else?"

Qa'Jhan replaced the flip pot and carefully pulled out a more familiarly shaped pot.
"You have a drip pot," Rowan said in amazement, eyeing the ceramic pot. It was almost exactly
shaped like a French drip pot she'd seen in New Orleans.

Qa'Jhan grinned. "This style is used most by Altmer. See the symbols around the bottom?" When
Rowan inspected the glowing runes and nodded, he continued. "The pot is enchanted to keep the
coffee hot while it brews. A very nice addition, though it increases the price."

"Oh, I'm so getting that," Rowan thought, eyes wide and bright. No way could she let the pretty
ceramic pot slip through her fingers. "How much for—"

A ruckus near the stables interrupted their conversation. Everyone at the caravan turned to peer down
at the stables to see what was going on.

The harsh roar of a horse broke through the air, causing many of the Khajiit to flick their ears back.
Several shouted orders followed the roar, along with a crash and more shouting.

“Oh dear,” Ysolda said. “Sounds like Skulvar has his hands full. Though I can’t imagine
why Lillith would send off for such a disruptive horse.”

Rowan winced as another roar assaulted her ears. She looked back to Qa'Jhan, whose entire attention
was on the commotion. "Qa'Jhan, can you pack up the drip pot and the copper pot? I'm buying
both."

He slowly turned back to her; one of his ears flicked to better catch the shouting. "Yes, of
course. Qa'Jhan will give you discount since you are buying in bulk."

Qa'Jhan playfully bickered with Rowan over the discounted price, encouraging her to challenge him
on several aspects of the pots' aspects and craftsmanship and how they impacted the price.

"One must practice if one wishes to learn," Qa'Jhan said. "But let Qa'Jhan speak seriously: Corvid is
welcome amongst us at any time and not just for trade."

"Thank you, Qa'Jhan," Rowan said as she paid and packed away her purchases. Thank god for a
magic pack, or else she'd be stuck carrying everything. At least no one had commented on her
shoving the large coffee canisters in there earlier. "Ysolda," Rowan called out, "I'm going to see
what's happening at the stables. Are you staying here?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. Ma'bar and I haven't finished our discussion yet. You go ahead though."

Shouldering her pack, Rowan waved goodbye to the caravan and walked to the stables. She'd never
paid them much attention before, only taking in the larger stables and new corral when she passed
by. Now, she examined the buildings more thoroughly. The stables were at least triple the size and
depth of the in-game ones, and bales of hay were neatly stacked on one side of the building. The
corral was almost completely hidden behind Skulvar's house and the stables, though sections of the
fencing could be seen between the buildings.
The shouts became clear as Rowan approached the stables.

"I said grab that rope, boy!" Skulvar shouted.

"I'm trying!" Another male shouted, who Rowan believed to be Skulvar's son, though she could never remember his name. "I just need to—" The man cut himself off with a scream.

Rowan ran the last stretch of distance, darting between the house and stables. Skulvar's son was stumbling backwards from a bucking horse. Rowan watched him trip and land sprawled out on his back. Charging a spell, she rushed the horse as it reared up. She cast the spell when she was within range, and a ward sprang into existence between the horse and man.

Startled, the horse curved away from the ward, stomping its hooves a few feet away from the man rather than into his skull.

Without thinking, Rowan grabbed at one of the ropes freely dangling from the horse's hastily-fashioned rope halter. She planted her feet in the ground and tried to follow Skulvar's shouted directions to get the horse into the corral, but it was only when his son staggered to his feet and grabbed another rope that they managed to make the horse cooperate.

Skulvar carefully tied the exhausted horse to a pole at the corral's built-in shelter. He motioned for his son and Rowan to drop their ropes and exit the corral while he himself slowly backed away as to not startle the horse again.

When he was clear of the corral, Skulvar closed and locked the corral before collapsing on the gate with a heavy sigh. He and his son were panting heavily and so was Rowan, though to a lesser extent.

"You have our thanks, Corvid," Skulvar said. He clapped her on the shoulder and grinned. "Jervar would be dead if not for you."

"It's no problem," she said. Her lungs and throat burned with every breath, so she forced herself to breathe through her nose rather than her mouth to lessen the pain.

"No, truly, you have our gratitude, mine especially," Jervar shyly spoke up. He was still covered in dirt and grass from his fall. "That mare would have put her hooves through my skull if it wasn't for you."

Rowan smiled, though in a slightly awkward manner. "Are you all right? I can heal you if you need me to."

He flushed. "Oh, no, just bruises. No need to bother with a spell."

"If there's one thing Jervar can handle, it's bruises. You can't work with horses until you can handle being bruised from dawn 'til dusk," Skulvar said. He inclined his head towards Rowan. "You ever worked with horses, Corvid? I ask because you weren't afraid like most people who haven't been around horses a lot are."

"Well, I've ridden horses most summers, though I never broke wild horses like you," Rowan said.

Skulvar eyed her for a long moment. "Say, will you be staying in Whiterun long? Or are you only staying a night or two before heading back out?"

Squinting at the strange question, Rowan thought of her magicka bouncing around in her skull and pressing outward at her ribs. She thought of Daedra and Aedra, of whatever might be waiting for her
at the College of Winterhold, and of the promise she made to herself to lay low that she'd conveniently forgotten about once the mystery of her magic had arisen.

I should stay here. At least for a while. Let myself adjust to everything. Maybe relax a bit before I explode, she thought

"Depends," she said finally. "I finished all the jobs I had lined up, so unless someone hires me, I'll be staying around Whiterun for a bit."

"How do you feel about some work?" Skulvar asked while stroking his head.

"Depends on what the work is."

"You're in need of a horse, aren't you?"

Furrowing her brows, Rowan said slowly, "I was going to buy one at some point . . ."

"How's about a deal?" Skulvar proposed.

"What sort of deal?"

"That mare is going to give us quite a bit of trouble – more trouble than I think Jervar and I can handle by ourselves. Now, I could hire someone from the stables of another Hold, but that takes time and paperwork and I have to ask their employers for permission to hire them out and figure out a schedule and even then, I don't get to choose who comes and helps us. If I hire you, I know exactly what I'm getting."

"You don't know how experienced I am with horses . . ." Rowan pointed out. "And I just said I've never broken a horse before."

Skulvar waved her protests off. "I know enough. You charged an angry horse without a thought, not that I'm surprised with all that I've heard about you dealing with hagravens. And you seem the type to be willing to learn what you don't know."

"So, you want to hire me to help you break the horse?" While not the strangest thing someone had asked her to do, it was certainly outside her current normality.

"In a way," Skulvar said. "If you help us break the horse, I'll sell her to you at a discount."

Rowan couldn't remember how much horses were in-game, but she knew they were over five hundred gold. She doubted that meant anything with the actual currency. "How much?"

"I reckon that mare is worth about triple our regular price of two hundred and fifty gold. So, you'd get her at five hundred and fifty rather than seven hundred and fifty."

"What makes her worth that much? I mean, she looks sturdy and all, but most Skyrim horses are," Rowan said.

"What makes her so great is her potential versatility," Skulvar said with a grin. "She's built hard and sturdy like a Skyrim horse should be, and you'd think that would slow her down, but it doesn't! She's got enough speed in her outrun an Elsweyr stallion and outlast them. She's cleverer than any breed from Hammerfell or High Rock I've seen; she's been spotting our traps and evading us for nearly a year now. We only got her today because she'd just fought off a sabre cat and even then, she didn't give up without a fight! I'm telling you, Corvid, this mare will be worth every Septim after she's trained."
Rowan eyed the mare. She was a gorgeous horse, bulky and huge like all Skyrim horses were with a white blanket concentrated on the back half of her blue roan, appaloosa coat, and her blonde mane and tail held dark roots and contrasted nicely with her coat.

*I wouldn't have to walk anywhere anymore. And I could take jobs further from Whiterun without worrying too much about attacks on the road, Rowan thought. I'd planned on getting a horse anyway.*

"So? What do you say?" Skulvar asked.

"All right, you have a deal," Rowan said with a decisive nod. "When do you want to start?"

Grinning, Skulvar said, "Sooner is always better. Why don't you go get into some better clothes, and we'll try and put a proper halter on this lady?"

Rowan eyed the mare. She was watching the three of them with her ears pointing stiffly forward. Her ears flicked backwards when Rowan looked at her and she switched her tail.

Rowan almost told Skulvar to leave it until the next day, but her magicka flared painfully in her abdomen, racing up into her lungs and shoulders like roots with razor sharp edges.

Stiffening, she hissed and closed her eyes, bracing against the pain. She only relaxed when the pain dulled to a throb.

"Yeah," she said hoarsely. "Yeah, let's do it."

"Skulvar, this isn't working," Rowan said. She wiped the sweat from her face with her shirt collar. Despite the air's chill, she'd sweated through her thick, long-sleeved shirt over an hour ago. "She doesn't trust any of us."

They'd been chasing the mare around the corral all day – Skulvar had refused to leave her tied up all day and night, stating it would be cruel – trying to catch her halter and secure her in a stall. While Skulvar believed her to be in good health, he wanted to be absolutely sure she didn't need any sort of healing before they began the training. Luckily, they'd managed to get a proper halter on her before untying her, but that was all they had accomplished.

Skulvar leaned against one of the corral's tall posts, panting. Jervar was sprawled on his back a few feet away in a similarly exhausted state.

"Aye," Skulvar said. "It'd be best to call it a day and work with her tomorrow." He frowned at Jervar. "Come on, boy, let's get her watered, fed, and put a fresh hay bed down." His frown deepened when Jervar simply glared up at him and continued to pant. "I said up, boy."

"Let him rest. He's the one who almost had his skull smashed in," Rowan said. "I'll help you."

Skulvar sighed. "I suppose you're right. You can lift a hay bale, right?"

"Yes, I can."

"Good. Go ahead and clean up the old hay and set down at least two bales' worth in the shelter."

With a sympathetic smile to Jervar, Rowan picked up a nearby pitchfork and tiredly walked to the corral's shelter. The mare stood off to the side, watching her every move, but she didn't charge, even
when Rowan cautiously entered the corral.

Rowan quickly removed the old hay from the stall and spread out two bales of soft hay. When she finished, she dumped, cleaned, and refilled the water trough while Skulvar added hay to the hanging basket and oats to a bucket at the stall’s entrance.

Skulvar clapped her on the shoulder when they exited the corral. “Thank you for your help. Jervar and I still need to feed and water the other horses, but why don’t you go ahead and turn in? You’ll need your rest to meet us bright and early tomorrow.”

Rowan nodded. She pulled on her fur coat as her cooled sweat brought the cold to her attention. She shivered and hastily buttoned the coat up, glaring at Skulvar as he laughed. He and Jervar were somehow all right with wearing only short-sleeved tunics. Fucking Nords.

“Go get yourself to a fire, Corvid,” Skulvar said. “Or else you’ll turn into an ice sculpture.”

“Fucking Nords,” Rowan grumbled. She shouldered her pack, said goodnight to the two men, and walked to Whiterun. She waved to the caravan, most of whom had already turned in for the night, and the guards outside Whiterun’s gates.

She stopped by the bathhouse despite the rapidly dropping temperature. She stank and didn’t want to bother Hulda for a bath this late in the evening.

There wasn’t an attendant present at the bathhouse, though Rowan was used to that. She simply lit a magelight, took off her boots, stepped into a waiting pair of wooden pattens, and walked to her preferred bathing room.

The bathhouse itself was more of a sauna than what Rowan would consider a “bathhouse” since there wasn’t a pool of water present at all. The building consisted of a front entrance, a large main chamber, and several smaller rooms along the exterior. Multiple stoves heated the main chamber. Rocks were piled on top of the stoves and heated and water or, more likely, snow would be poured on top of the rocks, and steam would heat the air and make the patrons sweat. While Rowan still preferred what Hulda called “Altmer bathing” with a private bath of hot water and fragrant bathing oils, she didn’t mind the Nordic style. Though she still wasn’t used to those branches people would hit themselves with, though at least they smelled nice.

Rowan’s preferred room was still warm and had embers glowing in its stove. So, she simply added more logs and a flame spell for good measure before undressing and hanging a clean set of clothes outside the room.

The room was small enough that it didn’t take long to heat up or for her to start sweating. With a sigh, she sat down on the smooth wooden bench and leaned back against the wall. Once she’d worked up a good sweat, she would scrub her dead skin off with a rough linen cloth but for now, she’d relax.

She took a deep breath of woodsmoke, grimacing slightly at the leftover ache in her chest. Skyrim’s cold air still did a number on her, and her lungs were often left raw after only a few hours outside.

She breathed deeply again, hoping to relieve the tightness in her chest. Instead, the pain intensified, and a sharper pain shot through her insides. She coughed gently to relieve the ache, but instead her lungs seized up. She couldn’t get a breath in between the coughing and wheezing. What little air she could get was minimal and too thin to help. She doubled over; rough coughs wracked her body and scraped her throat raw.
After several minutes of choking and gasping, Rowan finally regained her breath. She inhaled wheezy, stuttering breaths, wiped the tears from her too hot face, and opened her eyes. She froze when she saw red on her hands.

*Oh, no . . .*

She wiped the spit that had splattered on her lips during the episode; her fingers came away sticky with more blood. More blood was splattered on the ground between her feet.

"*Fuck,*" Rowan whispered emphatically, like she held a nail from her own coffin. Hell, she might as well have.

She didn't linger.

She cleaned the floor and her hands and then roughly but halfheartedly scrubbed herself. She dried off in the outer chamber and barely waited for her body to cool before getting dressed, gathering her things, and heading to the Bannered Mare.

Hopefully tomorrow would bring a solution.

[Line]

“*Shit, shit, shit, shit,*” Rowan hissed. She ran for the fence and climbed over it just in time to avoid being trampled by the pissed off mare.

Skulvar helped her down, clucking sympathetically. “That was a close one. You all right?”

Wiping the sweat from her face, she nodded. “Yeah, just didn’t expect it that time.”

“I would think she would be at least a little tired by now.” Skulvar sighed. “It’s late. Let’s stop for the day. Can’t stress her out too much, and this isn’t doing us any good either. We’ll think of something else tomorrow.”

Rowan’s magicka buzzed beneath her skin; it hadn’t stopped in the nearly two weeks they’d been working with the mare. Her inattention gave her only the slightest of reprieves before her magicka made its frustrations known again. Stopping meant not having a distraction, and Rowan wasn’t sure she could handle that. But Skulvar wouldn’t be argued with. Rowan had tried that on the second day.

“All right,” she reluctantly agreed.

Skulvar smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. “Get some rest. You’re more haggard than I am, and I’m twice your age.”

Rowan gave him a grimace-like smile before gathering her things and heading to the bathhouse. Maybe if she spent long enough scrubbing herself, her exhaustion would finally turn into drowsiness.

Her hope was in vain, of course. She’d tried every trick she could think of to get herself to sleep, but for the past five nights, she’d been left without even the briefest moments of rest. Even Danica’s sleeping draughts couldn’t calm the painful, anxious movements of Rowan’s magicka. Instead, they had given her horrifying hallucinations so intense she’d attacked anything or anyone that moved. Even Danica had been terrified of her and had been forced to lock her in one of the temple’s empty quarantine rooms until the draught ran its course.
Please just let me sleep, Rowan thought desperately.

She laid awake on her back and stared at her room’s ceiling. She’d gone to bed hours ago, but her brain refused to sleep. She’d worked herself to exhaustion – mentally and physically – each day to force her body into unconsciousness. Yet, no matter how many times she wrangled the wild mare or puzzled over her magical research, she came no closer to rest.

Hot, frustrated tears pricked at her eyes and slid down her temples to be soaked up by the sheets. Soon, muffled sobs followed.

The knot of tension still sitting heavy in her chest didn’t lighten with the sobs. If anything, the weight solidified, turning into a cinder block crushing down on her lungs.

Rowan wheezed. She rolled on her side to try and relieve the pressure. She gasped and coughed as her chest clenched painfully.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! She couldn't breathe! She couldn't— Fuck, she couldn't breathe—

The knot loosened a fraction, and Rowan inhaled a shock of suddenly cold air. She exhaled quickly, took in another large lungful of air, and tried to calm down. She couldn’t stop the soft sobs that escaped even when she tried to muffle them. She lay in bed for several more agonizing minutes, silently begging for sleep to take her as she cried. When she stopped crying, she felt wrung out and stretched too thin but no closer to sleep than she’d been before the episode.

She sat up, grimacing when her overworked and exhausted muscles protested, and got off the bed. Her legs quivered with the effort of holding herself up, and her lungs couldn’t seem to get enough air.

Rowan knew Danica would want to hear about this. Danica would be furious Rowan had gone this long without another healer looking her over, but Rowan knew it wouldn’t do any good. Somehow, deep in her gut, she knew this wasn’t a physical illness. There wasn’t anything to treat. It was just . . . her. Her body and her magicka fighting against each other for some unknown reason.

Would Senna know? Maybe. She’d know more than Rowan knew. But Rowan was in no condition to travel. She could barely get out of bed; traveling to Orphan Rock was out of the question unless she asked someone to take her. And what would she tell them? ‘Oh, hey, you know that hagraven at Orphan Rock everyone thinks I killed? Well, I didn’t kill her. The two of us are actually on the way to becoming friends. Anyway, I need you to take me there, so I can ask her if my magicka is killing me, so could you help me out?’ Yeah, that would go over great. Rowan knew the attitude towards hagravens and anyone associated with them. At best, no one would trust her again, and she’d probably be run out of town. At worst, someone would try to kill her. Best to keep her affiliation with Senna a secret.

Rowan weakly made her way to the table in her room and sat down heavily. Her journals were still out from when she’d written her latest entries in them; she grabbed her magical journal, opened it to the section documenting her episodes, and wrote down the most recent one. The activity didn’t make her drowsy, but it was something to do.

When she finished, she closed the journal and tiredly thought of what to do with the hours she now had to occupy. After some debate, she hauled herself to her feet, pulled some warmer clothes on over her sleeping clothes, grabbed a blanket, and left her room. She carefully walked down the ladder, exited through the storage room’s door, and made her way through Whiterun’s dark and silent streets. Only the guards on the grave shift were out. Rowan squinted at the brightness of their torches and hoped they excused how terrible she looked as a trick of the light.
It was most likely only wishful thinking. The guards knew more than they let on, after all.

She trudged down to the stables, every step jolting her aching bones. The mare looked up at Rowan’s approach but didn’t move from the stall, even when Rowan placed her blanket on the ground and dropped down onto it.

“Sorry for waking you up,” Rowan said. The words came out rough, like she’d eaten gravel, so she cleared her throat. It didn’t help much. “I couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d keep you company. Hope you don’t mind.” She leaned against one of the corral’s posts with a grunt.

The mare snorted and flicked her tail.

Rowan huffed. “I know you don’t trust me, but there ain’t much I can do right now. My magic’s killing me. Or trying to. Either way, it feels like shit.”

Grumbling, she pressed her temple against the rough post. Her head felt ready to split open. With the lack of sleep and day to day stress of her magicka, her headaches were constant and ongoing; the only thing that changed was the type of pain. Sometimes it matched the deep, aching throb of her muscles, but others were sharp and stabbing, like now.

A chilled breeze made her curl up and hiss, but she didn't move. She shoved her hands into her pockets, shifted to a more comfortable position, and allowed her eyes to droop mostly closed. She glimpsed the mare shaking herself and heard her give a short snort. When the mare did nothing else, Rowan closed her eyes completely.

The mare made another, lower sound, but Rowan’s brain was too fogged and scrambled to make sense of it. With the mare in the corral and the guards patrolling, she was in no danger, even if the cold was uncomfortable.

Against all odds, Rowan's muscles relaxed. The mare made another low sound but louder. Rowan hummed, or tried to, in return. Her labored breathing slowed and deepened. The knot in her chest began to unwind, and the edges of her scrambled thoughts dulled. For the first time in nearly two weeks, Rowan felt as if she were whole rather than pieces tied sloppily together.

And so, she slept.

Rowan woke to someone gently shaking her shoulder. Grunting, she shifted from her spot curled up against the post, cracking joints and twisting muscles as she did so, and squinted at the person touching her.

"Have you been out here all night, lass?” Skulvar asked softly.

Rowan blinked unhappily and looked to where the sun now rested. She nodded.

He sighed. "Come on. Let's get you inside and warmed up.” He hefted a grumbling Rowan to her feet, catching her when she stumbled, and helped her toward the house. "Thought you were smart, lass. Anyone who's not a Nord shouldn't stay outside without a shelter, even if it's only Midyear. Gods know what'll happen to you in winter."

Rowan let Skulvar ramble. He seemed to like doing that, that and bitching at his son. She should tell him to do the second thing less; maybe then, Jervar wouldn't send a thank you note if someone killed his father.
Skulvar basically carried Rowan into his house, where Jervar was already up and making breakfast.

"Father, we need more eggs. I can go—what happened?" Jervar sputtered when he saw the two of them enter.

Skulvar helped Rowan sit in a chair by the fire. "Foolish lass slept outside near the corral. Don't know why. Make her some of that tea. I know we still have some. Gods know we never drink the stuff," he grunted, pulling a fur off a bed and throwing it over Rowan.

"Of course," Jervar said, scurrying downstairs.

Skulvar fussed with the fire. "At least some good came of your foolishness." He grinned over his shoulder at her.

Rowan lazily rolled her head in his direction and gave him an inquiring blink. She didn't have a clue to what he was talking about. He was right, though. Some good had come from sleeping outside; she'd gotten something resembling restful sleep for the first time in over a week and was in a better mood for it.

Skulvar's grin widened. "Caught the mare sleeping near you when I came outside. She was right at the fence beside you, sleeping like she hadn't a care in the world. There might be hope of getting her trained, after all."

Blinking again, Rowan looked at the house's back wall. There wasn't a window there, but her gaze found the corral – and the mare – anyway. She hadn't been paying attention when Skulvar had woken her, but she didn't doubt that the mare had already moved back to the stall when he'd approached her.

Skulvar continued to stare at her, waiting for a reaction. Finally, Rowan turned back to him and gave a slow, satisfied smile.

He laughed, stood, and clapped her on the shoulder. She masked her reaction to the pain and returned his smile. Maybe, just maybe, things were starting to look up.

Things were not looking up.

Okay, they sort of were, but mostly they weren't.

Rowan fell into a new pattern. She would spend her days working with the mare – who now seemed slightly more inclined to trusting her than before – and trying to wrangle her magicka, and at night, she would sleep next to the corral and be lulled to sleep by the mare's ever-growing noises. At first, sleeping next to the mare seemed to be helping. Rowan's magicka would calm enough for her to sleep, and she wouldn't be as burdened in the morning. However, the reprieve lasted for shorter periods each day, and the pain and scattered thoughts would always return worse than before the reprieve.

Whatever control Rowan believed she'd gained quickly slipped through her fingers. The see-saw state of her emotions left her frayed, disoriented, and ill. She avoided everyone she could, refusing to even enter Whiterun on the worst days in fear of someone bodily dragging her to Danica. She couldn't go to Danica. She couldn't. What if she felt the hagraven magic Rowan dabbled in? What if she already knew? What if everyone knew? Fuck, fuck, *fuck*! Someone had to know. They had to know Rowan hadn't killed Senna. She hadn't come back with proof, only Nettlebane. Someone—
someone had to know by now. Even if they couldn't see it, they—

The Companions.

Fuck, they'd smelted her! They knew. They knew, they knew, they knew, they knew, they knew, they knew, they knew, they knew—

"Corvid!"

Someone grabbed and shook her violently. On instinct, she raised her hand and readied a spell, only to falter when her magicka snapped at her.

The person released her immediately and swore, though Rowan didn't process the words. She was too focused on the chaos that was her magicka. Blindly, she reached for it again, only for it to retreat, hissing and sending warning sparks at her. She got brief flashes – not words but feelings and images that bypassed actual thought and went straight to understanding.

The surge knocked her on her ass, and she was left staring wide-eyed and slack-faced up at the clear sky.

Oh.

Well, fuck.

All right then.

Someone approached her cautiously, and while she understood why – she had just charged a spell, hadn’t she? – she wasn't a threat now. Her sudden understanding of her shitfest of a situation had left her dumbfounded and placid. She wouldn't care if a mammoth charged her right now.

"Corvid?" Skulvar, because of course it was Skulvar. She'd spent nearly all her time with him and his son the past few days and avoided everyone else. "Are you all right?"

Rowan blinked. She took a deep breath. She blinked again. "I'm a dumb motherfucker," she said, her voice low and toneless.

Skulvar muttered something, but he sounded far away to Rowan, so she didn't pay attention.

He squatted next to her but didn't touch her. Good idea. She couldn't feel any magicka coursing through her body, but it was always good to be cautious; she might've zapped him by accident or turned him into a frog or something. That would be just her luck.

Clearing his throat, Skulvar said, "While I can't claim to be an expert on magic or wizards, I believe it would be best if you saw Danica. For everyone."

"Danica can't do anything," Rowan said blankly.

"Danica’s the best healer you’ll find in Skyrim without going to the College," Skulvar objected. "There must be something she can do."

"No. There isn’t," Rowan said with finality. Sensing Skulvar wasn’t satisfied, she added, "This ain’t a physical illness. I’ve got too much magicka, and it’s tryin’ to kill me."

"Is there anything that can help?" Skulvar asked after a period of silence.

"Yeah," Rowan said with a heavy sigh. "I got an idea. I don’t like it, but it’s all I’ve got."
“Then, you should get on that,” Skulvar said slowly. “Because, lass, I don’t think you’re going to last much longer.”

Rowan nodded; her head bounced like a bobblehead. She felt empty, as if the revelation had scooped out all the fight in her along with her pain.

She stared into the distance. She could see the forest’s treeline in one direction and the peak of the Throat of the World in another. The sky was clear as crystal with the fluffiest clouds Rowan had ever see floating gently along in it. Skyrim really was beautiful. Even if she’d spent most of her time there either dying, almost dying, or recovering from almost dying.

“Yeah,” she said.

Hopefully, she could stay alive for a little bit longer.

Not even an hour later, Rowan took her pack and walked to a secluded glade in the forest near Whiterun. She’d only used it for magic practice up until now.

She set her pack under the shade of a tree, placed a few essentials next to it, and moved to the center of the clearing. With a sigh, she dropped into a lotus position on the ground.

“This is going to end badly,” she muttered. This was a ginormous shitstain of an idea, but she didn’t have any others.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and focused inward. Her last experience with meditation had been months ago under Anise’s careful instruction. Now, she was alone and as clueless as she’d ever been.

She tried to clear her thoughts but failed and settled for shoving her fear and worry to the back of her mind. She focused on her magicka – where it sat, how it felt, and what it wanted – and gradually reached out to touch it.

That was her first mistake.

Her magicka didn’t shy away from her this time. Instead, it waited until she came within range and latched on. It crawled up her inner self like a symbiote, covering every part of her without mercy or care.

Her second mistake was trying to escape.

Her magicka sensed her terror and literally dug its claws into her. She screamed, not just from the pain but from what she Saw.

Everything and nothing assaulted her senses. As soon as she magicka opened, the Pathways dug their teeth into her and wouldn’t let go. Each wanted to claim her attention, but her brain couldn’t follow any of them. The Pathways fought each other until giving in and simply pumping her with as much information as they could before their neighbor could. The entirely of Aurbis stretched out before Rowan’s mind, yet she comprehended none of it. Oh, she caught bits and pieces every now and then when a piece of lore she was already familiar with popped up, but on a whole? She saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing. Her senses had been deadened. What she felt was fake and real; her physical body stayed unaffected as her brain turned to mush. The entire universe and beyond screamed at her, yet it meant nothing to her.
More and More poured into her, but she never overflowed. How could she? She was a bottomless abyss, constantly feeding, constantly needing More. Nothing could satisfy her. She could Eat for eternity and still starve.

But her body was mortal. And its limits came too soon yet not soon enough.

She didn’t feel or even notice the explosion despite sitting at its center. In fact, she only knew one had occurred because she laid splayed on her back in a rocky crater – something she could process only vaguely. Her blind eyes could only see the pathways glittering above her like stars. Yet, there was still the innate feeling she was lower than she’d been before, and she could not shake it.

There was blood in her mouth. It flowed from her eyes, as well. There was always blood. Had to be. She never expected anything less. Even if she couldn’t feel or taste it, she knew it was there.

Her ears rang but even that was muffled. She’d lost feeling in her entire body, too; she couldn't even feel the expansion of her lungs, but she had to be breathing. Right? She'd know if she wasn't. Even her wrecked body would tell her if she was dying. After all, it had been doing that for weeks.

Rowan wasn’t sure how long she laid splayed out in the crater, breathing and not able to panic, but it was long enough for someone to find her. She saw only the pathways and darkness and though the ringing had died down, her hearing wasn’t much better. However, her sense of touch had returned enough that she knew when someone slid into the crater and lifted her.

Her pulse kicked into high gear.

Distantly, she heard a voice – or voices, she couldn’t tell – but she couldn’t discern any of what they were saying, not even their tone. She had no clue who had found her. Maybe Skulvar or Danica, but neither of them would’ve moved her – Skulvar out of fear of being attacked and Danica would’ve examined her first.

The person holding her gently adjusted her, cradling her closer to their armored chest. They spoke again, but the words continued to be white noise. Another voice – was it another voice? It sounded farther away, but she didn’t know – responded.

Rowan’s lungs clenched as she forced herself to breath faster, heavier. She hoped the extra oxygen would wake her body up, let her move or struggle or something because no way was she being kidnapped, no fucking way—

She reached for her magicka in a desperate move. Just the thought of touching it turned her stomach and scraped her wrecked nerves, but nothing else was working, and if her only options were letting herself be taken or using her magic, she chose magic.

This time, her magicka didn’t pull away or rush her; it stayed placid and let her pull from it with only slight acknowledgement. It hurt, oh did it hurt. Her streams burned when she forced magicka through them. She made a gurgling sound in the back of her throat but only knew her kidnapper heard it when they stopped moving.

They spoke again. Rowan didn’t bother trying to discern what they said. Instead, she focused all her attention on slowly pooling her magicka into her one upturned hand. She couldn’t cast an actual spell or deal any real damage, but a burst of raw magicka right to the chest would be enough to knock anyone on their ass.

The other voice let out a shout just as Rowan released the magicka. The one holding her didn’t have time to react before they were forcefully shoved backwards. They dropped Rowan in their shock,
and while it was what she wanted, she didn’t have to like hitting the ground.

She hissed in pain. The pathways burst to life in front of her eyes. She caught a flash of something canine stumbling away from her before it was gone.

Canine? A ghostly dog? But that was where her kidnapper would be—not a dog! Not a dog! Wolf! It was a wolf, which meant her kidnapper was a werewolf!

She breathed deeply and tried to croak out a word. “. . . om . . . un . . . ons . . .” Not good enough, try harder. She forced her heavy, unfamiliar tongue to cooperate. “Om . . . an . . . yuns . . .”

“Is—e—ing—an—ions?”

She tried to perk up when she heard the faint syllables. Most of it was unintelligible, but at least it was something.

The shock of magicka had apparently kickstarted her body; she could move her toes and fingers, and her sight was gray instead of black, in addition to her hearing slowly returning.

Someone knelt next to her. When nothing else happened, she thought they were waiting for her to do something, so she was surprised to feel a large, rough hand gently stroking her arm and her hair.

Farkas. It had to be Farkas. None of the other Companions were so kind or so large as him. And didn’t that just make her feel like shit. She’d shoved her magicka into the poor guy’s chest, and he was comforting her! She’d make sure to buy him a lot of mead to make up for it.

“Ar . . . kus,” she croaked out, managing to roll her head toward to massive blur at her side.

The hands paused briefly before continuing their soothing petting. The hand on her arm slowly but deliberately traced up her arm and over her shoulder. She twitched when Farkas’ callouses tickled her neck, but the hand continued on, stopping to gently wipe her face. Or he tried to wipe her face. Something – most likely blood – coated her cheeks, temples, mouth, jaw, and chin. She could feel it clogging her nostrils and beginning to flake away, and then she could taste and smell all the blood around her.

She really couldn’t bring herself to be surprised or too bothered.

Fuck, blood had probably matted in her hair, too. That was gonna be a bitch to get out.

Farkas seemed to agree with her. His hand betrayed his frustration with the amount of blood coating her face; his movements became rougher as he tried to remove the mix of blood in various states of dryness.

The second voice spoke. Rowan still couldn’t understand what they were saying. It’d gone something like “Op” something something “oose” something “is” and that was it.

Grunting, Rowan squirmed, hoping to somehow convey her non-understanding, but either the Companions didn’t notice or didn’t think it meant anything. Farkas removed his hand from Rowan’s face and reached for something another blur handed him. A moment later, a wet cloth stroked across her face, and Rowan let out a soft sigh and relaxed as Farkas cleaned her.

Before he was halfway finished, feeling rushed through Rowan’s body. She hissed, groaned, and tensed as a wave of pins and needles swept over her entire body. The static feeling faded quicker in some body parts than others, leaving behind a bone-deep ache that made Rowan tense with every slow throb.
Farkas’s pets to her hair firmed, and he added gentle strokes to her forehead with his other hand. He began saying something, and though Rowan couldn’t concentrate long enough to decipher it, the words were soothing, and she tried to focus more on the gentleness of his voice.

Gradually the pain faded, only to be replaced by her ear popping several times in sharp succession. The other followed as her eyesight cleared too rapidly, almost blinding her for real. She squeezed her eyes closed and groaned at the sudden clarity. Even the day’s fading light was too much for her, and her eyes burned and watered at the stinging pain.

A large, calloused hand gently laid over her eyes, shielding them and enclosing her in safe darkness. Farkas’ too warm skin gave off a heat Rowan hadn’t felt from even the sturdiest of Nords in Whiterun; the wolf blood must’ve had more perks than just turning large, furry, and feral.

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

Rowan startled at the words. Her body jerked sharply and caused her to hiss in pain. Farkas’ voice had been muffled, but she’d heard him clearly.

“I don’t know. Magic is completely beyond my knowledge. I still say we should get Danica.” Aela! That was Aela!

“We can’t leave her alone, and you already said you wouldn’t leave me alone with her,” Farkas said.

“She tried to blow you up with magic!”

“She was just defending herself. She didn’t know who we were at first. Any of us would’ve done the same.” Rowan could practically hear Farkas’ shrug.

Aela huffed. “I know that. But we can’t exactly defend against magic, can we?”

Grunting, Farkas said, “It wasn’t that bad, just stung a bit. Had more force than it did bite. Nothing to worry about.”

Aela let out a grunt of her own. “What I want to know is why she was out here alone. I’ve spoken with her enough times to know her magicka is a danger to herself. Why would she endanger herself by going out alone?”

Farkas didn’t respond to Aela’s question. Instead, he wiped at the blood still leaking sluggishly from Rowan’s nose.

Rowan squirmed impatiently – or attempted to. Her shoulder and hip cracked as soon as she shifted. A soft, pained sound escape her before she could muffle it.

Farkas’ other hand, wet and slightly cold from holding the rag, stroked her arm soothingly. “You shouldn’t move, Corvid. We don’t know how badly you’re hurt.”

Well, too fucking bad, she thought. Because the joints she’d cracked had released the painful tension, and now she felt like moving wasn’t impossible. Cautiously, she shifted her other shoulder until it cracked and then used it to brace herself as she did the same to her remaining hip. Her elbows cracked as she slowly rearranged herself, as did her wrists, and she cracked her fingers when she felt she could. She cracked her toes next and then her ankles and her knees with some careful twisting.

Her upper spine needed to be next. Her back was killing her and her couldn’t crack her neck until
her back was sorted out.

Grunting, she took a moment to rearrange herself. Farkas still had her head in his lap and his gentle hand covering her sensitive eyes, and he didn’t seem like he was going to let her up anytime soon. Not like she wasn’t okay with that. He made an excellent pillow, even if he smelled like dog.

After a bit of thought, she propped herself up on her elbows and slowly twisted her spine. Every bone in her upper to mid-back cracked in quick succession. She gasped in relief, very nearly collapsing back onto Farkas’ lap.

She laid there and basked in the soft tingling of released tension until the pressure in the lower back and pelvis forced her to move. She gritted her teeth as the bones protested but twisted her lower body until the stiffened joints yielded and cracked. With only a slight pause, she shifted her pelvis every way she could until the smaller bones cracked and popped in quick succession. Finally, she carefully rolled her neck until it, too, yielded with a series of dull, wet pops.

With a final stretch of her jaw, she collapsed back onto Farkas with a relieved sigh.

Hesitantly, Farkas began petting her arm again. He murmured soothing, nonsensical things that Rowan hummed at but didn’t process. His other hand was still warm against her eyes and slightly damp from her sweat.

“Are you all right?” Farkas finally asked.

After patting his hand for him to remove it, Rowan looked up at him. The warrior wore a queasy, disturbed expression, and she belatedly realized that hearing her crack every joint in her body was probably a lot worse for werewolves than it would be for regular people.

She weakly flapped a hand at him in an attempt to console him, aiming for his cheek but hitting his shoulder instead. She tried to form words but could only manage a low grunt.

Farkas gently grabbed her hand in his; his eyebrows pinched together in concern. “Corvid? Can you hear us?”

“Yea . . .” Rowan croaked. Her lungs itched, and she coughed to relieve it.

“I don’t know what happened here,” Aela said sternly, crossing her arms, “but I know you did something foolish.”


The Huntress huffed. “You said yourself that your magic was dangerous. I didn’t take you for a fool, Corvid.”

“If som’un says they’re no’ a fool, then they’re th’ biggest one of ‘ll,” Corvid grumbled, squinting against the sunlight up at Aela.

Heaving a sigh as if a great burden weighed upon her shoulders, Aela twisted her mouth in a defeated grimace, though her glare didn’t lessen.

Rowan gave her a sloppy smirk of victory that got a rough laugh out of Farkas. He quieted when Aela turned her glare to him, but his smile stayed in place.

He turned back to Rowan. “Are you all right to be moved? We need to get you to Danica.”
Rowan sighed, and her brief respite from the problems at hand went with it, leaving her feeling like a well wrung out towel. “Not sure there’s much of a point. Ain’t much she can do ’sides make me rest and give me a few potions. The worst has passed anyway.”

Farkas made a low, wounded sound in his throat. “The worst? But this, you’re--” He broke off, his brows drawing downwards in confusion and sadness.

With another sigh, Rowan patted the hand still on her arm. “You’ve noticed I’ve been strange the past few weeks, right?”

“Yes,” Farkas answered slowly. “But we thought you were ill, especially when you were avoiding everyone and there were rumors you were sleeping outside Skulvar’s pens.”

“Nah, those were the effects, not the cause,” Rowan said. She cleared her throat, not even needing to ask for water before Farkas held a waterskin up to her mouth. She drank deeply but slowly; getting vomit up her nose and in her mouth in addition to the blood would be a goddamn travesty.

“My magic made me sick,” she answered when Farkas finally pulled the water away. At the warriors’ confused expressions, she elaborated, “Ya know how I told y’all that mages have to build up their magic reserves as they learn new and more powerful spells? Well, mine’s not like that. I got too much magicka in a body that’s not ready for it. Way too much. So much that it gets pissy when it’s not used how it wants to get used – and it does have a mind of its own, magic’s a living thing and it’s got a will. And up until now, I've been ignoring what my magicka needs, and that’s why I got sick and, ya know, almost died. It built and built and there was nowhere for it to go, so it turned on me.”

Farkas’ brows furrowed. “But . . . you used magic all the time. Isn't that enough? Or do you need more powerful spells?”

“It’s not the spells or anything like that. I'm not a normal mage. I'm a seidr, a World Walker, my magic’s different. It's got different needs than other magic does.”

Aela scowled at the non-answer. “And what does that mean?”

Rowan grumbled and tried to figure out how to explain World Walkers, the Pathways, and Aurbis to those who wouldn’t understand if she explained how to cast Candlelight.

“It’s . . . I’m a Great Big Powerful Mage that’s connected to the magicka of the universe – the Pathways – which shouldn’t be possible, and my tiny mortal body can’t handle that. So, my magicka builds up because I'm not giving it the workout it wants and it tries to kill me or drive me insane. You know, regular stuff.”

Aela’s scowl deepened while Farkas gave her that sad, queasy puppy look again.

Rolling her eyes, Rowan said, “If it makes you feel better, you can take me to Danica, but she can’t do much. My magic just won’t allow it.”

Farkas immediately gathered her up in his arms – albeit very carefully, like she was made of spun glass – and walked out of the clearing. After gathering up Rowan’s pack, Aela followed.

She gave Rowan an unimpressed look. “We would have taken you to Danica no matter what. Especially since it seems you’re too much of a fool to take care of yourself.”

Rowan merely sighed and got comfortable against Farkas. While she probably could’ve walked on her own, being carried back to town wasn’t a hardship, especially if the person carrying her was as
warm and comforting as Farkas.
“So, you really can’t do anything?” Aela asked.

“No,” Danica sighed.

Rowan grimaced from where she laid in her bed – yes, her bed, as Danica so lovingly called it since Rowan was almost always recovering from her injuries in the temple. She really didn’t mean to be difficult; It's not like she could help almost dying every week or so.

“I wish there was more I could do for her, but this isn’t a physical wound,” Danica explained. “A physical wound or illness caused by an outside source, that I can heal. But this is caused by her own magicka, and that magicka is also an . . . enigma.”

“And that means?” Aela prompted impatiently.

Danica huffed. “She isn’t a normal mage! She can connect with the Gildergreen without any effort! She can see the Pathways of the universe! Nothing about her is normal! Especially her magicka. There's too much of it; it acts oddly; it blocks out outside influences to the point where even Corvid can’t heal herself half the time because it refuses to cooperate!” Waving an arm in a way that could’ve been frustration, disgust, or both, she said, “The best I can do is give her a few potions, make her rest, and keep her for observation. I suspect that nothing but her gaining control over her magicka will help her in the long run.”

Farkas, who had seated himself next to Rowan’s bed after getting her food and water, frowned. “And how does she do that?”

Throwing her arms in the air, Danica shouted, “I don’t know! No one does! There hasn’t been a seidr in centuries, and most of the information anyone has on them – if they remember them at all – are just legends. Corvid knows the most about seidr, or World Walkers, out of anyone, and if that doesn’t tell you how little information there is about them, then nothing will. Now, I have other patients to look after. Either stay and keep Corvid company or leave.” She walked away from Aela, grumbling about warriors and their idiotic, repetitive questions.

Aela scowled at the healer’s retreating form but didn’t argue. She turned to Rowan. “It seems you were right.”

While Rowan didn’t say ‘I told you so’, she did raise her eyebrows and drink her broth in a way that got the point across.

Farkas broke the tension before it could fully form. “And if Danica can’t do anything, then we can’t either, can we?”

Rowan gave him a small, regretful smile. “No, thank you, though. I'm sorry for putting you through so much trouble for nothing.”
“It’s not nothing,” Aela said tersely. “Friends do not leave friends bereft during their troubles.”

“Friends . . ?” Rowan asked quietly, stunned by the proclamation.

Aela held her head high, not speaking but also not wavering.

Farkas cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. “If you want to be, that is. I know it’s not exactly normal for mages to be friends with warriors, but we would like to be friends with you, Corvid.”

“No, it’s, it’s not like that! I just, I, uh, I’m not good at this . . . stuff,” Rowan fumbled. Friends! They wanted to be her friends! If she could hit herself and get away with it, she would because for some ungodly reason, she expected to be held at arm’s length by everyone for the entirety of her stay in Tamriel. Of course, people would want to be friends with her if they liked her and she spent enough time around them.

“Yes, I’d like to be friends,” Rowan hastily added before her silence could stretch on.

Aela’s mouth curved into a satisfied smirk while Farkas beamed at Rowan.

“And don’t worry,” Aela said, “we won’t let Vilkas bully you.”

“Like I won’t put him in his place,” Rowan said. She sipped her broth before asking, “What’s his problem, anyway? It can’t be that he just hates magic. What is it about me that he hates so much?”

Aela snorted inelegantly while Farkas physically winced.

“My brother doesn’t mean to be difficult—” Rowan shot him a disbelieving look. “—he just doesn’t fully understand his own motivations sometimes. Or he misunderstands himself and acts accordingly.”

“What?” Rowan asked dully, completely unimpressed with Farkas’ excuses for his brother.

“What Farkas means is that Vilkas is acting like a fool and to pay him no mind,” Aela said. “He’ll sort himself out eventually.”

With a shrug, Rowan accepted it. “Whatever. He can do what he wants, as long as he doesn’t bother me.”

Farkas winced again, and Aela laughed.

“We’ll have to see on that last bit,” Aela said.

She and Farkas shared a look that was clearly a conversation, but Rowan couldn’t understand what was being said and probably didn’t want to. Whatever it was, it looked like an old argument.

Briefly frowning at them, Rowan decided to let it go. She’d found the solution to the madness of the last few weeks and, despite not liking it, was grateful for it. She wasn’t going to let talk of Vilkas sour her mood. Instead, she finished her food and took out her journals to record the day’s events in both of them. Several pages fully of theories were added to the research journal before the werewolves deemed their argument even close to finished.

Rowan huffed as Ysolda fussed over her. “Really, you don’t have to. I’m fine now.”
Ysolda’s hands inched towards, away, and then towards Rowan again. “You were dying and you didn’t think to tell anyone. Your opinion doesn’t count right now.”

Ysolda had arrived only an hour after Farkas and Aela had brought her to Danica; she’d been in a near panic at the news that Rowan had been carried to the temple after being missing for nearly an entire day. She had apparently heard from Skulvar what had happened at the stables that morning and had searched Whiterun for Rowan to bring her to Danica herself, but Rowan had already left by that time. She’d spent the rest of the day worrying herself to death over Rowan’s health until she’d heard of the Companions bringing her to Danica. Even after being reassured by Danica and Rowan that Rowan was in no immediate danger, she’d refused to leave and had created a sort of shift schedule so Rowan was never left alone during her recovery.

Grumbling, Rowan let her do as she wanted with her hair. Most of her complaints were because she wasn’t used to being fussed over, that and finding out she already had not one but four friends was a bit of a shock and she needed a bit of time to recover. Yes, four! Farkas, Aela, Ysolda, and Qa’Jhan – and while the Khajiit couldn’t wish her well in person, he’d sent his concerns with Ysolda, as well as teas to ward away illnesses that might take advantage of her being bedridden.

“You have such beautiful hair,” Ysolda sighed, breaking Rowan from her thoughts. “How do you get it to be such an odd color?”

“Well, a god apparently liked my dye job so much he made it permanent, Rowan thought. “A magical experiment gone wrong. It's permanently that color.”

“Oh? What color was it before?”

“Black.”

“Oh, yes, I forgot that Bretons almost always have black hair,” Ysolda noted quietly. She used one hand to keep the hairstyle she’d crafted in place around Rowan’s hair stick while pinning the hair with hairpins. “Maybe I should grow my hair out again. I never thought I’d miss having so much hair now that I’ve had so much fun playing with yours. And it would be lovely to wear hair sticks and combs like you.

“Before I forget, the caravan left this morning, but Qa’Jhan gave me their route, so we’ll be able to send letters until they return.”

Rowan frowned and shifted where she sat. She had wanted to say goodbye to Qa’Jhan, Ma’bar, and the rest of the caravan and was sad she hadn’t gotten to talk with them more before they’d had to leave.

Ysolda patted her shoulder. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to say goodbye, but hopefully we can get Danica to clear you this evening so you can leave. I know you have your magical research, but I don’t see how you aren’t bored while staying here all day.”

Shrugging, Rowan glanced over to the pile of parchment she’d written her research on the past few days. She had been trying to figure out how to approach meditation now that she knew she absolutely needed it to manage her magicka, but so far, she hadn’t gotten anywhere. She couldn’t exactly do anything if the Pathways immediately latched onto her magicka when she tried to meditate. Danica had tried to help but she didn’t use meditation. Farengar had been slightly more helpful since he’d used the meditative state to try and access the Pathways for his research, but even the exercises he’d given her would need to be altered to support her larger magicka well. Even with the alterations, the exercises weren’t guaranteed to work; they weren’t made for Novices, and neither
Danica nor Farengar felt up to the task of apprenticing Rowan. Though she might’ve been stupid for thinking it, she couldn’t help but be thankful for that. While her apprenticeship under Anise had been brief, it had been intimate and somewhat stifling. Her magicka didn’t like being tied to another mage, even a desperately-needed teacher. And Rowan doubted she could let someone root around in her magicka and her mind like that again, not without knowing them extremely well. She’d only let Anise do it because a) she’d been desperate and b) Anise’s magic had called to her.

Besides, it wasn’t like she would be able to apprentice under anybody else except a hagraven at this point. If anyone caught even a whiff of her hagraven style of magic, shit would hit the fan. Currently, no one seemed to have a clue as to the true nature of Rowan’s relationship with the local and non-local hagravens, and she’d like to keep it that way for the foreseeable and non-foreseeable future.

“Corvid?” Ysolda asked.

“How?”

“You got lost in thought. I asked if you wanted to go out and collect a few alchemy ingredients, if Danica allows you to leave, of course.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. Are you sure you don’t have anything to do? You don’t have to waste your time with me, you know.”

“Time spent with a friend is never wasted. All my affairs are in order, no need to worry.” She removed her hands from Rowan’s hair. “There, all done. You should get some decorative pins or maybe even just some ribbons. I could braid them in for you.”

“Ribbons?” Rowan remembered a few things about ribbons being used as functional and decorative pieces in hairstyles but had never tried them; they’d seemed too fussy.

“Oh, yes, it’s all the rage in Cyrodiil, or so I’ve heard. Apparently, the nobles there make entire sculptures purely out of stiffened ribbons and place them on their heads like hats. I doubt that’ll ever catch on here. Too outlandish and time consuming, but a few ribbons would be pretty.”

“Maybe,” Rowan said. She looked up as Danica approached.

“How are you feeling today?” Danica asked. The question was more of a formality at this point. Rowan had recovered remarkably quick for someone who’d been paralyzed (albeit only for a few hours). She’d felt well after only three days in Danica’s care, not the week she’d been expecting. Of course, Danica kept her nearly the full week anyway. The priestess had claimed it was to “be sure there were no lingering effects from her meditation”, but Rowan knew it was punishment to rushing off and doing something foolish without telling anyone. Honestly, the woman sounded more like a mother than a healer.

“Physically? Fine. Mentally? I’m gonna start crawling the walls if you don’t let me leave,” Rowan groused. Truthfully, the itch to run out Whiterun’s gates had vanished since her “meditation”. Even her magicka had calmed to the point that touching it felt like slipping into a hot bath after a long day. Not that Rowan had been interacting with her magicka when the healer had specifically told her not to, nuh-uh, no way.

Though that didn’t mean Rowan wasn’t getting stir-crazy. She had things to do! She had to apologize to Skulvar and help him with the mare. She needed to apologize to Farkas and buy him alcohol. She definitely needed to hurry back to Orphan Rock and ask Senna all sorts of questions about meditation. What else did she need to do? Probably a lot of stuff that she was forgetting.
Danica hummed thoughtfully. “There haven’t been any setbacks like I anticipated, and you have been following directions and resting. I suppose . . .”

Rowan perked up. “Yes?”

With a snort, Danica said, “Fine, fine. You're free to go. But I don’t want to see you in here for at least a month. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Rowan said, nodding seriously because this was a Very Serious matter.

“Are you going to be back in here within the month?”

“Not if I can help it,” Rowan said.

Danica frowned before sighing and letting it go. “I would prefer a ‘no’, but I suppose that’s as good as I'm going to get. Go on, get out of here.”

Rowan immediately clamored out of bed and began gathering her things. Most of it was still in her room at the inn, but Ysolda, Aela, and Farkas had brought many things to keep her boredom at bay.

“I want to stop by the stables to speak to Skulvar before we head out. Is that all right?” Rowan asked Ysolda.

“Yes, it’s fine. Though I honestly can’t understand why you’d want to work with that wild beast rather than a trained horse.”

“She’s not that bad,” Rowan argued. She shoved the rest of her stuff in her pack and shouldered it.

“She tried to kick your skull in!”

Rowan rolled her eyes as they left the temple and waved goodbye to Danica. “She’s a horse. What's she supposed to do, take me to court?”

This time, Ysolda rolled her eyes. “Honestly, the things you say. It's a wonder people don’t think you’re a disciple of the Prince of Madness.”

“Eh, they probably already—” Rowan cut herself off when they were approached by Skjor. “Yes, sir?”

“Kodlak wishes to speak with you. Farkas and Aela were supposed to tell you, but I’m guessing they forgot to do so before they left on their jobs,” he said.

Rowan raised her eyebrows. She and Kodlak generally didn’t interact much. That wasn't to say that their relationship was antagonistic like her relationship with Vilkas, but she simply spent most of her time with Farkas and Aela, or even the Companions’ whelps.

Please don’t ask me to join. God, she really didn’t want to disappoint Farkas, Aela, or Kodlak, but no way was she joining the Companions. Being a werewolf was not for her, and she wanted no part in that.

“All right . . .” she said hesitantly. She turned to Ysolda. “Are you all right with waiting? I don’t think it’ll take long, but . . .”

“No, you go ahead. How about I meet you by the gates in ten minutes? I need to get some baskets anyway,” Ysolda said.
“It shouldn’t take that long,” Skjor said. “Kodlak wishes to ask Corvid a few questions, and then she’ll be on her way.”

“I’ll meet you at the gates then,” Ysolda said.

Nodding, Rowan followed Skjor up the steps and into Jorrvaskr. “Is Kodlak in his room?”

“Yes. You remember where it is?”

“Yeah.”

“Go ahead then.”

Dismissed, Rowan quickly made her way down the steps before Vilkas could appear. He hadn’t been in the main hall but he had a knack for appearing everywhere she went, especially within Jorrvaskr. He’d even tagged along with Farkas and Aela to two of the visits to her in the temple, though Rowan couldn’t understand why. All he’d done was make snide comments and glare at her until she’d thrown her mug at him and told him to leave.

She peeked into the whelps’ room but saw it was empty. Everyone was either out on jobs or training outside. Hopefully that meant Vilkas was gone, too. Ria was still the newest member, and Vilkas was often the shield-sibling who went with her on jobs since he was the one training her.

Humming and walking at a slower pace, Rowan made her way to the Harbinger’s quarters. She knocked, wincing at how the sound echoed in the empty hallway.

“Come in.”

Rowan opened the door to see Kodlak sitting at his table. “Hello. Skjor said you wanted to speak with me?”

“Yes, I did,” Kodlak said. “Please, sit down.” He motioned to the empty chair across from him.

She closed the door behind her, walked over to the table, and sat down. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“First, I wanted to ask how you were doing. Farkas and Aela were quite distressed when they first brought you to Danica. They said you had recovered well, but I wanted to make sure for myself,” he said.

“Oh! Well, uh, I’m doing fine. Everything’s back to normal, and there haven’t been any side effects, though if anything out of the ordinary happens, I’ll be going straight to Danica. She made me swear.”

Kodlak smiled. “That’s good to hear. Now, I asked you to come because I have an offer for you. Keep in mind that’s it’s only a suggestion, and I don’t expect an immediate answer or even a yes.”

Sitting up straight and trying to appear composed, Rowan asked hesitantly, “Yes?” On the inside, she rehearsed her polite declination of his invitation to join.

“I understand your desire for privacy and seclusion when dealing with your magicka; however, due to your recent incident, I find myself believing a new plan is needed. Going off on your own, while safer for others, puts yourself at risk. What would have happened to you if Farkas and Aela had not found you? Or if it had been someone other than them? It's simply not practical for you to seclude yourself during your time of need,” Kodlak said.
Rowan frowned. Her brows furrowed as she processed his words. “I don’t . . . exactly . . . understand. What are you suggesting? I can’t meditate in the temple. It would be too dangerous for Danica’s patients. Meditating in town in general is a bad idea, even more so after I put a crater in that clearing in the woods. And most people here either distrust magic, have no clue how it works, or can’t take the time to babysit me.”

“I am suggesting that you conduct your magical . . . activities here, in Jorrvaskr.”


Kodlak smiled. “Farkas was very convincing. He made the point that if we as warriors couldn’t handle a friendly mage conducting magic close to us, how could we trust ourselves to fight mages on the battlefield?”

Narrowing her eyes, she said, “Sounds a bit wordy for Farkas.” Her friend he might be, but Farkas wasn’t exactly a wordsmith. Not that Rowan didn’t appreciate, enjoy, or even prefer his earnestness over flowery language.

“No, not in so many words, but the meaning is the same. He also stated he would take any responsibility for any consequences of your magical outbursts.”

“And what do the others think about this?” Rowan asked carefully. Surely the others wouldn’t want her meditating in Jorrvaskr, especially since they’d all heard about the crater Farkas and Aela had found her in.

“Aela agreed with Farkas, though she wants us to take any and all precautions necessary, which I agree with. Skjor did not give his opinion immediately but eventually agreed, as well. He believes we can learn from you, even if it’s just through observation. The pups each had their own thoughts but are also in favor of it. Ria immediately so, while Njada and Athis needed time to weigh it in their minds.”

Rowan almost didn’t ask but apparently, she was in a self-punishing mood. “And Vilkas?”

Kodlak grimaced before giving her a sympathetic look. “As soon as the decision was made, he took Ria on a job without a word.”

“Oh, well, it could’ve been worse.” Rowan licked her lips and tapped her fingers on the table. “As for your offer . . . I’ll think about it. I’m not sure how well an enclosed space would be if I had another . . . well, if something like last time happened.”

“There’s no rush; however, I ask that you make a decision before reaching your breaking point again. And remember: you have allies here in Jorrvaskr, even if they are not your shield-siblings.”

Swallowing thickly around the sudden lump in her throat, Rowan said, “Thank you, sir. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Kodlak smiled. “Good. Now, enjoy your day and don’t get into any trouble. You’ve had enough close calls for quite some time now.”

Rowan nodded, said goodbye, and left, trying to seem more composed than she actually was. Luckily no one intercepted her before she could slip out the door and down the steps towards the market. Again, no one intercepted her, though many people did say hello and wish her well.
Am I really fitting in? I thought I'd be the odd one out here, but people just kind of . . . accept me? Even with the purple hair and magic and weird shit happening to me . . . they just see me as a person? It happened in Riverwood, too. Is Akatosh making it easier for me to live here so I’ll decide to become the Dragonborn? Hmm, it’s not impossible, Rowan thought. It was times like these that she wished she’d actually gone to regular school; homeschool had done her no favors with social interaction. And no, summer camp in the middle of nowhere with rich snobs didn’t count as ‘social interaction’.

“Fucking parents,” she grumbled as she walked towards Ysolda at the gates. “Just couldn’t send us to school like regular people. Oh no, we want to keep our six gremlins at home where they belong. ‘That’s what nature and God intended’ my ass. More like ‘let’s fuck up our kids because we’re stupid and controlling’. Fuckers.”

She shoved that to the back of her mind and gave Ysolda a pleasant smile. “Ready to go?”

Nodding, Ysolda handed Rowan a basket. “What did the Harbinger want to speak with you about?” she asked as the guards opened the doors for them.

Rowan craned her neck to see the stables and corral over the walls. She shoved down the impulse to lie and forced herself to say, “He told me I was free to meditate in Jorrvaskr the next time I needed to, so that I wouldn’t be alone if something went wrong.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Ysolda said, but her face fell when she caught sight of Rowan’s expression. “Isn’t it?”

Rowan shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t even think it’s allowed, legally speaking. Don’t Nords have laws against the practice of magic inside cities?”

“Well,” Ysolda answered slowly, “it’s not exactly law, but it’s highly suggested that mages don’t conduct magic out in public spaces or where non-mages can get involved in it. And you can’t just do it in somebody’s house, either, unless they let you. But since Kodlak offered, there shouldn’t be any problem. Unless the rest of the Companions disagree?”

“No, apparently the rest of the Companions all agreed ‘Don’t let the stupid mage kill herself’.” Rowan snorted.

“Well, I think you should take their offer. There's no sense in you putting yourself in danger when another option has been offered.”

“I'll think about it. Now, I want to see my horse.”

Sighing, Ysolda said, “Fine. I'll drop it, but don’t think we’re not talking about this again.”

Rowan waved her off, practically skipping the last stretch to the stables. “Hello, Skulvar!” she called out when she spotted him.

Skulvar looked around the horse he was grooming. “Oh, hello, Corvid, Ysolda! Good to see you!”

“Good to see you, too,” Rowan said, practically beaming.

“Jervar and I have been worried about you, Corvid. How are you? You look a lot better than the last time I saw you,” he said.

“Well, it’s not hard to look better than that,” Rowan said. “Draugr look better than I did. But I’m all better now. I figured out what was wrong, so there’ll be no more problems like that. Oh, and, um,
I’m sorry about, you know, nearly shooting you with a spell.”

“Apology accepted. No harm done, anyway. You were sick, and you didn’t hurt me anyway.” He gave her a smile. “Now, what can I do for you?”

Scoffing, Rowan said, “You know I’m here to see my horse.”

His eyebrows raised. “Your horse? Silly me, I didn’t know you already owned her.”

“I’m the only one she likes, so it’s not like you can sell her to somebody else,” Rowan replied dryly.

Skulvar laughed. “Aye, that be the case. She's still in the corral, go on back.”

“I’m staying here, if that’s all right,” Ysolda said. “That mare might like you, but the rest of us would rather stay out of her way.”

“Fine, fine,” Rowan said, rummaging through her pack for the treats she’d had Ysolda buy. After stuffing them in her pocket, she walked briskly through the buildings towards the corral and grinned when the mare perked up, her ears shifting forward from their sideways positions.

Climbing onto the corral’s gate, she cooed, “Hello, darling.”

The mare snorted, trotted forward a few steps, and then stopped. She eyed Rowan with an odd mix of eagerness and caution. She nervously paced back and forth, never taking her eyes off of Rowan.

Beaming, Rowan held onto the fence with one hand and took the bag of honey and lavender sugar cubes out of her pocket. She lined up five cubes on top of the fence, putting enough space between them that they wouldn’t be knocked over when the mare tried to eat them, and hopped off the fence. She backed away from the corral, sat down a short distance away, and waited.

The mare stopped pacing. She perked her head up and swiveled her ears forward. Flicking her tail, she only paused for a few moments before slowly stepping up to the fence. She cautiously sniffed a sugar cube and, finding it to her tastes, ate it. The other cubes quickly vanished.

When there were no more treats, the mare hung her head over the gate and snorted at Rowan.

Rowan stood and shook her head. “No more. Five was already too much to be healthy, but I'll bring you back some nettle and dandelions. How does that sound? A break from hay and feed. I'll be back in a little while, and hopefully we can get back to work on your exercises. I can’t believe it but I've actually missed almost getting kicked in the head.” She brushed off her clothes and shuffled back towards the main house. She couldn’t keep Ysolda waiting all day, no matter how much she wanted to stay.

The mare nickered and bobbed her head. Her tail flicked back and forth. When Rowan continued moving away, she nickered again but louder.

Rowan paused, looked back, and raised her eyebrows. Cautiously, she stepped back towards the corral.

Leaning further over the fence, the mare snorted. She pawed at the ground and flicked her tail, but she seemed to be more annoyed at Rowan’s caution than angry.

Rowan took several slow steps towards the mare, gaining hope the more distance she closed between them. While the mare no longer charged Rowan when she came near or entered the corral to clean it or feed her, Rowan didn’t want to risk getting bitten. Danica would skin her if she found out Rowan
had gotten injured right after leaving her care.

Rowan stopped inches from the mare. Her hands hovered in front of her, raised but not yet touching the horse. Rowan forced herself to stay calm and in charge; any abrupt change in behavior could spook the mare and set them back. So, Rowan let the mare make the next move.

With one last annoyed snort, the mare pressed her nose into Rowan’s hands.

The tension in Rowan’s shoulders eased. She let out a relieved sigh, smiled, and gently swept her hands over the velvety softness of the mare’s nose.

“Corvid? Corvid, are you all right? Danica will kill us both if you get hurt, and I—” Ysolda abruptly cut herself off when she got within sight of the corral.

The mare jerked her head out of Rowan’s hands. She stared over Rowan’s shoulder at Ysolda and flicked her tail but didn’t run.

Rowan remained calm, even as she moved as to not get brained by the mare’s skull. Ysolda wasn’t a threat, and Rowan had to show the mare that.

Just stay calm. Slow movements. Calm her if you can, Rowan thought. Slowly and deliberately, she reached up and stroked the mare’s neck. She hummed a slow rendition of “Ragnar the Red” and purposefully relaxed her posture as much as possible.

The mare stayed tense for a few more moments before she abruptly snorted, looked away from Ysolda, and shoved her head back into Rowan’s hands.

Rowan practically heard Ysolda’s sigh of relief and smiled to herself. “You think you’re real funny, don’t you?” she asked the mare teasingly.

The mare tilted her head but gave no other indication she understood Rowan.

Feeling giddy and daring, Rowan pressed a quick kiss to the bridge of the mare’s nose. She pulled away after giving the mare a few last pats on the neck. “I’ll be back later. I promise I won’t forget the nettle and dandelions. Don’t give Skulvar too much trouble.”

Ysolda watched the mare cautiously but only spoke when they were near Whiterun’s farms. “Your horse is terrifying. I see why you like her.”

As promised, Rowan came back with nettle and dandelions for the mare – Rowan really needed to think of a name for her – but Skulvar had banned her from continuing the mare’s exercises for the next few days. Though Rowan was disappointed, she hadn’t been surprised. Her deteriorated state had frightened him terribly, after all. So, she let him be as cautious as he wanted. Instead, she grabbed a basket of food from Hulda and climbed into the corral with the mare. She spent the next several hours journaling and bouncing her theories off the unimpressed mare.

Skulvar finally kicked her out when the sun had set, telling her to get some sleep and come back in the morning. For once, she’d done as she was told without argument, though she did grumble some.

She returned to the Bannered Mare to be cheerfully greeted by Hulda.

“Good to see you!” Hulda said. “Ysolda told me you both went out and gathered herbs. How’d you
“No life or death experiences. And Danica hasn’t dragged me back to the temple yet, so I guess I'm good,” Rowan said, leaning on the counter.

“Well, that might not last. Had some men come in here earlier asking about you. They'd heard you were a Seidr and wanted to know a bit more. Hope you don’t mind, but I told them what I knew; it wasn't much outside of the jobs you’ve done and the mess with your magic. They seemed impressed, though. They asked a lot of questions, like how strong and how skilled a mage you were. I told them the truth, of course, that you’re young but highly skilled and learning more every day. That, and you’re damn hard to kill. They sounded like they had a job for you,” Hulda said.

Rowan frowned. Normally, individuals approached her with jobs, not groups. “What’d they look like? Got any idea what kind of job they want done?”

“That’s the thing. They were a rough looking bunch. You wouldn’t think they were looking to hire someone from looking at them.”

Rowan wrinkled her nose. “Well, if they are, then it’s probably something really dangerous or awful.”

Hulda laughed and asked, “Think you’ll turn them down when they ask? Don’t think I've ever heard of you turning down a job, even that bounty for killing a giant.”

“There’s a first for everything. Guess it depends on what it is and how much they’re paying. It's not like I'm strapped for cash or anything, and Danica would be furious if I took a dangerous job so soon. She’d probably hunt me down and skin me herself,” Rowan said.

Laughing, Hulda said, “She would, too! Don't worry, I doubt they’ll hire you soon, if they do at all. They didn’t even rent any rooms tonight, just came in for drinks and left. They said they would be back in a few days, though.”

Rowan shrugged and pushed off the bar. “Eh, who cares. I'm heading up to bed. Don't let anyone keep you up too late.”

“Like I'd let them,” Hulda scoffed. “You get some rest, you hear? You’ve gotten too little these past few weeks.”

Rowan perked up at the friendly concern and smiled. “I will, Hulda.” She made her way to the back room, only pausing to say over her shoulder, “And don’t worry about those guys. Whether they come back or not’s not our problem. Have a good night!”

“You, too, Corvid.”

For a short while, Rowan believed she might just find a balance, but as always, her reprieve began to slip through her fingers just as she got used to it.

She kept it under wraps as much as she could. After all, Danica watched her like a hawke when she helped out at the temple, and even Farengar eyed her a bit closer than normal. Rowan didn’t doubt they would intervene if they thought she was getting worse for even a second.

Unfortunately, Rowan’s patience steadily waned over the course of several days. Rowan needed to
do something, go anywhere, as long as she wasn’t sedentary any longer. She found herself tracing the roads on her map or staring at the skyline more often than not.

Four days. She’d had four days of peace before the itch crept back along her spine.

The feeling wasn’t overpowering like it had been before she’d “meditated”, but it was noticeable. She could ignore it for now, but ignoring those feelings rarely ended well for her. She couldn’t put it off forever. She’d have to get moving again soon, though she didn’t know where she’d go or what she’d do. She’d completed jobs for most of Whiterun by now, and Jarl Balgruff hadn’t sent out any new bounties but . . .

There was so much out there beyond Whiterun. So many quests, so many people, just so much. She hadn’t exactly kept her promise of laying low until the two years was up, but traveling as far away from Whiterun as her blood urged her to? What would happen to her? How far would the urge take her? Would it be content in Skyrim? Or would exploring Solstheim satisfy it? Could she head to the heart of Morrowind, to Vvardenfell to see the destruction caused by the Red Mountain? Or would it take her in the other direction, to see how Cyrodiil had changed or hadn’t? What about the lands she had never thought of before? Would that satisfy it, or would nothing quell the urge?

Rowan’s teeth chattered as fear’s cold hand gripped her lungs and squeezed. A drop of sweat lazily trailed down her back.

No, she couldn’t ignore the urge. But maybe she could delay it? Just until she had some solid plans, at least.

Kodlak had offered her a safe haven – in the middle of a den of wolves, but a haven all the same. Was she ballsy enough to take him up on it? She could always sneak out again and find another clearing but that didn’t hold the appeal of staying nestled inside Whiterun, right next door to Danica and Farengar.

Maybe . . . she thought, just maybe.

Rowan approached Jorrvaskr with grim determination. She’d consulted both Danica and Farengar this time, and though neither had any experience with her type of situation, their assurances of assistance should the worst come to pass comforted her.

She didn’t knock on Jorrvaskr’s doors despite feeling that she should. That discomfited her more than the idea of what she was about to do, surprisingly enough. Only two weeks or so ago she was flitting in and out of the wolves’ den a few times a day, and now she thought she had to knock.

Fuck it, she thought and shoved open the doors. She strolled inside like she belonged there, barely pausing to greet the Companions settled in the main hall.

“Kodlak, can I talk to you?” she asked, b-lining for where the elder warrior sat.

“Of course, lass. Is this about my offer?” he asked knowingly

Farkas perked up immediately, and Aela’s eyes never left Rowan. The other conversations tapered off as the Companions gave her and Kodlak their full attention.

“Yes,” she said. “Both to that question and the offer.”
His eyebrows furrowed as he frowned. “So soon?” When Rowan didn’t immediately answer, he gestured to the open chair between him and Skjor. “Sit, tell us what’s happened.”

She didn’t want to, but the Companions (well, almost all of them) had voted in favor of opening Jorrvaskr to her. They should know the basics of what they were getting into or might witness. She sat down and accepted the mug of mead Aela slid down to her. She caught it so the alcohol didn’t slosh out over her hands and onto the table.

Rowan swirled the mead and tried to think of how to explain everything but then decided to just wing it. “The itch is back.”

No one spoke, but their lack of understanding was obvious. The wolves seemed to have more of an idea what she was talking about, but Rowan wasn’t going to call them out on it.

Kodlak inclined his head to encourage her to go on.

“The itch is this urge to move. To go somewhere, anywhere, and do something. I have to travel and fight and learn. When I travel, even just a short distance, it goes away, but I can’t stay in one place for too long or it comes back. The longer I ignore it, the stronger it gets. I need to be on the move. Ignoring it makes it build up and makes me lash out and do stupid stuff . . . You can probably imagine the extent of recklessness I can get up to when not in the right state of mind.”

The last comment got a mixed bag of reactions; a few chuckles, a lot of grumbling, a concerned look or two, and even a glare.

Kodlak hummed thoughtfully. “Yes, I understand your urgency now. How soon are you planning on attempting another meditation?”

Inhaling deeply, Rowan said, “As soon as possible, for a few reasons. One, I want to know if I have more control over it when I’m not halfway dead. Two, after what happened last time, I don’t think it’s a good idea to wait longer. The buildup is excruciating, and the longer I wait, the more, um, for lack of a better word, unhinged I’ll become. And three, I need to know if meditating actually gives me more control or if it’s just the most obvious way of releasing the built-up tension.”

“Seems like you’ve thought it through this time,” Kodlak said, not unkindly.

“I’ve already discussed it with both Danica and Farengar. Danica doesn’t like it but given the other option, she believes it’s the best one.” Rowan frowned and tapped her mug with the tip of her short nail. “I’m still not sure about meditating here. Last time my magicka exploded and created a crater large enough to fit nearly three bears. I could do some serious damage if this goes wrong.”

“Yes, you could. However, we have already voted in favor of you meditating here. There’s a large space beneath Jorrvaskr that hasn’t seen much use since even before I was born. You’re welcome to it.”

Now that was something she’d never heard of. “What kind of space?”

“We believe it used to be a place of worship, but the details have been lost. Come, I’ll show you.” Kodlak stood. His knees popped as they took his weight, but he didn’t falter at the sound.

Rowan abandoned her untouched mead and followed him. Chairs creaked and squealed across the stone floor behind her, and Rowan glanced over her shoulder to see the others following them. The whelps whispered to each other, most likely they had their own questions about the room. The Circle members were silent.
Kodlak led the group down the stairs but stopped in front of a large bookcase that nearly covered that entire section of wall.

Without pausing, Skjor and Farkas walked forward and, each taking one side of the case, lifted and moved it down the hall, revealing an ancient stone door.

Someone gasped – most likely Ria – but Rowan paid them no attention. She focused on the intricately carved door. Something in the back of her mind told her she could read them, but she found herself strangely disappointed when the carvings remained meaningless to her.

“What do the markings mean?” she asked as Kodlak stepped forward.

“No one knows. Companions of the past have attempted to decipher them or hire scholars to do so, but no one has been successful. We believe that Jeek of the River held their secrets and that they died with him, as well as the Oath of the Companions,” he said. Then, he slid his fingers into the space between the door and the wall. Seconds later, a soft click was heard, and the door shifted out of the way.

Warm air carried the scent of dust, mineral rich earth, and old incense into the hall. Rowan found herself inhaling deeply and reveling in how her heartbeat began to slow. The itch paused along her spine, gave a shudder, and then dulled until it only buzzed to urge her forward.

Vilkas approached with several unlit torches in hand. Farkas moved to light them with a flint, but Rowan simply reached out, grasped one of the torch heads, and cast Flames. Her stare never left the dark entrance, even when Vilkas reprimanded her for still holding her hand to the lit torch.

She pulled her hand away, unharmed by her own magic for once, and cast Magelight. She forced herself to stay still and look at Kodlak. “Harbingers first.”

Kodlak glanced at the mage light and took a torch from Skjor. He led the way down the stairs, keeping one hand on the intricately carved walls to steady himself. Rowan followed closely behind with Skjor at her back and the other Companions following. Everyone kept hold of their own torches; there were no holders on the walls to leave them in. Without asking, Rowan left mage lights along the walls, keeping them attached to her magicka by a thread so they wouldn’t go out.

Rowan trailed her fingers along the wall. Magic – so old she doubted even the hagravens would recognize it – welled to the surface to inspect her. Not dead or fading, merely dormant, she realized through the peaceful haze.

“There’s magic here,” she said. She wanted to open herself to it but felt like she shouldn’t in the Companions’ presence.

“What?!” Njada squawked. “You couldn’t have mentioned that, Athis?!”

“Why’re you bitching at me?! Just because I’m an elf doesn’t mean I’m a mage! I know a few spells, but I’ve never studied it,” he shot back.

There was a smack of a hand hitting flesh, an indignant yell, and then scuffling.

“Hey!” Ria shouted. “If you two are going to fight, then at least let me pass so I don’t get caught up in it!”

“Cease your squabbling,” Skjor ordered, leaving no room for argument.

The argument stopped.
“We’ve suspected magic to be a part of the shrine for a long time, but no one has been able to confirm it.” Skjor said. “What do you make of it?”

*Oh, so he’s talking to me,* Rowan thought. “It’s ancient. I’ve talked to the Gildergreen – the original, not the one here – and the magic here is even older than that.”

“How old do you think it is?” Farkas asked.

“Older than the First Age. Way older.”

“How can you be sure?”

Rowan traced a swirled carving. “I don’t know how I know. I just know. The magic feels foreign yet familiar, raw and completely untamed and unfiltered, unlike the magic of today or even the older magic I’ve read about. Granted, I haven’t studied what magic the first races used, but . . . a part of me recognizes that this isn’t something mortals would’ve been able to use.”

“Are you suggesting that this place wasn’t built by mortals?” Vilkas asked. His voice sounded strangely weak and untethered.

Pressing her whole hand to the cool wall, Rowan invited the magic to inspect her. It approached unhurriedly, not out of caution, but because it knew she wasn’t a threat; she was too young and experienced to pose a threat to something that had existed as long as it had. It curled along her offered magicka, inspected her, and pulled away with its version of a satisfied hum and a welcoming nod.

“Corvid?” Farkas asked.

A hand gripped her shoulder. She looked back to see Farkas instead of Skjor. “Hm?”

“Are you all right?” Farkas asked. His eyes lingered on where she continued to touch the wall.

“Yeah, fine. The magic’s polite, that’s all.”

“It’s polite?” Njada scowled. “What does that mean? Magic’s not sentient. It can’t be polite.”

Rowan raised an eyebrow at her. “And that’s why you’re a warrior and not a mage.” She looked at Farkas. “You remember what I told you about magic?”

Shrugging, Farkas said, “Sorta. You said a lot of stuff about the difference between sentience and sapience and that magic was sentient but not sapient.”

“Not sapient on a level that mortals understand,” she gently corrected. “Magic can think and decide for itself and is therefore sapient. Mortals just can’t perceive its thought processes or its lines of thought. To think of magic as just a thing or a tool is dangerous and is most often the cause of death for mages.” She stopped when she finally noticed the awkward shuffling around her. “But you guys don’t need to worry about that since you’re not mages.” She took a step down, paused, and added, “Oh, and, yes, I am definitely saying this place was built by something either not entirely mortal or not mortal at all.”

No one moved until Kodlak slowly turned back around and continued down the steps. Rowan thought that maybe she should’ve kept her mouth shut but shrugged it off. Most of the Companions were werewolves; they could get over a little discomfort.

The stairs went deeper into the ground than Rowan initially thought; there didn’t seem to be an end
to them. However, the air retained a pleasant, unnatural warmth that Rowan felt had nothing to do with any sort of special enchantment.

“Do many of you come down here?” Rowan asked as the stairs curved.

“No,” Skjor answered. “The shrine has always felt . . . off. None of us feel welcome here, though nothing malicious has ever occurred. And using it for another purpose seemed wrong.”

“And there’s always the feeling of being watched,” Aela added.

Rowan hummed and purposefully ignored Aela’s comment. While she doubted the magic was doing the watching, she wasn’t about to tell them that. “And yet you all voted to let me use it. Why?”

“Because, lass, it feels like the right thing to do,” Kodlak said. He stopped. “We are here.”

Rowan pushed her mage light forward. Sure enough, a large, ornate doorway stood before them with a grand ogee arch and beyond it – absolute darkness. Even Rowan’s mage light couldn’t shine past the doorway.

“Well, mages first,” Athis said.

A warm hand rudely pushed her forward. Rowan glared over her shoulder at Athis, who only grinned and waved her forward.

Njada laughed. “Yeah, make sure it’s safe for us.”

Rolling her eyes, Rowan said, “What? The big bad warriors are scared of a dark room? What has this world come to.” She turned back to Kodlak. “I’m fine with going first, if it’s all right with you.”

With a slight nod, Kodlak motioned for her to go forward. Both he and his wolf watched her with a strange intensity as she cautiously approached the doorway.

The magic’s silence continued. Rowan could feel it watching her, but it gave no emotional input other than distant interest. She let it become white noise in the back of her brain and continued her slow but steady steps to the doorway.

When she was close enough, she reached out and traced her fingers along the deep carvings. The strange sense of déjà vu from earlier returned. She bit her bottom lip as she stroked one of the symbols with her thumb.

Why does this feel so familiar? She thought. I didn’t even know this place existed until now, and now I feel like I should know it? It has to be a magic thing, but what does it mean?

She could feel the Companions watching her but paid them no mind. They did that a lot – watching her. Was she really so strange to them? To everybody? She knew she was strange, but she barely noticed the weirdness anymore. Some things didn’t even register as “weird”, like magic in the walls of a god-made temple or trees digging through her brain.

That probably said something about her, though she wasn’t sure she wanted to know what.

Deciding she’d had enough of the suspension, Rowan crossed the threshold and entered the room in only three sure steps.

Immediately, lights rapidly lit up the room one after another. Rowan couldn’t stop herself from following the clockwise pattern around the entire circumference of the room, even as she was nearly
blinded.

She closed her stinging eyes and hissed through her teeth. *Goddamn, fucking temple!* She waited for her eyes to adjust before slowly opening them. *Oh . . .

Large and circular, the shrine was covered with intricate carvings and shimmering mosaics. Oddly clean tapestries hung in low, graceful arcs from the ceiling, so low, in fact, that Rowan could see their brush and layered fringes. Rowan's eyes traced along the edges of the room, instinctively avoiding the shrine’s centerpiece as anticipation and fear churned in her belly. Instead, her eyes were first drawn to the floor. The marble began as white at the shrine’s entrance but pinkened the closer to the center it was.

Rowan couldn’t stop herself from stepping forward. Her eyes stayed locked on the gradually darkening marble.

Rowan’s heart thudded in her chest. Her blood swooshed in her ears. Her lungs couldn’t get enough air. Foreign eyes prickled along her back. The buzz of the shrine’s magic had fallen to the wayside. Something else was here, and it wanted her to *look*.

Her feet stopped on their own accord. Phantom hands reached from behind her, firmly took hold of her jaw, and forced her gaze away from the floor.

A macabre statue sat as the shrine’s centerpiece. It depicted a large, golden humanoid figure with both male and female characteristics. The figure sat lotus style on a circular dais and wore only an embroidered loincloth. Ram horns, made of a darker, non-golden substance and decorated with light jewelry curled from the figure’s head, accentuating their pierced, pointed ears. A full beard, braided and similarly decorated, fell to their chest where, where—

The ribcage messily splintered and cracked open, gruesomely shoving the figure’s flesh out of the way to display a large, crystalline heart within. A thick, dark red fluid flowed unhurriedly from the heart to pool on the dais. The fluid had long since overflowed from the dais and leaked from underneath the figure to stain the dais a similar red and reached further still to stain the marble red and then pink.

And yet, the figure’s face disturbed Rowan the most; it remained pleasant – happy, even. Its lightly curled mouth and gentle eyes seemed to both welcome and mock her. Even standing before Akatosh had not made her feel so small or so lacking, like she’d disappointed her parents in some vague way again when she hadn’t known there were rules in the first place.

Rowan swallowed the surge of bile back down her throat, retching around her own built up saliva. A deep, mournful pain rose in her chest, and tears of grief overflowed from her eyes. She needed to get away yet she needed to be closer. She couldn’t stand even a glimpse of the statue yet she wanted to kneel at its feet. She twitched and jerked in the phantom’s grip, not truly understanding if she was trying to get away from it or the mess of grief, horror, repulsion, disgust, and yearning entangling her.

Abruptly, the phantom released her. The pressure forcing Rowan to stand evaporated, and her knees gave out. She collapsed to the floor, barely catching herself on her forearms so her head didn’t crack against the stone. Though, she doubted she would have cared if it had. The Companions could have decided to take her head off, and she wouldn’t have even dodged.

Dazed and disoriented from the abrupt lack of stimuli, Rowan stayed on the ground. The taste of bile soured her mouth; the grief pains lingered in her chest; and the tear tracks had turned sticky on her face.
It was a *test*, she realized dumbly. What kind of test, she didn’t know; but it was definitely a test, and she had somehow passed.

She *had* passed, right? No, she definitely had. This shrine wouldn’t be apathetic if she had failed.

Rowan looked back at the statue. A sort of melancholy longing filled her, but so did something else . . . something pleasant, warm, fond, and . . . familiar. Frowning, she sat up, ignoring the bruises already forming on her arms, and stared intently at the statue. Who was it depicting? It didn’t resemble any Daedra or Aedra she was familiar with, but then again, she’d never done a lot of research on most of the Elder Scrolls’ deities. Maybe it was one who wasn’t worshipped anymore? Or the first form of a god?

“Rowan, are you all right?”

She tilted her head to show she’d heard Farkas’ question but didn’t look over her shoulder. “Yes, I’m all right.” Physically, at least. Her mind whirled with questions, but no one there could answer them.

After a short period of silence, Kodlak asked, “Will this place suit your needs, child?” He hadn’t entered the shrine. None of the Companions had.

Rowan ignored the hesitance in his voice. “Yes,” she said, her eyes not leaving the statue’s pleased stare, “yes, this will do nicely.”

*Chapter End Notes*

find me on tumblr as thefandomhoarder!
hey, i got a quick question for y'all: do y'all think i put too much magic worldbuilding in this fic? i mean, i know i have to prioritize a lot of the magic stuff in here since 1) i'm literally making everything up myself, and 2) it's really important to the character. but do i put too much effort into the magic stuff and too little into moving the actual plot along? a lot of the story so far has been about establishing my own magic system to the original game and explaining a lot of that and laying the groundwork for how it applies to rowan. has it been too much? is it annoying y'all? do i need to hurry my ass along and stop waxing poetic about my own magic system?

i hope it's not annoying, because i just want to explain it correctly

“What do you need all of this stuff for anyway? You didn’t have it in the clearing,” Aela said. She sat a case of incense down by a wall and turned to Rowan, frowning and with her hands on her hips.

“Yeah, well, I'm not in a clearing this time, am I?” Rowan said, lighting the last of the candles. “It feels disrespectful not to give some sort of offering when I'm going to be using the shrine.”

“Hm, I suppose. Though I am surprised. You never seemed very religious to me.”

“I’m not, I'd just prefer to be cautious.” Especially since whatever lives here doesn’t care about boundaries.

Aela shrugged and dusted off her hands. “Whatever you say.”

“And what about you? Are you religious?” Oh, why the fuck did you ask that?

Aela didn’t answer for a few moments, allowing the silence to stretch on. She startled Rowan when she quietly answered, “Mine is more of a personal god.”

“That’s cool,” Rowan recovered as smoothly as she could. She busied herself with arranging a few types of incense on the altar. “You don’t have to share if you don’t want to.”

Aela silently observed Rowan until she grew tired of the silence. “When will you begin your meditation? The others are getting nervous.”

Ignoring her friend’s low, almost growling tone, Rowan said, “Once all the preparations have been made and everyone who wants to be here gets here.”

“The Circle shall be present inside the shrine in case we need to intervene. The whelps will observe from the hallway. Ria is our fastest sprinter. If something goes wrong, she’ll be the one to get Danica,” Aela said.

“Good. I've already told Danica about today’s session and helped her make her own preparations. There's a bed in the temple waiting for me if I get hurt,” Rowan said. She didn’t mention how she’d already arranged the space so she’d be as comfortable as possible during her upcoming recovery.
“When will you be done here?” Aela eyed the statue warily. All of the Companions felt uneasy in the temple, though the wolves were the most put off by the statue. Farkas hadn’t been able to explain the feeling other than “Its eyes are . . . off”.

Funny. Rowan felt the same way about the statue’s chest. But she understood what he meant. The entire shrine was off-kilter, and while Rowan had her theories, she couldn’t be sure of anything regarding the shrine. Outside of a few texts Kodlak had dug out of his room, all of which had been written by scholars hired by the Companions, no texts mentioned the shrine anywhere. Not even Whiterun’s archives held any information. The entire shrine was a large blank spot.

*Enough about that. Time to focus on here and now. Meditating and not dying.* Rowan chanted to herself. She lit the small bundles of incense around the shallow offering bowl of blood and began the vague, silent prayer Danica had taught her. It wasn’t a prayer to any one deity, but one that was meant to ask an unknown god to accept her offering and ask for mercy – or at least indifference – while Rowan used their shrine.

When she finished the prayer, Rowan waited for a sign or some sort. She didn’t know what she wanted to happen, but she had expected something, even if it was a violent rejection from the shrine. But nothing happened. The shrine stayed as silent and watchful as it always had been.

Shrugging, Rowan stood and brushed imaginary dust off her soft leather trousers. If the shrine didn’t care about her presence, then she wasn’t going to complain.

She rearranged blankets covering the straw mattress Danica had convinced her to drag down to the shrine. ‘In case you have seizures,’ Danica had said. ‘Even you would suffer from a concussion’. Which was, you know, fair.

“Are you ready for me to get the others?” Aela asked.

“Yes.”

Aela left and returned moments later with the other Companions. Kodlak led their group into the shrine; the whelps obediently stopped at the doorway, peering in with wary curiosity.

“You are ready to begin?” Kodlak asked. He settled heavily against a wall, his movements lacking the usual fluidity the other werewolves possessed.

Rowan nodded. “I can start as soon as everybody’s where they want to be.”

The Companions shared a glance, and the healthy wolves spread out within the shrine’s first half circle. They each hovered cautiously at the edge of the previously discussed blast radius.

“All right,” Rowan said. Her heart picked up its pace, and her chest clenched. She licked her lips. “Everyone ready?” When the Companions nodded, she settled into lotus style on the mattress. “Let’s get started.”

Nerves grew wings in her belly even as she tried to calm her breathing. They flew upwards and clogged her airway, forcing her to swallow reflexively. A cold sweat broke out along her body even in the shrine’s warm air. Her fingers itched and buzzed; she wanted to peel back the flesh and scrape her bones raw.

Instead, she took another breath and guardedly reached for her magicka. It inclined its head towards her slowly, conscious of the strain surrounding the two of them. She and it observed each other. Neither dared to move forward or backward; while Rowan’s memories of the pathways frying her brain kept her in place, her magicka seemed to be weighing her worthiness.
Rowan didn’t like that. But she didn’t press forward. If she was going to survive her own magicka, she’d have to learn to tolerate things she didn’t like.

One by one, she crushed the fluttering nerves in her belly until she felt some measure of calm and could sit completely still. Even if this session was as disastrous as the last, she would survive it.

The tension in the room gradually released. Rowan hadn’t even noticed the wolves reacting to her mild panic, but she probably should have suspected they would notice how on edge she was.

*Just stay calm. It's just like working with the mare,* she thought, forcing herself to stay calm. *If it knows you're afraid, it'll react. Just let it happen naturally.* Whatever ‘naturally’ meant in this case.

This time, her magicka reached for her; it crept towards her like a spider sneaking up on prey. Rowan had no fear of spiders, but the organic, almost living way the magicka moved made her skin prickle and her hair stand on end.

The magicka sensed her discomfort and paused. While it had no eyes or physical senses, Rowan knew she was being watched. Again, she forced herself to calm and shoved her apprehension to the back of her mind.

The magicka crept closer and closer and closer.

She ignored it. If her focus shifted from her breathing, she would panic.

The magicka hovered in front of her, so close that its charge skittered across her skin and burned the delicate hairs on her face.

She swallowed and began praying – to who or for what, she didn’t exactly know. All she knew was that her mind was racing as fast as her heart and the blood pounding in her ears, and all her mind could concentrate on was how her chest felt it was going to split open because something inside needed to get out even if it had to claw its way through her—

The magicka touched her

And Rowan’s world exploded.

Rowan came back to the mortal plane slowly. The fog surrounding her dazed brain slid away like thick mildew, clinging to her consciousness as best as it could until finally dripping off.

As she stared blankly up at the ceiling, Rowan processed a few things. One, she was on her back. Two, something had knocked her over. Three, that something had most likely been her own magic. Four, her ears were ringing. Five, there was noise beyond the ringing. Six, there was something wet on her face. Seven, the wet stuff was most likely blood.

“Rowan! Rowan, can you hear us? Are you all right?” Farkas asked rapidly, his face pinched with worry. He hovered over Rowan’s splayed form, though was careful not to jostle her.

Eight, the other noise was the Companions.

“Of course, she’s not all right, you fool! You saw what just happened!” Aela barked. She stood off to the side, holding herself tensely as her eyes darted over Rowan.

“Farkas, stop leaning over her. She doesn’t need to be crowded,” Skjor said. “Ria’s gone to get
Danica. Just keep Corvid conscious.”

Frowning, Farkas did as he was told, though he kept a firm grip Rowan’s shoulders.

Rowan didn’t pay the panicking wolves much mind. She was too busy slowly blinking the spots out of her eyes and steadying her breathing. After her heartbeat finally slowed to a heavy but steady beat, she grunted and tested the movement in her toes and fingers.

The wolves’ attention immediately snapped to her, but no one protested as she went through the motions of making sure all her body parts still worked. When she was satisfied that everything was in order, she motioned for Farkas to help her sit up. He did so eagerly, the relief on his face nearly painful.

Rowan sloppily patted his face even as he pulled a cloth from nowhere to wipe her nose – Oh, so it is blood, what a surprise. “I’m fine, buddy. Don’t—” She cut herself off with a frown. Those were the words she was saying, but something was wrong. Her mouth formed the wrong shapes, and the sounds that came out were . . . not what she intended.

She looked up at Farkas to ask if she was hearing things, but the confusion on his face answered her question for him.

“Did . . . did she say what I think she said?” Athis asked. He and Njada stood at the edge of the group, having finally entered the shrine at some point.

“What did she say? I don’t recognize the language,” Aela said.

“It sounded like . . .” Athis frowned and stepped closer. “Corvid, can you repeat what you just said?”

Nodding, Rowan slowly repeated the words. She frowned when something nagged at her in the back of her head. She knew what she was doing but couldn’t actually remember what it was, like muscle memory she couldn’t remember learning.

Athis choked. Rowan watched irritably as he collapsed in on himself and proceeded to laugh himself sick.

Kodlak gave Athis a patient but weary look. “Athis, explain yourself.”

With the attention of his Harbinger on him, Athis calmed down, though he continued to stifle his snickers as he spoke. “Apologies.” He looked at Rowan. “You’re speaking Dunmeri. Perfect Dunmeri, in fact.”

Kodlak frowned and also looked at Rowan. “Did you speak Dunmeri before? You made no mention of it,” he said.

Rowan shook her head. “A few words, like n’wah, s’wit, fetcher, tel, and the respectful titles.”

Athis grinned, saying, “She says she only knew a few words.”

Kodlak approached and kneeled by Rowan’s side. “Do you remember what happened? All we saw was you calming yourself and seeming to meditate properly and then you began seizing and screaming minutes later.”

Rowan took a moment to collect herself as she thought. What had happened? While this session had been similar to the previous one, this one had been less . . . less something. Less frenzied? Less overwhelming? Less intense? None of the words accurately described the feeling that something had
been toned down this session.

Huffing and crossing her arms over her chest, Rowan continued to wrack her brain. What was different? She remembered the Pathways reaching for her like the first session. The Pathways had fought over her, trying to be the first to cram their knowledge into her brain. She couldn’t handle it and, in her panic, had reached out and... Oh. Now she understood what had happened, or at least part of what happened.

“I chose one of the Pathways and, apparently, it held knowledge of Dunmeri,” she finally said.

The Companions looked to Athis, who also looked confused.

“Pathways? What in Oblivion are Pathways?” he blurted out just as Ria stumbled down the steps with Danica on her heels.

After giving Rowan a relatively clean bill of health – outside of now only speaking Dunmeri – Danica ordered everyone upstairs into the main hall. She never turned her back to the statue, even as she exited the shrine.

Rowan’s knees still felt shaky, so Farkas helped her up the stairs. Vilkas hovered awkwardly behind them, a pinched frown on his face. Rowan could feel his intense stare bore into her back, causing her skin to prickle. She shoved that instinct to the back of her mind with the other discomforts she was steadfastly ignoring. While Vilkas may have been an off-balance predator, he wouldn’t allow his wolf to harm her unless she provoked him, and she refused to give him the satisfaction of making her uncomfortable.

Back in the main hall, Rowan immediately sat down at the table to give her wobbling legs a rest. Farkas got her a mug of water but didn’t sit down. Instead, he and the other Companions stayed standing, along with Danica.

“All right,” Danica said. “Someone tell me what happened.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Vilkas spat from where he hovered by Farkas’ shoulder behind Rowan. “It went wrong, that’s what happened! Damned mage nearly killed herself again.”

Farkas whipped around to snarl at his brother. Rowan could feel their wolves, already riled up from her meditation, raise their hackles. They would start fighting in the damn mead hall.

Glaring at the twins over her shoulder, Rowan snapped, “If you two start fucking fighting, I’ll blast your asses with ice and kick you out my damn self!”

Farkas and Vilkas immediately turned to her, their faces still angry but also confused.

Athis laughed.

Danica frowned. “All right. That’s new. What did she say?”

“She said that she’d blast them with ice and kick them out if they started fighting,” Athis said with a smirk.

Njada let out her own laugh. “Oh, please keep fighting. I want to see her kick both your asses.”

“That’s enough – all of you,” Kodlak interrupted. “Vilkas, Farkas, I know you’re both concerned for
Corvid, but keep your tempers in check. If you cannot, then excuse yourselves.”

Farkas huffed but nodded. Strangely, Vilkas froze in place, becoming tenser as Rowan gazed curiously at him.

Concerned? She thought, puzzled. Farkas, of course he would be worried. He was her friend. But Vilkas? He’d disliked her from the moment he’d caught sight of her. Rowan watched with interest as Vilkas’ purposefully turned away from her and crossed his arms, adopting as nonchalant a stance as possible. Oh well, I can worry about that later. She turned back to face Danica.

“This session went better than the previous one,” she reported to the healer. “While the amount of information held within the Pathways was still as overwhelming as the first time, I was able to see individual Pathways and choose one. That specific Pathway held knowledge of Dunmeri, though I didn’t realize it at the time. At the time, the Pathways were overwhelming me, and I panicked. I picked a random Pathway to follow, hoping that if I chose a path, then the others would leave me alone. However, I underestimated how powerful the individual Pathways are, and—”

“Hold on a minute! I’m supposed to be translating and you lost me after you started talking about ‘Pathways,’” Athis said. With a grumble, he grabbed a few rolls of parchment and charcoal stick, stalked over to the table, and handed them to Rowan. “Here. Write all of that down.”

Rolling her eyes, Rowan took the parchment and began writing. She paused only a few words in after realizing the characters were wrong. She tapped Athis’ arm and motioned to the parchment.

Athis tilted his head. “Huh. Looks like you can write Dunmeri, too. Your writing’s shit, though.”

Rowan smacked his side and went back to writing, choosing to ignore his snorting laugh. When she finished, she handed the parchment to Athis.

He took the parchment and squinted at it. He repeated it word for word, his and the other Companions’ confusion growing with each word. “—However, I underestimated how powerful the individual Pathways are, and the sheer amount of knowledge completely overwhelmed me. What you all witnessed – the seizures, screaming, and blood – were caused by the Pathway shoving too much information into my brain in the span of a few seconds. I suspect that my only being able to speak and write Dunmeri are also side effects.”

“I only understand half of that,” Njada said, crossing her arms over her chest and scowled.

“I believe we should start with what ‘Pathways’ are,” Skjor said patiently.

“While I’m no expert,” Danica said, “the Pathways are how magicka enters Mundus from Aetherius. Not much is known about them since most mages can’t even access them, let alone study them.” She looked at Rowan. “From what you’re saying, your meditations are linking you directly into the Pathways? No wonder you’re always overwhelmed!”

Frowning, Rowan shook her head. “Not exactly. Meditation itself doesn’t seem to immediately connect me to the Pathways. It’s more like meditation pulls away a wall that separates me and the Pathways.” She paused to allow Athis time to translate before continuing, “Meditation opens me up to the Pathways and allows me to see and interact with them, but I’m not connected to them unless they reach for me or I reach for them.”

“Fascinating,” Danica murmured. She cupped her jaw in her hand. “And you said that the Pathway you chose contained knowledge of Dunmeri, do you think that’s true for all the Pathways? That each Pathway contains specific knowledge?”
Rowan was nodding before Danica finished speaking. “It’s the beginnings of a theory. It needs to be tested more, of course, but I can do that each time I meditate. Of course, it’d be easier to research if the Pathways wouldn’t completely overwhelm me every time I meditated, but I’ll deal with that—”

Ria waved her arms in the air. “Wait, wait, wait. Shouldn’t you both be more concerned about the fact that Corvid currently can’t speak or write Tradespeak? I mean, that seems like what you should be focusing on right now.”

Danica and Rowan shared a look. “There isn’t much we can do about it,” Danica said slowly.

“Brains are delicate organs,” Rowan piped up. She lightly hit Athis when he didn’t immediately begin translating. “This isn’t a physical injury, so healing magic’s useless. The Pathway’s magic seems to have short—” Shit, wait, short-circuited isn’t a term here, fuck. “It’s . . . written over the part of my brain that contains language and speech. Hopefully, it’ll only last until my brain fully processes the information.”

“And if it doesn’t? What if this is permanent?” Farkas quietly asked.

Rowan had been firmly not thinking about that possibility. Her stomach twisted, and anxiety prickled along her back.

Farkas seemed to immediately realize his mistake. “Sorry,” he quietly murmured and firmly squeezed her shoulder.

She gave him a bland smile over her shoulder and patted his warm hand. “No problem, big guy.”

Vilkas shifted uncomfortably. Rowan could see him glance at her hand on Farkas’, but he didn’t comment like she thought he would. Instead, he turned away, his stiff posture curving further away from them.

Feeling oddly awkward, Rowan placed her hand back in her lap and turned back to Danica.

She forced herself to take a calming breath. “All we can do is wait. Danica or I aren’t specialized in magicka regarding the brain, and neither is Farengar for that matter. We would all just end up doing more damage than good. It’s best to wait.”

“What about the College of Winterhold?” Aela asked. “Surely they could be of some use.”

Something akin to fear lurched in Rowan’s gut. She suppressed the feeling before the wolves could sniff it out or she could dwell on it. “Maybe. But I’d rather wait and see what happens first. Besides, at this rate, I’d have to take Athis with me to translate. And a trip that far would need to be planned.”

Athis grimaced. “Gods, I hope this clears up soon. I don’t want to go to the damned College.” The Circle members glared at him, and he wilted. “I mean, I’ll still go but. . .”

Rowan patted his arm with false sympathy. “Don’t worry, you’ll get plenty of translator practice while you follow me around now.”

“What?!” he squawked. “I have jobs to go on! I can’t be your personal translator!”

When Kodlak looked like he was going to speak up, Rowan gave him a placating look and wave of her hand. Giving Athis a pinched expression, Rowan said, “It’s not like I won’t pay you. I know I’ll be cutting into your actual job, but it’s either you, Irileth, or Jenassa. Irileth’s the Jarl’s housecarl and I’m not on as good of terms with Jenassa as I am with you. So, complain all you want, but
you’re my first choice.”

Crossing his arms and grumbling, Athis gave a short nod. “Fine, but the pay better be good.”

“What rate sounds fair?”

“Two silvers a week.”

Two silvers? She could more than handle that. “I’ll make it three since you have to follow me around constantly.”

“Deal.”

Danica sighed. “You two are ridiculous. Is everything sorted? Athis will translate for Corvid while she recovers?”

“Yes,” Athis said as Rowan nodded.

“Good. Now, Corvid, any other side effects I should immediately be aware of? I noticed you seemed weak and you had some blood dripping from your nose.” Danica approached Rowan, pooled her magicka in her hands, and began examining Rowan.

Finally allowing herself to feel the aches and pains, Rowan described them methodically, “I feel overheated and generally weak, like I have the flu. There’s an itch in my lungs, but I can’t seem to cough. I’ve got a headache, of course, like I got knocked in the head a few times. My fingertips feel raw, and if I try to touch my magicka, it’s like touching a raw, open wound. My magicka well is completely oversensitive.” I should probably work on not using so many ‘likes’ when I describe the side-effects.

After Athis finished translating, Danica sighed and pulled her hands away, dispelling her magicka. “Most of that appears to be standard for you at this point. Since there doesn’t appear to be any serious physical side-effects, all I can tell you is to take it easy, not use your magicka, and to come to me if anything changes. If you feel any serious fatigue, take a third of a stamina potion and see how it works.”

“Will do,” Rowan said, standing. “Come on, Athis, we need to go explain to Hulda what happened so she won’t freak out when she sees you following me everywhere.”

He huffed. “Fine. But make it quick. I wanted to get in some training before the day ended.”

Rolling her eyes and gathering her things, Rowan said, “It’ll take as long as it needs to. She’ll have lots of questions, and Ysolda will, too, once she hears about what happened.” She gave him a beaming, mocking grin over her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Athis, the two of us will be having lots of fun together. I can’t wait to drag you around while I shop!” Before he could reply, she waved goodbye to the others and disappeared out the door, poking her head back in only to hurry the grumbling Athis.

Rowan could honestly say she was a bit disappointed with how easily the citizens of Whiterun accepted that she (hopefully briefly) couldn’t speak Tradespeak. Sure, there were questions, raised eyebrows, and even some laughs (from Farengar, especially. Though even Jarl Balgruuf chuckled at her predicament), but for the most part, people just . . . didn’t react. Rowan explained, Athis translated, and then they accepted it.
“That’s so weird,” Rowan said for the hundredth time. She squinted at Anoriath, who was chatting with Carlotta as they both set up their stalls for the day.

Athis grunted and rolled his eyes. He took a sip from the mug of coffee Rowan had brewed for them both before handing it to her. He’d been mostly ignoring her as she puzzled over the non-reaction to her situation. “You’re weird. Everyone knows it. You nearly kill yourself on a weekly basis. Why wouldn’t they accept that your magicka made you lose the ability to speak Tradespeak?”

“It’s just that . . . they’re Nords,” Rowan said, taking the mug. It wasn’t what she really wanted to say, but it was as close as she could immediately think of.

“Ah,” Athis interrupted before she could explain further. “I understand. Yes, I suppose it is strange how quickly they’ve adapted to your magickal habits. Maybe since you’re so damn helpful and likeable, they’ve decided to loosen up a bit.”

“I’m likeable?” Rowan asked. She knew it wasn’t the part she should’ve latched onto but couldn’t help herself.

Athis laughed and smirked at her. “To a certain degree. The rest of the time you’re an Oblivion damned pest.”

Careful not to spill the coffee, she jabbed her knuckles into his unprotected side, snickering at his yelp. “Well, it’s nice that they more than tolerate me. Better than being glared at all the time like Vilkas does.”

Athis’ indignant expression immediately split into a mischievous, knowing look. “Now that’s a story that definitely has more to it than you know.”

Raising her eyebrows, she gave him an unimpressed look. “If you think I’m going to run in circles trying to figure out what you mean, then you’re gonna be disappointed. Whatever Vilkas’ problem is with me, he can figure it out his damn self. It’s not my problem.”

Athis grin didn’t diminish. “Are you sure? At the rate he’s going, I doubt you’ll find out anything even if Daedra invade Nirn.”

“I’ve got enough problems without having to deal with his attitude.”

Athis shrugged. “Fair enough.” Something caught his eye across the marketplace, and he straightened up to get a better view. “Got a group of mercs who’re staring at you.”

“Hm?” She looked in the direction he was. “Oh, they might be the ones Hulda told me about. A few days ago, a group of mercs came in and asked if I was available for hire. They didn’t give any details about a job, their names, or even when they’d be back.”

“Why would a group of fighters need to hire a single mage for a job?” Athis wondered suspiciously.

“Dunno. If they want to hire me, they can ask me themselves. I don’t exactly need a job right now.”

“You can never have too much money.”

Rowan hummed. “Well, I’ve never been too fond of people who hoarded tons of money, especially those with so much money they could never possibly spend all of it. You know, the types who could literally buy cities if they wanted to? Hate those people. I think there should be laws that people with certain amounts of money have to pay larger taxes so that most of that money goes back to the community.”
Athis scoffed but looked thoughtful. “Don’t say that in Morrowind. The Great Houses would probably all hire the Morag Tong to take you out.”

“Money doesn’t do any good if it’s just sitting around gathering dust. If one or a few people hoard nearly all the money within a community, the economy stagnates and—”

“No, no, no, I am not getting lectured this early in the morning,” Athis interrupted, waving his hands. “If I wanted a lecture, I’d make a smart comment in front of Skjor.”

Rowan snickered and sipped the coffee. She looked up when footsteps approached them. It seemed the group that had been watching them had finally decided to make their move.

“Hello,” Rowan greeted neutrally. She eyed each of the heavily armed warriors. Most of the group of nine were human, though there were two orcs, a Bosmer, and an Argonian.

“Greetings,” a heavily scarred Imperial said. So, she was the leader.

“I’m guessing you’re the group Hulda told me about,” Rowan said.

The Imperial had a brief moment of confusion before Athis translated. “Ah, so the rumors we heard of your . . . magickal mishap were true.”

“Yes, but it’s no big deal. I haven’t had any other issues other than the normal ones.”

“Yes, well, we wished to ask if you might be available for hire. Though, we understand if you aren’t, given your present condition,” she said slowly.

Rowan briefly measured the group. They seemed perfectly at ease. One of the orcs was even drowsing as he leaned against the Bannered Mare. “Not until my speech begins to return to normal, but I expect that to happen within a week or so. What type of job is it? If it’s time sensitive, I can’t promise anything. Magic doesn’t exactly care about time constraints, after all.”

“No, nothing like that. We’re in need of a magic consultant. None of us are mages; however, we’ve found a crypt rumored to hold great treasures. Unfortunately, its doors are magically sealed. None of us can get through. We even used some of the exploding black powder from Hammerfell, but nothing has worked,” the Imperial explained.

Rowan leaned forward. She itched for her journal. “Oh? Any idea as to what area of magic? Were there runes along the door?”

Athis tensed at her side and continued to translate, but she could tell he wasn’t happy about something.

“Runes, yes, but other than an obvious shimmer of magic, none of us could tell anything beyond that.” The Imperial inclined her heads toward Rowan. “If you agree to assist us, you would be well compensated, and we would be there, as well. Your safety would be of the utmost importance.”

Chuckling, Rowan said, “I don’t exactly need to be protected, but thanks anyway. Where is this tomb anyway? Do you have any more information on it? Oh, wait, I completely forgot to ask your name!”

The Imperial smiled. “I am Nantea Pulliotus. And you need no introduction, you are Rowan Corvid, the resident seidr.”

“Ah, so that type of news does travel fast,” Rowan said sheepishly.
Nantea’s smile widened. “Indeed. Though we’re grateful you’re a resident of the first city we chose. We were going to ask the Jarl’s court wizard for assistance before trying for the College of Winterhold.”

“Well, I'll be happy to help. I haven’t come across any runes like you’re talking about, but I’m sure I can do something.”

The entire group seemed to perk up. Rowan swore she heard the Bosmer murmur something but couldn’t quite catch it.

“Excellent,” Nantea said. “Here, let me mark the tomb’s location on your map. Maybe you’ll have more luck researching it than we did. And you said you might be ready to depart in a week?”

Rowan pulled her map from her pocket and handed it over. “Maybe. It depends on how long it takes for my Tradespeak to return.”

Nantea nodded. “That’s fine. We’re in no rush. The tomb isn’t exactly going anywhere. Would it be all right if I sent one of my men here to check if you’re ready to go in a week? We prefer to camp outside of cities, easier for our group to move.”

“That would be fine. If my Tradespeak has returned, I’ll be ready to go. If not, we’ll give it another week.”

“Excellent.” Nantea handed back Rowan’s map with a new charcoal marker on it. “I’ll send Alesic to check on you in a week,” she said, motioning to a tiny Breton male. Alesic winked and smiled. “Don’t worry about his flirting. He’s harmless. Mostly.”

“Aw, come on, boss. Don’t give me a bad reputation already,” Alesic whined.

“Your bad reputation is of your own making,” Nantea shot back coolly. She gave Rowan a nod. “Good day, Corvid. Hopefully you will be joining us in a week.”

“Good day.”

As soon as the group was out of hearing range, Athis turned to Rowan. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“What?”

“Don’t you think it’s suspicious at all? A group of mercs comes in and asks you to accompany them on a job to the middle of nowhere? You’ll be alone with them. Aren’t you the least bit worried?”

Rowan gave him a small, helpless shrug. “Not really. I mean, I can take them on if it turns out bad. I mean, it’s not like I haven’t taken out entire bandit camps by myself before.”

Athis grumbled and glared in the direction the group had left. “I don’t like it. You shouldn’t run off without a Shield Sibling to watch your back. Especially not with such a large group of strangers.”

Smiling, Rowan knocked his shoulder with hers. “Aw, it’s sweet you care so much.”

He turned his glare on her. “I’m serious. Take someone with you. Call in a favor, hire someone, I don’t care. Just don’t go alone. Hell, even better: take the twins.”

Rowan choked. “The twins? You want me to drag them both to a magical tomb?”

“They’ll protect you. That’s all that matters.” He continued when Rowan tried to speak, “Look. If
Njada or I had gone alone that day we were tricked and ambushed, we would’ve died. And I may be an asshole, but I’d rather you not die because you thought you didn’t need protection. Don't go alone.”

Rowan’s mouth dried up. Looking away, she gnawed on her lip as she thought. He was right, though she didn’t want to admit it. How many times had she nearly died just because she’d gone on a job alone? A lot. Especially in the early days when she’d been inexperienced.

“All right, I’ll ask them. But I’m taking it out on you when I have to deal with Vilkas’ bitching for God knows how long.”

“Fine by me. At least you won’t be dead.”

With Athis following her everywhere, Rowan realized how few places she actually went in Whiterun and how few people she actually talked to. Most of her time was spent in her room, by the stables, or with Ysolda, Hulda, or Farkas. Every now and then she spoke with Danica and Farengar, but she mainly kept to herself and her research unless someone sought her out.

“For an interesting person, you’re very boring in real life,” Athis said dully as he watched Rowan work with the mare. He refused to enter the corral for any reason after the mare had stared him down the first day.

“What did you expect me to be doing in Whiterun?” Rowan had meant for it to come out mockingly but instead, she genuinely wanted to know what Athis had expected of her.

Athis was quiet for a few moments. When he answered, it was with a huff. “You know, I don’t actually know. But I didn’t expect a bloody routine, that’s for sure.”

Rowan stopped grooming the mare and frowned at him. “Why wouldn’t I have a routine?” Like it was the strangest thing she’d ever heard.

Athis waved her off with another huff. “Bloody boring mages.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sorry. The only tricks I know are almost dying and weird magic shit, both which I'm currently not allowed to do. Try again later.” Her pronunciation wavered, giving her an accent of someone not used to speaking Dunmeri; however, her ability to speak Tradespeak hadn’t yet returned.

“Have you thought of a name for her yet?”

“What?”

“The mare. Have you named her yet? She's basically yours by now, right?”

“Yeah, she is. Not like Skulvar can sell her to anyone else.” Rowan patted the mare’s neck. “And I've been thinking of names but haven’t decided on one yet. Nothing feels right.”

Athis snorted. “It’s a horse. Name it and rename it all you like.”

The mare whipped her head around and made a low, irritated noise at him.

Laughing, Rowan said, “Ooo, she doesn’t like that! And no, I'm not gonna name and rename her.”
Skulvar appeared from between the buildings. He paused beside Athis to admire Rowan handling the mare before saying, “Corvid, there’s a man here to see you. Says his name is Alesic.”

“Send him on back. He came all this way for nothing, unfortunately,” Rowan said.

Skulvar nodded after Athis translated. “Sure, just don’t let him spook the mare.”

Athis scoffed. “As if that horse gets spooked by anything. She’s more likely to cave in someone’s skull.”

“Just like her owner,” Skulvar joked as he disappeared to the front of the house.

Alesic appeared moments later, a large grin on his face. “Good afternoon, Corvid, Companion!”

Athis responded with an uninterested nod. Alesic paid him no mind; all of his attention was on Rowan.

She thought it was a bit rude to not even ask Athis’ name, but Athis himself had told her he didn’t care if the merc knew his name so she didn’t mention it.

“Hello, Alesic,” Rowan said. She set down the grooming brush and climbed up the corral’s fence to peer over it at him.

His grin faltered. “Ah, so your Tradespeak still hasn’t returned?”

The mare’s head jerked. She snorted, flicked her tail, and gave Alesic her full attention.

Rowan’s shoulders prickled. Watching Alesic, she shook her head apologetically. “No, sorry. Sometimes my accent will fluctuate, but other than that, there’s been no improvement.”

Alesic shrugged. His grin returned brighter than before. “Ah, no matter! We’ll give it another week, no? As the boss said, we’re in no rush.” He inclined his head to the mare. “I apologize for interrupting you. I’ll head back and tell the boss it’ll be another week. And don’t worry about it, we expected it.”

As he turned to leave, Rowan called out, “One more thing.” He paused and looked over his shoulder. “I’ve hired two of the Companions to come with us. I know you all are an experienced group, but I’m more comfortable fighting alongside them. I know how dangerous Skyrim’s tombs can be, and I figured the extra help could always be used.”

“Of course! I’ll tell the boss. Whatever makes you comfortable. We understand traveling around with a group you don’t know isn’t exactly, eh, smart. So, of course, bring them along!” Alesic said with a relaxed flourish of his hand.

Rowan smiled. “Thank you. Hopefully I’ll be back to normal by next week, and we can get on the road.”

“It’s like I said: there’s no rush.” With one last bow of his head, Alesic left.

“I don’t like him,” Athis said. The eyed the spot Alesic had last been suspiciously.

Licking her lips, Rowan climbed down from the fence and returned to the mare’s side. She picked up the brush and began grooming the mare, murmuring soothingly to her.

“Corvid?”
“Yeah?”

“You noticed something, didn’t you?”

Rowan was grateful for the way the mare hid her from Athis’ stare. “Kind of.”

“Kind of or yes, you did?”

Exhaling forcefully, she said, “I believe I did. I doubt it’s enough to be truly suspicious, but... the mare was on edge. I dunno, she just, sometimes she just knows things. It's that animal instinct, I guess. She didn’t like how Alesic reacted when I told him my Tradespeak hadn’t returned.”

Athis hummed thoughtfully. “I think you should trust the demon horse’s instincts. Don’t trust those mercs, Corvid.”

Rowan tried to shake off the itch creeping along her spine. “I'll have Farkas and Vilkas with me. If those mercs are hiding something, they won’t stand a chance against the three of us. Stop worrying.”

Athis snorted. “Whatever you say. Just don’t die. It’d be a real shame if you got killed because of mercs rather than blowing yourself up with magic—”

Rowan tossed the grooming brush at his head, and that was the end of that conversation.

Rowan's Tradespeak returned midsentence halfway through the next week. One moment she was speaking perfect Dunmeri, the next, only Tradespeak. Of course, she could still speak and write Dunmeri, but now she had to actually think about it before she spoke.

The entire situation fascinated Farengar to no end. Almost daily, he requested that Rowan travel to the College of Winterhold, whether to further study the phenomena or be studied herself, she wasn’t quite sure. Probably both.

Currently, she wasn’t going to the College. She wasn’t even in Whiterun. As soon as she no longer needed to be attached to Athis, she quietly readied her traveling gear and snuck out.

Not exactly her smartest move, but she needed the solitude, at least for a short while. She was used to being mostly left alone unless someone approached her. She’d managed to not become too on-edge around Athis in the nearly two weeks they’d been together, but that was mainly because Athis seemed to know when she needed to be left alone – figuratively speaking, at least. He would stay with her just in case she needed him to translate, but otherwise, he didn’t bother her. He didn’t speak to her, didn’t touch her, didn’t engage her in any way; it was like they didn’t know each other at all. Which sometimes Rowan needed. Constantly being around others made her prickly, agitated, and overstimulated. She’d been glad Athis had realized that early on. God knew most of the other Companions wouldn’t understand.

She hadn’t taken a job. There wasn’t a need to since she would be leaving at the end of the week, but the opportunity to stretch her legs was too good to pass up. Especially since this would be the last opportunity for some alone time before she took off with Nantea’s group and the twins.

Currently, she was wandering a bit aimlessly, marking caves and places of interest on her map for later inspection. She’d killed a few wolves and bagged some game and alchemy ingredients, but mostly, she was enjoying the solitude.
Spotting a worn, dirt path, Rowan veered off the main road, humming *Ragnar the Red* for the thousandth time that week.

The path stopped at a tomb’s entrance. Rowan internally debated the pros and cons of going in alone before thinking ‘The hell with it’ and descending the stairs. She cast Muffle before opening the heavy door and peeking inside the tomb. A pitch-dark room greeted her, so she cast Mage Light and tossed it inside. Rowan caught sight of a table and a few dark shapes that must’ve been sarcophagus. Falling into a crouch, she treaded lightly into the room, eyes flicking between the two coffins.

When she was barely halfway into the room, a grating sound met her ears. She froze in place and kept her breathing even despite her pounding heart.

The draugr’s eyes glinted in the darkness as it grunted and unsheathed its sword. It slowly stalked around the dark room.

Swallowing thickly, Rowan strained her ears to follow the draugr’s footsteps. It walked further into the room – close enough to where her Mage Light hovered near a half-collapsed door for the corpse to be illuminated – paused and waited in place.

Rowan debated on what to do. More than likely, the draugr didn’t need light to see; however, she was handicapped. She could move back towards the entrance and summon a fire atronach to take care of the draugr, but the room was small. Flame atronachs used up a lot of oxygen, and there wasn’t much in the room to begin with. As her mind fed her scenarios of the entrance becoming blocked and a slow death by suffocation, she decided her bow would be more than enough for one draugr. If she could get further into the tomb, then she would risk a flame atronach.

She crept back towards the entrance as the draugr paced back to its coffin. The only hints of its presence were its footsteps, grunting, and the glow of its eyes.

Rowan grabbed her bow, ignoring the poisons on the left of her leather belt. Most poisons didn’t work on draugr since they weren’t, you know, alive, and she didn’t want to waste the ones she had on a regular draugr.

She notched an arrow. Her heart sped up at the noise the string made as she pulled it to its full capacity. The draugr paced back towards the Mage Light. Rowan eased her arrow into position, waited for a breath, and then fired.

The draugr went down with barely a sound and an arrow in its skull.

The tension in Rowan’s body released. She stood, wincing as her knees popped. Casting another Mage Light in her palm, she circled around the room to light the torches with Flames. Even properly illuminated, the room was small and had few items. There was another coffin on the opposite side of the room, but it didn’t open, even as Rowan stepped in front of it to investigate a corner.

Hidden behind a group of vases and urns and covered in dusty cobwebs was a chest. Rowan easily picked the lock and, after investigating the rest of the room, approached the half-collapsed door.

Obviously, part of the ceiling had caved in at some point, crushing the door partway. Humming thoughtfully, Rowan shoved at the broken stone. None of them budged even the slightest. The door was a standard wooden one, though made of thick, sturdy wood that had been treated with some ancient recipe to make it withstand the passing years. There wasn’t a lock, just a simple handle to pull open the door.
“Well, here goes nothing,” Rowan murmured. She firmly gripped the handle and pulled.

Nothing.

She huffed. After wiping her sweaty hands on her robes, she gripped the handle, planted her feet, and tugged.

The door screeched against the stone and opened an inch.

Grinning, Rowan tugged again. And again. And again. Slowly but surely, the door screeched open. Rowan winced when the door finally opened enough for her to squeeze through. Every draugr in the whole damn tomb had to be awake by now, and she wasn’t looking forward to that hot mess.

She took a break to catch her breath and drink from her waterskin. Eyeing the still motionless stones, she finally took out her bow and stepped through the opening.

The hallway she entered was empty, but she crept through it to the catacombs it led to anyway. There would be draugr there for sure. She couldn’t hear any pacing, so maybe her scuffle with the door hadn’t woken any undead.

*Time to do just that.*

Aiming for the center of the room, she summoned a Flame Atronach and retreated up the corridor.

The effect was almost instantaneous. Her atronach hadn’t even had the time to follow her before it was fighting several draugr. Rowan couldn’t say exactly how many draugr since they all sounded the same, but at least one could Shout.

_Glad I’m not the one dealing with that._ She tapped a rhythm against her thighs as she waited. Her atronach died first, which she expected. Even with the strength boost her magicka gave it, Flame Atronachs weren’t the sturdiest atronachs. After the explosion died down, she waited until the draugrs’ footsteps took on a steady pace before creeping down the hallway and summoning another atronach. This time, she crouched near the catacombs’ entrance, readied her bow, and shot arrows off as the atronach took the brunt of the draugrs’ wrath. Her atronach died again, but she didn’t summon another. She simply picked off the remaining draugr with her arrows before searching the room for valuables.

She placed the few old Alessia coins she’d found in a bag separate from her Septims and snuck through the hallway into a larger room. After shifting around a large, decorative stone pillar, she froze.

_Fuck._

She knew exactly which tomb she was in. Somehow, her dumbass hadn’t recognized Dustman’s Cairn’s location and had fucking waltzed in without a care in the world.

Ducking back behind the pillar, she strained her ears for any signs of the Silver Hand.

_Oh, you fucking dumbass! How could you be so stupid?! You’re gonna die because the Silver Hand’s gonna think you’re a fucking werewolf, you goddamn idiot!_ She trapped a frustrated scream in her throat. No. No. _Calm down. It's not a problem. I can just go back the way I came. I haven’t seen any Silver Hand yet, only the draugr, so I can just leave. No biggie. Still, how fucking stupid was I? How could I not know this was fucking Dustman’s Cairn? Like, for fuck’s sake, it’s one of the few tombs that people start digging through and—_
Oh.

Oh, she really was an idiot.

No one had removed the collapsed door had still been in place. No one had dug through the first chamber. No one had come through and killed most of the draugr. Because no one else was here.

The Silver Hand weren’t waiting for her because they hadn’t found the tomb yet.


It was totally fucking possible for her to literally be ahead of the game.

“Never mind, I’m a literal goddamn genius!”

She clumsily clamored to her feet and hopped down the steps. “Okay, so, all I have to do is find something to wedge under the gate, so I don’t get trapped. Easy.” Except, even with all her training in Skyrim, she still didn’t have a lot of upper body strength. She wouldn’t be able to haul the stone chairs or a shelf over. But there had to be something she could use.

She scanned the room. Immediately, she spotted the enchanting table but ruled it out since it wouldn’t be able to stand on its side. There were some urns scattered around the room. Maybe she could pile them together? But what if the impact caused them to roll away?

And then she spotted the basket.

Well, it wasn’t really a basket since baskets were made out of, like, woven grass or wood or something, but it looked more like a basket than an urn to her, with its wide opening and base.

“That should work,” Rowan said, knocking the basket with two knuckles to test its sturdiness. When it didn’t move, she grinned and rolled it down the stairs and into place, grunting the entire time.

After putting the basket upside-down and directly below the gate, she stretched with a groan. “My back’s gonna kill me tomorrow.” She tested the basket’s sturdiness a few more times, even going so far as to throw vases directly on top of it to see how far it would move. It wobbled due to its curved opening but stayed in place.

“Welp, here goes nothing.” Rowan stepped into the alcove and pulled the lever before her brain could stop her. She squeezed her eyes shut and tensed as the gate came down – only to stop with a loud bang!

Slowly, she turned on her heel and peeked out of one eye.

“Oh, holy fuck!” she shouted. “I’m so goddamn smart!” Cackling, she scooped up the potions and Alessias scattered on the table, shoved them in her pack, and wiggled through the gap under the gate. “I can’t believe that fucking worked, oh my god!

“Next stop, the shard,” she said, her mouth curving smugly up at the corners.

She snuck through the next section of the tomb, killing draugr and skeevers as she went. The spiders gave her some trouble, especially the giant one, but another Flame Atronach and a few fireballs took care of them simply enough.

The draugr scourge on the other hand . . . well, Rowan didn’t dodge fast enough and ended up summoning an atronach to distract the scourge while she healed her new concussion. The draugr
died in the end, but Rowan would have to spend some time scrubbing the blood from her helmet and hair when she got back to Whiterun. She was more careful after that.

When she arrived at the inner chamber, she froze.

How could she have forgotten about the Word Wall?

The pit filled with draugr, she remembered, but the Word Wall?

She swallowed thickly. *Maybe nothing will happen. Akatosh said I wasn’t the Dragonborn yet. The first one is still alive. There can only be one Dragonborn at a time . . . right? Yeah. Yeah, that’s right. Nothing will happen. Just . . . get it out of the way.*

Slowly, she ascended the stairs. Unlike in-game, the Word didn’t glow brightly like she expected it to. Instead, its glow flickered, like it couldn’t decide if it wanted her to see it or not. The chanting she recognized from the game buzzed in her ears, but it was far off. If she hadn’t known what it was, she would’ve passed it off for the wind.

Halfway up the steps, her nerves got the better of her. Instead of going straight to the Word Wall, she detoured to the chest and urns around the room. The Alessias she found were mostly useless, but they gave her something to concentrate on while she gathered her courage.

When there was nothing else to loot in the room other than the shard and the Wall, she took a deep breath and approached the Wall.

Nothing happened at first. Rowan hovered close to the Wall, frowning when the magic reached for her before flickering out.

After a few more moments of the Wall’s indecisiveness, Rowan made the decision for it. She stood directly in front of the Word, placed her hands on the stone, and opened herself. The Word flickered, stronger than before, but still didn’t clutch at her.

She hummed thoughtfully. It was strange not to have something magical clutch at her. What was she supposed to do with something that seemed uninterested in her for the most part?

*It means you’re not Dragonborn.* The thought should have been a relief, but something nagged at her in the back of her mind. *Then why does it come towards me? It might stop, but there’s something there.*

*Time to try something else.* Concentrating, Rowan located the Word’s magic and this time, instead of waiting for the Word to latch onto her, she gripped it and pulled it towards her.

At first, all she felt was the Word’s confusion. It felt like nearly nothing in her grip, so she pulled it deeper. Still nothing. And deeper still. Her own magicka coiled irritably at the intruder but didn’t lash out. She pulled the Word’s magicka deeper still until she found she couldn’t go any farther unless she wanted to pierce her magicka well.

*Well, that solves that,* she thought tiredly. She released the Word’s magicka and pressed her forehead to the Wall to rest while she waited for the magicka to retreat.

But it didn’t leave.

She frowned and tensed but didn’t force the magicka out. What was it doing?

The Word’s magicka curled curiously around her magicka well, like something there had finally
piqued its interest, something that couldn’t be see or felt on the surface.

*I think . . . that I fucked up . . . .*

Whatever the Word had been waiting for, it seemed to have found it because it thrummed with excitement for a brief moment, pulled back, and then burrowed into her magicka well.

Jerking away from the wall, Rowan slapped her hands over her mouth to stop herself from screaming. Oh, it hurt. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt, it *hurt*! The Word pried the walls of her well apart and squirmed inside to a buried part of her core she had never touched, had never known existed until now.

Biting down on a gloved hand, Rowan curled in on herself and sobbed. The Word gave no indication it noticed her pain; it burrowed through her, reminiscent of the Gildergreen but so—*much*—*worse*.

Tears rolled down Rowan’s cheeks. She choked on another pained sob and propped herself up on the Wall when her knees wobbled.

The chanting grew louder and clearer, surrounding her completely. The voices echoed off the crypt’s walls and vibrated through her bones. Her brain felt like it was turning to mush in her skull.

Finally, the pain eased. Not because the Word was pulling back, but because her well had begun to absorb it. That hurt, too, like packing salt in a gaping wound right before sewing it up. Rowan opened her eyes and looked down at her chest expecting to see cracked open ribs and a mess of flesh and blood.

But there was nothing. Just her dirty, slightly bloody robes. She could feel her intact armor against her oversensitive skin, rubbing her raw with every shuddering breath.

She let out a low, wet groan that reminded her of a dying animal.

This felt like the aftereffects of her meditations, except with a more immediate feeling of wrongness and a splitting migraine to the middle back of her brain.

Stumbling away from the fall, Rowan bent over and vomited.

When her stomach finally stopped emptying itself, she managed to process exactly what was wrong.

Her magicka had pulled completely inward. It swarmed the foreign Word like antibodies to a virus, yet their attacks bounced off it.

She reached for her magicka and winced when she slid off it. She tried to call it, but it ignored her. She shivered, the crypt’s cold finally starting to sink in through her armor.

She couldn’t fight like this. Her touch repelled her magic like they were similar sides of a magnet. She might be able to wait it out, but who knew who long that would take? She'd planned to take the shard and fight her way out, but now? She might be able to force herself to cast a spell or two, but for the most part, she would have to rely on her physical fighting skills.

*I should have brought someone.*

She could go back out the way she came. But that would mean leaving the shard. Unless . . . maybe she could use an atronach to distract the draugr when they woke up? She could hide and then just run for the exit. Not the bravest solution, but a practical one.
You could come back later, a voice in her brain whispered. After you’ve recovered.

But what if the Silver Hand show up? I've killed all the draugr except the ones here. I've practically done their job for them! I'm not letting them have the shard.

She gritted her teeth. As soon as she could, she was going to work on her Conjuration. A Flame Atronach wouldn’t last long against so many opponents and casting another spell would give away her position – if she could even cast the spell a second time.

She couldn’t exactly remember where the exit was but judging from the stairs on one side of the room, she assumed that one of the coffins was a fake and led to the exit. There were three coffins in total on the second floor, which meant at least two held draugr. She would have to wait for the right one to open unless she wanted to get killed.

Hunching down behind the table, she poised her hand over the shard. Here goes nothing, she thought before grabbing the shard and ducking behind the table and, hopefully, out of sight.

The first of the coffins opened with a familiar grinding noise. Rowan peeked around the table to the second floor. One of its coffins opened, and another draugr stepped out.

Slowly, one by one, each of the coffins in the room opened until the crypt was filled with pacing, growling undead.

Rowan eyed the second floor’s middle coffin. She could see the exit. Now she just had to get there.

Moving so slowly she felt her joints creak, Rowan peered around the table. She wanted to summon the atronach as far away from herself as possible, but she doubted her range would be half what it normally was.

She froze when a draugr appeared from a corner. It paused barely a foot from her with its back to her. Rowan barely breathed as she waited for it to turn around and see her.

It didn’t. Instead, it paced to the front of the table and to the now-empty chest.

Not trusting herself to breathe, Rowan reached within herself, roughly gripped her magicka, and pulled.

She gritted her teeth to stop the scream in her throat. Blood gushed from her nose. Her ears popped. The room spun. The nerves in her hands deadened.

The draugr swarmed the atronach. Rowan waited until the draugr from the upper level rushed down the steps to join the fray before doing her own awkward shuffle/stagger crawl up the stairs.

Of course, a draugr saw her.

She wouldn’t have even known she’d been spotted if a Shout hadn’t sent her tumbling onto the second floor. She clamored on her hands and knees to the exit, barely making it through as the scourge sent another Shout her way. The force of the Shout caused her to stumble and scrape her knees against her armor, but she didn’t stop. She staggered up the rocky incline, forcing herself to keep moving.

She nearly slammed against the lever when she spotted it. Her shaking, sweating hands almost couldn’t grip the handle well enough to shove it upwards.

“Come on, come on, come on,” she muttered frantically, bouncing on the balls of her feet and
tapping at the stone slab as it descended.

She didn’t even wait for the slab to fully descend; she clumsily slung her leg over and stumbled into
the first, small chamber.

Her heart stuttered at the sight of the dead draugr, and she nearly gave herself a second concussion
when she rushed to the exit. But soon she was outside in the chilled night air and she was alive. Bloody, exhausted, feeling like a raw nerve, and terrified out of her mind, but alive.

“Jesus fuck, I'm not doing that again,” she bit out. She wiped some of the blood from her mouth but
stopped bothering when more simply replaced it.

She stumbled up the stairs. Her stomach roiled with each step she took; her vision blurred; her mind
weighed heavily in her skull; and her ears were playing tricks on her. She kept hearing more than just
her own fumbling footsteps.

She should’ve brought someone with her. Athis. Athis would’ve been a good choice. Or Aela. She
knew how to be quiet. Maybe even Farkas, if she had explained how she needed something like
alone time. But she shouldn’t have come alone.

The other footsteps grew louder and multiplied. Rowan shook her head to try and clear her brain, but
all that did was make her vision spin.

She paused to bend over and dry heave. The other footsteps didn’t stop.

That was wrong. That—that was wrong. The footsteps should’ve stopped when she stopped
because, because she was alone out here . . . right? She was, she was alone . . .

Something heavy and blunt hit the back of Rowan’s skull. She crashed face first into the ground. Her
gut protested, and bile foamed at the back of her throat.

“Don’t cave her skull in, you idiot!” someone hissed. “This'll be for nothing if you kill her!”

“Oh, shut up! I didn’t even hit her that hard!” someone else barked back.

“Stop arguing and tie her up,” a third, calmer, and more familiar voice ordered.

Rowan groaned and shifted. She tried to get onto her hands and knees, but two large hands jerked
her arms behind her back and roughly tied them together with thick rope. When they released her,
she flopped gracelessly onto the ground; her teeth clacked painfully at the impact.

She fought against the fog in her brain – both that left over from the Word Wall and from her head
wound – but solid thoughts slipped through her fingers like slime. Rowan had only been completely
wasted once in her life, but it sort of felt like how she did now. She had no control over anything –
not her brain or body, hell, she couldn’t even tell if she was currently facing the ground or the sky.

“Her feet, too. Don’t want the little mage getting any ideas, do we?” the third voice said.

The second voice grunted. “Sure thing, boss.”

The large hands were back, this time curling around her ankles. A jolt of fear rocked Rowan to her
core, and she lashed out clumsily with a kick. Her boot connected with something solid and possibly
fleshy, but all the attacker did was grunt and grab her leg again to tie her ankles together.

Someone laughed. “She’s feisty! I’m kind of disappointed we didn’t get to fight her for real.”
“You would’ve been the first to die, fool.”

“Silence,” the ‘boss’ said. “Give her the sleeping draught already. I want to get on the road as soon as possible.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Rowan couldn’t see the giant looming over her back, but she felt the heat of their body and smelled the oil they used for their armor. She tried to squirm away, but the attacker gripped her around the throat, jerked her upwards, and shoved a bottle to her mouth. She clenched her teeth shut, refusing to open even as the bottle clacked against her teeth and the potion sloshed over her lips.

Someone sighed. “Idiot. You have to hold her nose closed so she can’t breathe. Here. Like this.” They stepped forward as Rowan began to thrash uselessly against the hold on her throat. Her thrashing caused them to miss her nose, but they eventually gripped it tightly.

Rowan didn’t bother holding her breath. She breathed through her clenched teeth instead, blindly baring them at her attackers.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

“She’s stubborn.”

“Idiots,” the boss muttered.

Rowan tried to collect her thoughts. If she could just get out a burst of magic and knock the ones holding her off of her, then she could burn the ropes or lash out again. But her magicka wouldn’t respond. Its full concentration was still on the Word of Power – locked away and inaccessible – deep in her chest, and nothing could sway its interest, not even her possible death.

A knife sank into her calf, and Rowan howled. The bottle was quickly shoved between her teeth and upended. She reflexively gagged and swallowed, choking on the thick, foul liquid. Half of the potion overflowed from her mouth and onto her front. When the bottle was finally removed, she tried to spit out the potion, but a hand covered mouth. Paired with the hand still on her nose, she had no choice but to swallow so she could breathe.

The boss jerked the knife out of Rowan’s calf.

Screaming, Rowan lashed out with her tied feet, hitting something, and bit the hand over her mouth, latching onto the flesh until blood filled her mouth.

“Shit!” the gruff voice shouted. The hand around her throat released her, only to crash against her skull moments later.

Rowan released the hand when her vision started to go dark. The hand jerked away from her as its owner cursed up a storm.

“You idiot!” the other attacker released her nose – the only thing keeping her head up.

Rowan’s head hit the ground and bounced. She groaned lowly. Between the dampener on her magicka and her wounds, the sleeping draught was beginning to work. She couldn’t be sure how long it would affect her; she’d only taken it out of desperation for sleep before, never when she couldn’t access her magic. At best, it would keep her under for a few hours. At worst, she’d be out for an entire day.
“You can’t bash her skull in! if you give her brain damage, who’s gonna want to buy her then? No one! ‘Cuz she won’t be able to use magic! What’s the use of a personal slave-mage if they can’t use magicka?! None—”

“Be quiet.” The sound of cloth over metal. “Gromzum, pick ‘er up. The sooner we get back to camp, the better.”

“. . . Yes, Boss.”

Skin crawling as the strange hands hauled her over a shoulder, Rowan found herself thankful when the sleeping draught finally pulled her into unconsciousness.
Rowan woke up in a box.

Nope, not a box, she realized with growing horror as the sleeping draught’s effects slowly wore off. A chest.

Her kidnappers had locked her in a chest.

Not just any kidnappers, but Nantea – that was the voice she’d managed to recognize through her trauma-induced haze.

God, she’d been so stupid.

This was right, she thought miserably. Tears rolled down her cheeks in thick streams, pooling stickily under the side of her face. She tried to muffle her sobs; even now, she knew she couldn’t let the mercs know she was awake.

I really can’t catch a break, can I?

Rowan curled as tightly in on herself as she could despite her binds. Movement made her head wounds throb. Even in the darkness, she recognized the spell of vertigo. Choking down the nausea, she smothered the newest sobs welling in her throat.

And then she got angry. Oh, she was fucking pissed. How dare they. How fucking dare they?! Nantea fucking lied to her, sent Alesic to get her guard down, followed her when she left Whiterun, and attacked her! How dare they!

Rowan was going to tear them apart.

Compressing her rage into a tight ball in her chest, she took stock of her situation.

Rope bound her arms and legs. Blood still covered her face, and she could feel the dried blood in her hair beneath her helmet. She ached everywhere, but the pain concentrated in her head, chest, and right calf. Every breath caused her ribs to expand and contract with sharp stabs of pain. And if she was judging correctly, she was moving.

Concentrating, she listened to the sounds outside the chest. She could hear muffled voices, footsteps, and the creak of wood.

They’re using a wagon to transport me. There are most likely more mercenaries than the ones I saw in Whiterun.

All right. We got that out of the way. Now, tools, weapons, anything I have that I can use.

They’d taken her backpack, weapons, and the potions belt and toolbelt she wore outside her robes, but she was still wearing her armor and every time she shifted, she could feel the thinner toolbelts she wore beneath her robes.

Wincing, she wiggled her ankles and – yes, the knives, potions, and poisons she’d shoved in her boots were still there. Now, she just needed to get to one of her knives.

She twisted her bound arms until she could inch her robes up her back. The awkward position made her wrists and hands cramp quickly, so she had to pause and stretch before continuing. Within a few
minutes, she had the back of her robes hitched up over her mini-toolbelt. She picked out a short, serrated blade rather than the long dagger at the small of her back and got to work on the ropes around her wrists.

Heartbeat picking up, she strained to hear the conversations going on outside the chest. Most of the voices were too muffled to hear, but she caught a few words like ‘Cyrodiil’, ‘buyers’, and ‘like kings’. The mercs mentioned money a lot.

Rowan’s knife cut through the last rope. Grunting, she brought her hands to her front and rubbed her tense wrists and shoulders. She turned over on her back, braced her feet against the chest’s lid, and blindly began to saw through the ropes around her ankles.

When those ropes gone, she laid back and went over her options.

1. She could pretend to be tied up, wait until someone opened the lid, and then go from there.
2. She could try and open the chest, sneak out of the chest, and then go from there.
3. If she could access her magic, she could blast open the chest, and attack the mercs.

The third option was her preferred one, but there was that big ‘if’ she could use her magic. She hadn’t tried yet, though she could feel her magicka swirling angrily around that new, heavy spot in her magicka well. However, not all of her magicka’s attention seemed to be on the Word anymore.

So, you’ve finally noticed what the fuck’s goin’ on, you piece of shit? She scowled when her magicka flicked out a few tendrils in acknowledgement and then returned to circling the Word.

Let’s just try a Mage Light. At least that won’t blow up on me too badly if it fails, she thought. She lightly tugged at her magicka, scowl deepening when it ignored her and stayed in place. She tugged harder and managed to gather a few threads of magic but not enough for a spell. Gritting her teeth, she finally reached inside her well, grabbed a figurative handful of magic, and *pulled*.

Her magicka whined and hissed like a bratty, stubborn cat but allowed itself to pool in her palms. Rowan winced as her still-raw palms burned but shoved the discomfort aside. Slowly, she cast Mage Light. She sighed in relief as her tiny space was finally illuminated. The chest was a large one, but there still wasn’t a lot of space; she doubted she would’ve fit if she was slightly broader or taller. There was just enough space for her to turn and stretch her legs halfway.

“No,” she muttered, “how do I get out?”

She couldn’t pick the lock from the inside. What she *could* do was blow apart the entire front of the chest with a burst of magic. That would catch the mercs off-guard and give her the element of surprise. From there, she could summon an atronach to distract a few of the mercs. Most that she’d seen before hadn’t looked like they could use magic, but she would assume that at least half of them could.

*I’ll keep a Greater Ward up on my left. Even if none of them use magic, I can send out bursts of raw magicka through it. It’ll be painful and will wear me down faster, but they definitely won’t expect it. They’re heavily armed, so a dagger won’t do much, but I’ll keep one within reach anyway. Just in case. For the most part, I’ll use ice and shock magic. Fire would be too risky since I don’t know where I am. Plus, ice will slow them down and lightning will kill them faster. She unbuckled her mini-toolbelt and buckled it over her robes. Once I get back to Whiterun, I’m going to work on my Conjuration and find that spell that lets you see just how many enemies are around. That would be really fucking useful right now. Ya know, I should expand on my spellwork in general. That seems like a thing a mage should be invested in.*
Rowan went over her “plan” again, which really was more of an outline of a plan, consisting of “bust out of the chest, distract the mercs, kill as many mercs as possible, escape, don’t die”. To be fair, it wasn’t a bad plan, just not well thought out. Which, also to be fair, summed up the entirety of her time in Skyrim.

“Okay, so, when do we do this.” Now would probably be good. The cart was moving, and the mercs were talking even louder than before. They were most likely expecting her to be knocked out by the sleeping draught for another few hours at least. Now was her best chance, unless they stopped to sleep. But really, she wasn’t going to wait that long in a fucking box. She’d probably have to pee before they stopped to rest, anyway.

“Do it now before you lose your nerve,” Rowan ordered.

She concentrated her magicka in one palm, pulled a ward up in another, and counted to three.

And then she blew the entire front and half the top off the chest.

She paid no attention to the shouts of the mercenaries. As soon as she saw moving armor, she cast one of the strongest lightning spells she’d ever cast. She didn’t pause as the mercenaries fell. She summoned an atronach to distract the mercs and crawled out of the ruined chest, hand automatically reaching for her dagger.

Good thing, too.

“You little bitch!”

Rowan rolled out of the way as a mace came down where she’d been laying. Snarling, she climbed up the front of the carriage and slammed her dagger into the human male’s eye. Blood spewed from the new hole in his eye socket when she pulled her dagger out. She spat warm blood from her mouth and shoved the corpse out of her way. She nearly lost her balance and fell when the cart’s horse began thrashing. Rowan grabbed the reins to get the horse under control, but only so she could direct the horse’s panic into the mercenaries in front of the cart. Four mercs fell under the horse’s hooves before one of the mercs got smart.

Rope dug into Rowan’s throat. She released the reins instinctively to grab at her throat. The merc hauled her from the cart’s front and into the back. She and the merc crashed into the mangled chest, but their grip on the rope never loosened.

Face red, eyes bulging, and lungs screaming, Rowan flailed her arms until she managed to find the merc’s face. Raw magicka burst from her palm. Blood, flesh, and bone splattered her face. Gasping, she shoved the corpse and rope away from herself and spent precious seconds doing nothing but raggedly breathing.

Until her atronach exploded.

Glaring through watery, bloodshot eyes, she sneered at the remaining mercs and summoned a new atronach. She felt the difference with this one even as she cast the spell. Nearly twice the size of a regular atronach and made of blue flames instead of red, the atronach set the cart on fire just by standing near it.

Seems like even Rowan’s magicka was pissed.

Wiping the saliva from her chin, Rowan climbed back into the cart’s front, broke the horse loose, and shot an ice spell at the back of the cart. She’d caught sight of her pack and no way was she letting it get burnt to pieces, especially not by her own atronach.
From her perch, Rowan held her ward in one hand and fired bolts of ice and lightning at any mercs in sight. A few archers had gotten in a hit or three, but she wasn’t too concerned. Her fury fueled her quite nicely, and no arrow was going to take her down. As a magicka poison leached into her bloodstream, her sneer deepened. She sent a shot of healing magicka to deal with the poison and a wave of raw magicka at the archer responsible.

With most of the mercs either dead, dying, or about to be dead, Rowan glared at the surrounding forest.

*Where’s Nantea?*

“Looking for me, World Walker?!”

Nantea, fully armored in steel-plate and holding a shield, leaped out of one of the closest trees and onto Rowan.

Rowan didn’t move quickly enough. Nantea knocked her into the back of the cart. Rowan didn’t even look as she blindly fired lightning in front of her, hoping to fry Nantea.

“You know, it’s a real fucking pity that you’re so damn stubborn, World Walker,” Nantea mocked. “Do you know how much nobles will pay for their own personal slave-mage? And for one with your power and potential? I’d could’ve bought half of Summerset Isle and lived like an Empress for the rest of my days after breaking and selling you! I doubt I’d even have to break you myself. How many would raise the price just to have the honor of breaking the first World Walker in centuries? It’d be a fucking privilege!”

Letting out an inhuman shriek, Rowan pulled as much of her magicka into her body as she could physically manage and launched herself at Nantea. She collided with Nantea’s shield but bared her teeth at the deep dent she left.

“Look at you! The power flowing off you is delicious. I’d actually be afraid if you had just a bit more discipline. You’re not even casting spells at this point; you’re just throwing magicka around! Well guess what kid, you think you’re the first mage I’ve fought?” Nantea unsheathed her sword and twirled it, laughing. “My armor’s enchanted specifically to give me an edge over you magic users.”

Magicka cracked and squeaked through the air around them like lightning. The air smelled of smoke, blood, and sickly-sweet ozone. The sun sat high in the sky, illuminating the charred corpses surrounding the destroyed cart. The horse had long since run off; a trail of bloody hoofprints darted off into the forest.

Rowan processed none of this. Her world had narrowed down to Nantea and the roaring fury in her soul demanding the mercenary’s head.

Nantea swung her sword; the blade clipped Rowan’s arm, cutting her robes and chipping her armor.

“You’re wearing armor,” Nantea said.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Rowan sneered. “What – never seen a mage in armor before?”

Nantea laughed. “No, actually, I haven’t. Seems like you’re full of surprises.” She swung her sword again. Rowan dodged, but Nantea twisted the blade in her grip and jabbed the blade into Rowan’s hip.

Rowan fired lightning at her. She grinned viciously when the charge knocked her back and visibly skittered across her armor. The lighting lit up the threads holding the enchantments on Nantea’s
armor together. If she could get close enough, Rowan just might be able to shatter the enchantment.

Nantea batted Rowan away with the flat of her blade. Rowan hissed as the impact fractured the weakened armor at her hip; the glass fragments cracked and dug into her side and thigh mercilessly.

“You’re tougher than I expected a scrawny thing like you to be,” Nantea noted.

Rowan adjusted her weight onto her good calf. “I’m used to getting tossed around by a Nord. You’re easy next to him.”

“That might be true, but you’re still going to die, World Walker.”

Rowan tossed a fireball at Nantea’s face and darted towards the mercenary when she was blinded. She pressed both her hands to Nantea’s armor and didn’t budge, even as Nantea noticed the movement and swung her sword around. Rowan gathered her magic in her palms, located the enchantments, and shoved.

What most people – especially non-mages – didn’t know was that enchantments were fragile things. Sure, a well-crafted enchantment was long-lasting and stable, but all enchantments were fragile. Any damage to the enchantment or fluctuation in magic powering the enchantment and the entire thing went down in flames. Sometimes literally.

Nantea’s enchantments splintered under the force of Rowan’s magicka. Rowan hastily stumbled backwards – sliding off Nantea’s sword and falling flat on her back as blood streamed from her eyes and nose – and summoned a Greater Ward. She watched Nantea’s armor deteriorate and crumble to dust in some places and warp in on itself in others.

Nantea screamed. Her leg armor compressed to the point of drawing blood. The twisted metal forced her to hold her left leg at an awkward angle. Her hands scrambled to undo her helmet as the fractures spread upwards. A crack split the metal over the left side of her face and spewed compressed, powdered metal. She managed to remove the helmet and toss it to the ground just the enchantment collapsed, and black smoke spewed from the helmet’s fractures and the entire thing melted into a slimy puddle.

Nantea snarled at Rowan. Blood ran down her face from where the fractures’ sharp edges had sliced her. “You little fucking cunt. I’m going to make you regret being born.”

Hacking out a nervous laugh, Rowan said, “You’re a bit late. Akatosh got to me first.”

Howling, Nantea started forward, stumbling due to her ruined armor and using her sword as a crutch.

Dropping her ward, Rowan scuttled backwards. She forgot about the open back of the cart and fell headfirst onto the ground. She let out a squeaky yelp, righting herself as quickly as possible, and scrambled away just in time for Nantea’s swing to miss her head.

Rowan turned around when she was safely out of range of Nantea’s sword. She took a moment to gather herself as Nantea shrieked and ripped her crumbling armor straight off her body and flung it away.

Rowan was exhausted. Right down to her bones. Every nerve felt like a live wire sending shocks of pain all over her body. Her injured calf throbbed with every movement but had started to go numb. She could barely hold her head up. She blinked the blood from her eyes and wiped her nose with her robes. A bruise was most likely already forming in a neat ring around the front of her throat. She didn’t even want to think about the arrows and wounds Nantea had left on her—
Don’t think about it. Just don’t, don’t think about it. Deal with it later. When you’re free.

Her magicka buzzed excitedly beneath her skin, vibrating painfully in her bones. It was just so happy to get such an extensive workout, and Rowan . . . Rowan . . .

She felt alive, even if she was slowly bleeding to death.

I’m so f*cked up. She shoved that thought away to deal with later and adjusted her stance.

Nantea tossed away the last of her armor, leaving her in just her padded doublet, britches, and socks. A strange, grotesque amulet hung around her neck. Blood soaked one of her pantlegs, the front of her shirt, and both her shoulders. She readied her sword. “I’m going to kill you, and I’m going to relish it.”

“Bold words from a dead woman,” Rowan spat back.

Nantea smirked cruelly. “You’re in worse shape than I am, World Walker. You might have spunk, but I’m the one who’s going to walk away from this fight.”

Sneering, Rowan gathered her magicka and said, “My name is Rowan Corvid.”

She shot a bolt of lightning at Nantea. Nantea dodged, but she wasn’t fast enough to dodge the spear of ice that impaled her moments later.

Nantea’s sword fell to the ground with a clatter. Blood quickly soaked Nantea’s front and the cart beneath where she’d been pinned. Choking, Nantea uselessly scratched at the spear; she only succeeded in chipping her nails and leaving bloody streaks on the ice.

Rowan crumpled in on herself. She squatted down, braced her arms on trembling legs, and cradled her face in bloody, numb hands.

“God,” she croaked out. She fell back onto her ass. She needed to cut the arrows out of herself. She needed to clean her wounds and heal them. She needed to get her stuff and get the hell away from here. She needed to kill Nantea, to watch the life leave her eyes. She needed—she needed . . .

She needed a fucking bath and to sleep for a week.

A weak, ragged laugh met Rowan’s ears.

“Seems like . . . you win . . . World . . . Walker . . . .” Nantea wheezed. She stopped scratching at the spear. One arm flopped uselessly at her side, and the other weakly wrapped around the spear.

Rowan groaned. “Don’t you ever shut up? Can’t you see I want some peace and fucking quiet? You should die quietly, you know, go out politely instead of like the rude fucker you were in life.”

Nantea laughed again, louder, harsher, and more obviously painful than the first. “And . . . why . . . would I . . . do that . . . when, when I can . . . talk . . . to you . . . instead?”

“And hear me call you a fucking fuck? Is that what you want to be the last words you hear? Because I’ll be happy to oblige you. You’re a fuck and deserve a slow, painful death. There. Now, shut up.”

“You’re . . . better . . . than I thought . . . you’d be.” Rowan could hear Nantea’s smile. “I expected . . . a brat . . . or a dickish . . . old mage. Not you. I’m glad . . . glad that I lost . . . to you. It’s a good, good way to die . . . Killed by a young-ster who . . . who doesn’t”—Nantea let out a hacking cough—“Care about . . . anything else . . . other than . . . living.”
“I’m gonna . . . come over there and smack you. Just, smack you with my little gay hands,” Rowan said, examining her robes. She would have to get new ones; these were absolutely ruined. “Just to get you to shut up.”

“I can’t wait . . . to watch you. You’re . . . you’re going to be . . . glorious. You’ll give . . . our Lord . . . a good fight . . . It’s been . . . so long . . .” Nantea continued, her voice becoming softer and raspy.

Rowan frowned and looked at Nantea suspiciously. “What . . . are you talking about?” Her chest dropped into her gut. She licked her bloody lips. “You, you’re just mercs. You were gonna sell me as a slave.” When Nantea didn’t respond, Rowan staggered to her feet and limped over to Nantea. Nantea’s eyes were glassy and unseeing. Her lips barely moved, so Rowan leaned in close to try and hear what she was trying to say.

“For . . . the glory . . . of our Lord . . .”

The last of Nantea’s breath wheezed out of her lungs; her head lolled lifelessly to the side; and her weak grip on the spear released.

Rowan opened her mouth to speak but decided against it. The sudden silence rested too heavily on her for her to break it. Instead, she took one last look at Nantea’s corpse, stare lingering on the dreadful amulet, and weakly climbed into the cart. She searched through the splintered and charred wood for her pack and found it underneath part of the chest. Picking it up, she shook the splinters off it and opened it to take inventory.

Nothing appeared to have been taken or even disturbed. Which was good because if she’d had to search for her things amongst the corpses, she was going to dig up the energy to throw the biggest fucking hissy fit Skyrim had ever seen.

With a sigh, she pulled out her healer’s kit and got to work. She broke off most of the arrow shafts, so she could easily maneuver her clothing around them. Slowly, she stripped out of her robes, boots, and armor.

*Good thing I’m nearly numb from the blood loss, she thought. I’d hate to deal with the cold right now.*

Luckily, none of the arrows had hit her back, so she’d be able to take care of those wounds relatively easily. One in her left thigh, another in her right abdomen, and another right above that one, an easy if annoying fix. Her armor had shielded her from the worst of the arrowheads, though she wasn’t looking forward to digging the glass from her left hip, side, and thigh. Or repairing her armor. That was going to be a bitch.

She cut the arrowheads out and, after judging her magicka safe to use, healed the wounds instead of sewing them up. Gathering her tweezers and vials of wound cleaners, she went to work on her hip picking out the shattered armor and gently cleansing the wound. The cleansers stung like they always did, and Rowan hissed out her discomfort through clenched teeth. When the wound was clean, she examined it; while large, it wasn’t particularly deep. She would need her magicka for her calf and throat, so she slathered healing poultices on it and bandaged it.

She rinsed her hands with the cleanser and dried them on a clean cloth from her kit. Her head drooped, and her eyes slid closed. Jerking, she shook her head and downed a swallow of stamina potion. That would make sure she didn’t fall asleep, though she wouldn’t risk anymore potions until she’d finished tending to herself.
The stab wound from Nantea’s was next. She'd been reckless in destroying Nantea’s armor, but luckily, the sword hadn’t gone deep. She'd need stitches, though. After cleansing the wound and deeming it poison-free, she dug her suture kit out of her healer’s bag and went to work, putting in even, continuous stitches. When finished, she covered the wound in a poultice, bandaged it, cleaned her hands, and moved on to the next wound.

Rowan prodded at her throat, wincing. Oh yeah, definitely bruised to hell and back, though nothing seemed to be damaged since she could speak and breathe fine. She sent out a burst of healing magicka to it and moved on to her head. Blood formed a crusty barrier around the wounds. Hissing and making soft pained sounds, Rowan gradually broke up the worst of the blood to feel the extent of the wounds. Her head was obviously bruised, and at some point, her earlier concussion had been reopened. That explained the amount of blood, at least. She upended the last of one bottle of cleanser onto the wound and gently scrubbed the blood from it as best as she could. She’d have a knot on her head for a while, but the wound didn’t require stitches, so she left it alone after fastening a bandage with shaking hands.

“And on to the worst of all,” she muttered sourly. She’d caught a glimpse of her calf when she’d removed her boots. She already knew it would require stitches, even with healing magic.

With a new bottle of cleanser and a clean rag, she got to work cleaning the wound. The knife Nantea had used hadn’t been thick or long, but the wound had bled horribly. Luckily, Nantea had stabbed her in the meat of her calf; any lower or deeper and her tendon would’ve been punctured, and even healing magic could only do so much for tendons.

Rowan propped her calf onto her opposite knee to better see it. Frowning, she reached for a scalpel. She couldn’t trust that she’d cleaned it properly with as narrow as it was, so she widened the wound until she could cleanly pick it apart and inspect it properly. A few more splashes of cleanser and a wipe down with the rag and she deemed it ready for healing.

She tensed her muscles to rid herself of the near constant shaking. In spite of this, her magicka vibrated through her bones. Her teeth ached. When her stomach turned, she leaned over the cart’s side and waited for the nausea to pass.

Spitting tacky blood from her mouth, Rowan turned her full attention to her calf. Concentrating her magicka, she sent short bursts of healing magic to the wound. She could most likely heal it halfway in one go, but with how much magicka she’d used, it was best that she stayed cautious. Magicka sickness was no joke, and she needed to be able to walk after this.

A few stagnated healing bursts later and Rowan reached for her suture kit. Shoving a piece of leather between her teeth, she jabbed around the wound with a needle coated in a numbing agent. The agent worked quickly. In moments, Rowan was stitching her calf up with neat stitches, though her movements were jerky.

She slathered a poultice on the closed wound to keep out infection and wrapped it with shaking hands.

Wincing, Rowan lowered her calf from her knee and stretched the leg to test it. She felt the pull of the stitches despite the numbing agent. Her toes were nearly numb from the cold.

Exhaustion was setting in, so she gulped down the last of the open stamina potion and immediately redressed. She repacked her things, writing a sloppy note to remind herself to sterilize her medical tools and restock her kit.

Slowly, she stood and staggered to the edge of the cart, maneuvering around Nantea’s corpse.
Wishing for a stepladder, she clung to the cart’s handrails, lowered herself to sit, and then scooted until she could gently plant her feet on the ground.

When she finally stood on solid ground, she glanced tiredly around at the corpses. She really didn’t want to spend time looting all those corpses, but she knew she’d hate herself later if she passed up such a good opportunity for loot.

_Just the ones that aren’t badly burned_, she thought, starting with Nantea’s corpse. A loose bandolier belt hung around her chest and another around her hips; rooting through those earned Rowan a nice assortment of gold, gems, lockpicks, potions, and jewelry. She avoided Nantea’s amulet entirely. That thing gave her the creeps.

She stumbled over to the more intact corpses and rummaged through their clothing and weapons. Most didn’t have anything of any particular worth other than coins, lockpicks, a dagger or two, and arrows.

_Even to sell and repair my armor, at least._ Not like she actually needed the money anyway, but still . . . the mercs had caused her a lot of trouble. The least they could do was pay for her armor repairs.

She wanted to laugh at the joke, she really did, but all she could manage was a small, tired smile that faded as quickly as it came.

_Welp, _she thought, _time to figure out where the hell I am._

‘Where the hell she was’ turned out to be almost a day from Whiterun on the road to Riverwood. Rowan had been forced to make camp when the sun began to set; she hid her fire-less camp in the trees and underbrush, barely managing to put up her tent through her hyperventilating. She’d scarfed down spiced dried meats and bread while jumping at every noise in the surrounding woods. She slept so little that she sourly thought she could’ve made better time if she hadn’t made camp. But the thought of someone else sneaking up on her made her insides go cold and slimy.

She didn’t leave camp until the sun had risen high.

Throughout the day, she only stopped to check her wounds as needed. Her calf was really the only one that worried her, but infection could come out of nowhere, especially in her weakened state.

As she staggered past the farms surrounding Whiterun, her main thought was, _Danica’s going to kill me._

Her second thought was, _Hopefully not after I get a bath._

She probably should have bathed in the river before returning to Whiterun; each time she came back covered in blood and filthy, someone always made a ruckus.

_Maybe I can sneak in and that won’t happen this time . . . ? Oh, wait, too late._

One of the guards shouted, “By the gods!” and disappeared inside Whiterun’s gates while another two guards rushed towards her.

“Corvid! What happened to you?” a second guard asked, obviously eyeing the blood and dirt staining Rowan’s robes and her face.
“The Companions have been looking everywhere for you! Farkas is still out searching with Aela,” another said.

Rowan wanted to feel something at her friends’ worry for her, but she was just so tired . . . “I’ll be at the Bannered Mare. Will you tell Farkas and Aela where I am when they get back?”

The guards were caught offguard. “I, yes, of course, we will. Do you need an escort?”

She managed a smile and shook her head, stopping when her stomach turned. “No but thank you. I’m just . . . very tired.”

“Here, let us get the door for you,” he said, and they shoved open the doors for her.

“Thank you. And . . . I’m sure you’ll hear about what happened soon enough.” With that, she shuffled through the gates. She nearly ducked back out when several pairs of eyes turned to watch her but she staggered through the streets, greeting people with silent nods and grim smiles.

The guard who had disappeared inside Whiterun earlier appeared at the top of the marketplace’s stairs, Danica and Ysolda at her side. As soon as she stopped Rowan, Danica and Ysolda took the steps two at a time until they stood in Rowan’s personal space.

The two women fired off question after question, but Rowan didn’t listen. Couldn’t, really. Exhaustion had turned her brain to mush. She couldn’t think right now if she tried. Rather than trying to listen to Danica and Ysolda she simply walked towards the Bannered Mare. Danica and Ysolda followed her, still talking, though their tones had changed. Rowan couldn’t consciously place the change.

Hulda’s head shot up when she entered, and the entire tavern went quiet.

“I’ll get a bath started,” Hulda said, before Rowan could even open her mouth. She quickly walked through the storage room doors.

Danica and Ysolda took hold of each of Rowan’s arms and quickly but carefully maneuvered her through the doors, as well. They helped her down the stairs into the basement, where Hulda was already heating multiple buckets of water over the large fire.

“Help me undress her,” Danica said – to Ysolda, Rowan assumed.

Blinking slowly, Rowan let them slide off her pack, undo her toolbelts, and remove her robes.

Danica tsk-ed. “I’ll have to get you new ones. These would do better as rags now.”

Rowan nodded heavily. She sat down on the stool Ysolda guided her to and offered up her armor to be removed.

Ysolda fretted over the ruined armor at Rowan’s hip. “What happened?! This is glass armor; it would have to have been hit with tremendous force to shatter like this . . . .”

Rowan didn’t answer. She chose to stare at the wall instead.

“Worry about that later,” Danica said. “Let’s get her undressed and see how badly she’s hurt this time.”

‘This time’. Rowan couldn’t help but smile at that. What a terrible routine she’d gotten herself into.

When the last of Rowan’s armor and clothing had been piled off to the side, Ysolda, hand clutched at
her mouth, shifted out of Danica’s way. Danica swooped in immediately, magicka already gathered in her palms as she gently but efficiently unraveled Rowan’s bandages. Ysolda tried to stifle her gasps as each wound was revealed but eventually, she moved to help Hulda rather than watch Danica work.

“Corvid,” Danica said, snapping her fingers to get Rowan’s attention. When Rowan looked at her, she continued, “I need you to tell me how you got each of these wounds. I can already feel the remnants of a magicka poison, but I need to know what to expect.”


The rest is magicka exhaustion, fatigue, and burnout. Have a migraine. Am lightheaded, nauseous, and aching everywhere. Magical veins are fried from overuse. Hands are raw from the same. Only drank one stamina potion. Used as little healing magic as needed.”

Danica inspected each wound carefully. She wiped away poultice, tested stitches, and prodded at new scars. Finally, she nodded. “Better than I expected for field healing, but then again, it’s you, so I should have expected it. Let’s get you cleaned up and dressed. Then, you can go to sleep after eating something.”

Rowan nodded and slowly got to her feet. Her knees popped. Grimacing, she hobbled over to the now full bath. The other women helped her into the linen-lined tub but didn’t leave. Ysolda stayed near the bath, grabbing a bar of lightly scented lavender soap, and helped Rowan bathe, starting with her hair. Danica and Hulda stood only a few paces away, lowly speaking back and forth. Hulda gave a nod and, with a final look to Rowan, went upstairs.

Danica approached the tub and leaned down to get Rowan’s attention. “I’m going to get you some clothing. I’ll be back. Try not to fall asleep, all right? Hulda’s going to bring you something to eat.”

Rowan nodded sleepily. She didn’t watch Danica leave, just continued to drag a soapy rag over her overstimulated body.

“It’s good you don’t often wear your hair sticks while adventuring,” Ysolda said. “I fear it would’ve been stained beyond recognition at this point.”

“It’s uncomfortable to wear with helmets,” Rowan said raggedly.

Ysolda hummed. “Yes, I understand that.”

The two didn’t speak for a long while. Eventually, Ysolda deemed Rowan’s hair clean enough to be rinsed and used a bowl to pour water over her head. Rowan lingered in the dirty bath water. It was so warm, and even though the water made her wounds throb, she felt nice and cocooned.

“Corvid . . .” Ysolda started. She paused and seemed to be debating what to say. Rather than asking the questions Rowan expected her to, she made an inquisitive noise and brushed Rowan’s hair over her right shoulder.

Ysolda’s fingers lightly stroked along her back. “What . . . what are these? These scars look like
markings? Or are they runes?”

Ah, the scars . . .

“Remember the trolls?”

“Trolls? Oh, yes, the first job you took. Yes, I remember.”

“Nearly torn apart. Almost died. Used raw magic to heal the wound. It left marks.”

Ysolda continued to trace the pale scars down to where they disappeared beneath the water.

Ysolda spoke hesitantly, “Corvid . . . what happened out there? One moment, you had just gotten your ability to speak Tradespeak back, and then next, you were gone. Will you tell me what happened?”

Ah, so Ysolda was learning how to phrase things to make Rowan talk. Good for her.

Rowan cleared her throat. “Needed alone time. Found a crypt. Got through it. Attacked afterwards . . . kidnapped. Fought kidnappers. Won.” She licked her lips and then said, “Tell Athis he was right.”

“Right? Right about what?”

Rowan shook her head. Athis would know. “Tell him?”

“I . . . yes, I'll tell him. Thank you for telling me.”

Rowan nodded, and the moment of quiet was broken as Hulda descended the stairs.

When Rowan clean, fed, and sleeping soundly in her room, Danica, Hulda, and Ysolda met with the Companions waiting in the storage room.

Athis, Vilkas, and Njada may not have been the friendliest of warriors, but Danica knew they each respected and worried for Corvid in their own way.

“Well?” Athis asked, his face grim. “How is she? Do we know what happened yet?”

“Physically? She's a mess. New scars and half full of stitches with a side of magical burnout. She should be off that calf for at least a week, and I’m positive she has two concussions,” Danica said. “Mentally? She was half in a dissociative state the entire time I examined her. I'm hoping most of that is from the burnout rather than head trauma, but I'll test her reflexes and memory when she wakes up.”

“Should she really be sleeping then?” Njada asked.

“She spent the night outside of Whiterun and walked back here by herself. There’s no point in keeping her awake now. It will just make her irritable, and no one wants to deal with an irritable Corvid.”

“Do we know what happened?” Vilkas asked tersely. He held his arms crossed tightly over her chest and he practically glowered at everyone and everything.

Ysolda cleared her throat. “She . . . she told me a bit of what happened. Not in any detail, mind you,
but the bare bones. She needed some time alone, so she left. She found a crypt, explored it, and after she left the crypt, someone snuck up on her and . . . .”

“And what?” Vilkas growled.

“They kidnapped her. She then said she fought them, won, and I’m guessing the rest is her getting back to Whiterun.” Ysolda licked her lips and looked at Athis. “She asked me to tell you something.”

Athis straightened. At his side, Njada raised her eyebrows but didn’t comment.

“She said to tell you that you were right.”

Athis frowned, momentarily confused before realization dawned on him. He spat several Dunmeri curses and paced through the storage room angrily.

“What is it?” Hulda asked.

Athis ignored her, continuing to mutter to himself until Vilkas gripped him by the shoulder.

Vilkas leaned down to look Athis in the eye and lowly asked, “What does Corvid mean by you being right?”

“The mercs,” Athis spat out. “The job she asked you and Farkas to go with her on. Those mercs. I knew they were bad news!”

Vilkas growled low in his throat, but no one noticed as Hulda asked, “The ones that came in and asked about her weeks ago? But why would they try to kidnap her?”

“Her magicka.”

Everyone’s eyes darted to Danica.

“That has to be the reason. She’s the first World Walker in hundreds of years. Even if you doubt the World Walker bit, she’s a magical prodigy. Not even a year into her studies and she’s quickly mastering Restoration, adept at Destruction, and a fair cast at the other schools. Just experiencing the sheer force of her magicka is enough to cause even the most experienced mages to crumple. Now, tell me that there isn’t someone out there who wouldn’t pay good coin to own that power,” Danica said.

Athis nodded, his expression bitter. “The slave trade is no joke. Strong, experienced mages are valuable if you can break them right. I’ve seen them used for guards and in battles.”

“They wanted to sell her into slavery?” Ysolda asked. Her voice and expression put her disgust on full display.

“Most likely. With her power, potential, and growing renown? Those mercs could’ve sold her and each lived like royalty for the rest of their lives.”

“Well, they’re dead. Corvid wouldn’t leave any of them alive. So, that settles it,” Njada said.

“Not necessarily,” Danica said.


“No, Danica’s right. Sure, it might deter the lower-class ones, but the more experienced ones? The
ones that really know what they’re doing? It’ll just entice them. Especially once they hear she’s a living legend,” Athis said.

“If they hear she’s a legend,” Ysolda said.

“And how do you suppose we keep that a secret? The entire Hold knows about her, and it’s spreading beyond that,” Vilkas said. He’d curled himself back against the wall; his entire body strained with the need to split apart, change, and put his claws through something or, better yet, someone.

“People here like Corvid. She’s the problem solver people have been wanting. What do you think will happen when they hear that because someone heard about her being a living legend, she was kidnapped? They’ll keep quiet or, better yet, will help stop word from spreading. Especially if we get the guards involved.”

“And what about Corvid herself? She’s been going around telling nearly everyone she meets she’s a World Walker. I doubt the woman even knows how to keep a secret.”

“I doubt we’ll have to worry about that. Corvid may be young and naïve, but she’s not stupid. She’ll recognize that she’s vulnerable and a target and will keep that information close to her chest from now on,” Danica said.

Ysolda nodded. “Then it’s settled. We'll spread word of what happened and let word of mouth do the rest.”

“Agreed,” the others said.

Athis and Njada turned to leave, though paused when Vilkas lingered. He eyed the top of the staircase before looking back at Danica. “Athis, Njada, return to Jorrvaskr and inform the others of what we know. I’ll wait outside the gates for my brother and Aela and will speak to them of the situation when they return. Farkas will most likely want to see Corvid immediately once he knows she’s here and alive. Normally, I would let him do as he pleases, but do you believe it wise to allow him to be around her currently? You mentioned she would be irritable, does that also mean unstable? I don’t want him to be injured because he startled her.”

“She won’t automatically use her magicka, though instinctively it will try to protect her. Her magicka lashing out if she were to be startled is a possibility. If Farkas wishes to visit her, then it would be best to wait until she’s awake and coherent,” Danica advised.

Vilkas nodded. “I’ll keep him away until she can receive visitors. Hulda, will you send word to us when that happens?”

“Of course.”

He nodded again, this time with finality. “Thank you. Good day and good luck.”

He exited first, and Athis and Njada followed closely behind.

Ysolda broke the silence. “How long until he cracks?”

“Vilkas? He's more stubborn than Njada and Athis put together. Give it another year and then we can start making bets.” Hulda scoffed.

Danica snorted and wiped the stray hair behind her ears. “I’m not bothering with that nonsense. The boy can act like a brat all he wants. I'm betting on Farkas making a move before next month is out.”
“Farkas? Ha!” Hulda grinned, the gossip a welcome break from the morning’s grim start. “He follows her like a puppy. Looks at her like she hung the stars, but he won’t do anything. Boy’s practically got her on a pedestal. And one he can’t touch.”

“Well, I doubt Corvid will choose either of them,” Ysolda said boldly. “They’re both happy right here in Whiterun. And I know none of us are delusional enough to think that Corvid is going to settle down for anyone.”

The argument continued good-naturedly all the way back at the Bannered Mare’s bar where the three women pushed away their worry for another day.

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Rowan didn’t leave the Bannered Mare for four days. The first two days, she stayed locked up in her room, barely tolerating Danica’s presence as she worked through her magical burnout. She’d only had visitors once during those two days and she doubted Farkas and Vilkas enjoyed having their boots vomited on.

On the third day, she migrated to a shadowy back corner of the Bannered Mare at Danica’s request. And by request, she meant Danica ordered her to get her “miserable ass” out of bed before she fused to it.

So, she sat with her journals, her drip pot brewing coffee, and a glass jar each of fresh cream and honey laid out on the table in front of her. No one besides Hulda had approached her (yet). She wasn’t looking forward to company, not in her vacant, melancholy mood.

She added entries to her journal, trying and failing to capture the very real fear she’d felt before she’d killed Nantea’s mercenaries. But her mind was elsewhere, lost in thoughts of how this was an actual world where random encounters weren’t truly random but the consequences of her own thoughtless actions.

“Good morning, Corvid.”

Absently, Rowan looked up.

Uthgerd the Unbroken stared down at her with her regular flat expression.

“Morning, ma’am,” Rowan replied. Though she mostly didn’t care, a part of her wanted to know why Uthgerd was bothering to speak to her when they had only met in passing before now.

Uthgerd’s mouth twitched. She inclined her head towards the empty chairs at Rowan’s table. “May I sit?”

For a moment, Rowan thought she’d accidentally taken Uthgerd’s regular table but quickly dismissed the idea. She’d chosen this table particularly because it wasn’t anyone’s regular. Even more puzzled, she nodded.

“Thank you.” Uthgerd sat down without hesitation.

“Would you like some coffee? It’s about finished brewing,” Rowan offered automatically.

Frowning, Uthgerd gave the pot a suspicious look and slowly nodded. “All right, I’ll try it. Though, that’s not why I came to speak with you.”
Nodding, Rowan removed the ceramic filter top from the pot, stirred the coffee, and sipped at it. Deeming it finished, she poured two mugs, slid one to Uthgerd, and added cream and honey to her own. “Try it black first and then add cream, honey, or both, depending on your tastes.”

Uthgerd eyed the coffee suspiciously but took a sip. Swirling her tongue in her mouth, she reached for the honey, drizzled some into her cup, and taste the drink again. This time, she nodded satisfactorily.

“I came to speak to you about your encounter with the mercenaries,” Uthgerd stated.

Rowan stopped stirring her coffee and met Uthgerd’s eyes. Blunt and to the point like she’d expected Uthgerd to be but not cruel. She tilted her head as permission to continue.

“I wanted to commend you.”

Rowan’s brows furrowed. Releasing her spoon, she tilted her head to the side and gave Uthgerd her full attention.

“Your situation was an unexpected and terrifying one; I know from . . . personal experience. Yet, you came out victorious. Your bravery and strength of will are commendable.” Uthgerd drank a gulp of her coffee. “You’re young, but you’ve proven to be both physically and mentally capable. I hope you understand that the difficulties you face are not merely the creation of your youthful naivety but the mechanisms of more malevolent sources.”

“I . . . thank you.” Rowan forced her tone not to sound questioning. She’d never inspected Uthgerd’s character closely in-game; she’d been just another mercenary. But Rowan could tell the mercenary was hinting at a past she’d most likely rather forget. All because she wanted to comfort Rowan. “Really, I mean that. Thank you.”

Uthgerd nodded. She finished her coffee in another two gulps and stood. “I appreciate you taking the time to listen to me. Most think us mercs have nothing to offer but our blades. It’s good to see that some know we have a bit of wisdom with our experience.” She tapped the empty mug. “That stuff is good. Soothing but still has a kick to wake a warrior up. I’ll see you around, Corvid.”

“Yeah, see you . . . .” Rowan trailed off as Uthgerd walked away, confused but warmed by the interaction.

Ysolda slid into the empty chair closest to Rowan. “What was that about?”

Rowan tapped the pads of her fingers against her mug. Smiling softly, she said, “She said the coffee was good.”

Ysolda took the misdirection with grace. “Oh? Then maybe you should sell it. I’ve only heard of coffee houses in Cyrodiil. It might be good to have one here in Whiterun.”

Rowan gave an acknowledging hum and allowed her smile to widen as she gave the idea some thought. “That’s actually not a bad idea.”

Morning Star 9, 4E 200 (January 9, 2018)

Dear Journal,

How does one open and run a business?

Sincerely,
While her journal didn’t know the first thing about operating a business, Ysolda was training to take over a business and was thrilled to share her knowledge with Rowan.

Too bad Rowan misjudged how much actual effort went into a business.

“Most of what you’ll need sounds like specialized equipment, especially for the type of scale you want. A personal bean grinder isn’t going to cut it for an actual café,” Ysolda said. She sat outside the corral, an ever-growing list in her hands.

Rowan groaned and rubbed her forehead against the saddle pad she’d placed on the mare. “I know. I don’t know what I was thinking. I mean, I can’t run a business! I’m barely in town unless I’m recovering from injuries! I can’t stay in one place long enough to run a business. Plus, I’m atrocious at math. What kind of business owner can’t use math?”

Ysolda scoffed. “Plenty can’t do maths, Corvid. What you really need is a business partner. Someone who can run the store while you galivant all across Skyrim. Preferably someone who already knows about coffee houses, or coffee at the very least.”

With another groan, Rowan moved back to the stable where the mare’s gear awaited. Rowan had specifically commissioned it from Skulvar to match the mare’s personality and Rowan’s own aesthetic.

She gathered the saddle and other gear and walked back to the mare’s side. The mare glanced at the gear, snorted, and turned around disinterestedly. Hopefully that meant she wouldn’t mind having all the gear strapped onto her.

Ysolda continued to chatter about all the things Rowan would need for her “business”; Rowan half listened as she saddled the mare. She still wasn’t fully sold on the idea of opening a café, even if it was half her idea in the first place.

Rowan adjusted the saddle pad before heaving the saddle onto the mare’s back. Again, the mare snorted but gave no reaction other than chewing on the bit in her mouth. Making sure the stirrups were in the right position and right length, Rowan first belted the front cinch strap, making sure it was secure but not tight enough to pinch. Then, she did the same with the flank strap. Rowan climbed onto a stool and slowly, ever so slowly, eased herself onto the saddle so she laid sideways across the mare’s back. She had tested the mare with the full saddle tack and sandbags but never with an actual rider. Rowan really didn’t want to get bucked off.

When the mare didn’t acknowledge her weight, Rowan stood back onto the stool and mounted her. She settled easily into the saddle and rested her hands on the saddle horn. The mare did nothing. Calmly, Rowan unraveled the reigns from around the horn and tested the length.

She hadn’t had much opportunity to work with the mare on leg commands; mostly she had only used vocal ones and whistles to get the mare used to them. Now, she could pair vocal and leg commands together. Eventually, she would stop using vocal commands altogether.

If the mare didn’t buck her off as they moved.

“Walk,” she said calmly, positioning her legs further back and squeezing along the mare’s sides.
With a snort, the mare started forward, her pace as calm as Rowan’s tone.

Rowan smiled. She brought the mare to a full stop and leaned forward. “You’re such a good girl. Thank you so much for not bucking me off and crushing my skull with your hooves. Will you work with me some more? Hm? I promise I’ll get you some nice apples to go with your feed and hay.” The mare flicked her tail, and Rowan took that as a yes.

Over the course of the next hour, she went through the list of nonverbal commands Skulvar had made sure she’d memorized. “No horse rider worth their salt uses vocal commands as their first choice. Any horse breeder’ll tell you that,” he’d said after drilling her for a solid hour.

Now, he stood off to the side of the corral with Ysolda, watching Rowan work the mare until the mare’s patience wore thin.

Rowan dismounted, praising the mare the entire time, and led her by the reigns back to the stalls so Rowan could remove the saddle and bit and give her a thorough grooming.

“Wonderful work,” Skulvar praised. He climbed onto the corral’s fence to better watch her. “Now, all she needs is a name.”

“Ching Shih,” Rowan said. She laid Shih’s gear over the side of the stall, picked up a grooming brush, and began grooming her.

“Pardon?”

“Her name. It's Ching Shih.”

“Huh. Sounds Breton. It got a meaning?”

“Ching Shih was an infamous pirate. She's often regarded as the most successful pirate in history because of the size of her fleet and that she died a free woman,” Rowan explained. She set the grooming brush aside once she’d given Shih a thorough brushing and picked up the hoof pick. Standing at Shih’s side and facing her tail, Rowan slid her hand down Shih’s leg, picked up her hoof, and used the pick to remove the dirt and rocks stuck there.

“Named after a ruthless pirate, eh?” Skulvar’s tone gave away his smile. “Very fitting. Well then, I believe Ching Shih here’s about ready to leave the corral and take you wherever you want to go. Don’t you agree, Corvid?”

Rowan smiled, though Shih’s bulk hid her from Skulvar and Ysolda. “Yes, I believe she is.” A thought occurred to her and her smile widened. “Hey, Skulvar . . . what do you know about armor for horses?”

Even as she and Adrianne planned Shih’s armor alongside the already started repairs for Rowan’s own armor, Rowan didn’t forget her promise to expand her spellwork. The next morning, she got up bright and early to sneak into Farengar’s office. People had been acting oddly around her, catching sight of her and sharing glances like there was some unspoken agreement that she wasn’t in on, and she didn’t like it. It made her neck and back prickle like she was being talked about constantly.

She settled into a relaxed lounge on Farengar’s chair. Dragonsreach, like the rest of the city, was only just waking; however, Rowan found herself filled with jittery energy and couldn’t stop herself from bouncing the leg balancing on her opposite knee.
A shout brought her out of her thoughts. She barely contained the desire to jolt and darted her gaze to
the entrance to Farengar’s room. The court wizard himself stood in the doorway, leaning heavily on
the frame and one hand clutched at his chest.

“Corvid!” he spat her name like a curse.

Her mouth curved mischievously. “Morning Farengar.”

He looked at her sourly and pulled his hood over his head. “It’s too early for you to be sneaking
around. Don’t you have anything better to do than scaring random citizens going about their days?
Like, perhaps figuring out a way to not die every time you leave the city?”

Her smile widened. That’s what she liked about Farengar. He never treated her differently even if she
had nearly died a few days before. “I’m actually here because of that.”

He snorted and approached the desk to look through his scattered notes. “And how does bothering
me help you not die?”

“What spells do you have for sale? Anything I don’t know already?”

Pausing his inspection, he hummed thoughtfully. “I believe I do, actually. Most of my new tomes are
Alteration and Illusion, though I believe I remember at least one Conjuration spell you haven’t
learned yet.” He entered the storage room at the back of his office and rummaged through it,
muttering to himself. He returned a few moments with six books. “Let’s see. I’ve got Ironflesh,
Detect Dead, Paralyze, Mayhem, Pacify, and Conjure Frost Atronach.”

“I’ll take them all,” Rowan said, hopping out of the chair and already beginning to count gold as
Farengar rattled off prices.

“I’ve sold more spell tomes to you in the past few weeks you’ve been in Whiterun than I did in all
the years before,” Farengar teased. He set the books on his desk and leaned against it.

“Don’t act like you don’t like it,” she retorted. She counted the money in neat piles of silvers and one
gold piece.

“Oh, I’m not complaining. It’s always nice to have extra funds for my research. But you know if you
want access to more spells, you’re going to have to travel to the College. I have no reason to order
any specialty tomes.”

She rolled her eyes and finished counting out the money. “I know that, but I’m not ready to head up
there yet. I will when I want to.”

“I understand that, as well. I couldn’t stand most of my Apprentice years. All I wanted was to get out
and conduct my research on my own terms, though the College itself is relatively relaxed with its
research restrictions from what I know of it.”

“What, you mean you never studied there?” she asked incredulously. As much as he tried to shove
her towards the College, he hadn’t been a student there?

He chuckled. “Only for a short time, and I wasn’t technically a student of the College. My teacher
took me there when she had to make the trip. I had a one on one teacher and student apprenticeship
like you started with. I found it offered greater opportunities to deeper study magic, but it was
definitely more confining than the College was. At the College, there were classes with other
students and a professor, and you would ask for one on one study sessions, but for the most part
students were left to themselves as long as they didn’t completely ignore their lessons in favor of their
personal studies.” With a smirk, he added, “Of course, you might garner a bit more attention than the average mage.”

Rowan rolled her eyes, placed the tomes in her pack, and moved to the exit. “Yes, thank you, Farengar. Like I need to be reminded of that. Have a nice day.”

“Good day to you, too, friend.”

Rowan snuck past the guards as she exited. She didn’t want to risk someone asking her to tell a few tales or worse – get invited by the Jarl to breakfast. She liked Balgruuf well enough, God knew he was friendly and appeared to like her for some reason but making small talk with prissy nobles wasn’t her idea of a nice morning.

She quickly moved down the stairs, only to be stopped by Anoriath in the market.

“Corvid! Before you rush off again, stop by the shop. Elrindir just finished some new arrows that we know you’ll want to try out,” he called out.

Rowan went some mildly annoyed to interested. “Oh? Cool! I'll go there now. Thanks!”

“No problem! Good to see you!”

“Good to see you, too!”

Rather than sneaking straight out the main gates, Rowan detoured to the Drunken Huntsman, going in the back entrance rather than the front.

Elrindir looked up from the large book he was writing in. He smiled and set down his quill. “Corvid,” he purred, “how wonderful to see you. And how are you this fine day?”

“I’m doing good. How are you?” she asked while approaching the counter.

“Never better now that my favorite customer is here,” he said, leaning onto the counter. “What can I do for you?”

“Anoriath said you’d just finished some new arrows. Mind if I take a look?”

If possible, his expression brightened further. “Of course not! Will you be wanting to look at bows, as well? I understand you’re quite attached to that old Nordic style one you expertly repaired; however, we’ve just gotten in a glass bow that I know you’ll appreciate. Here, let me get it for you while you look through the arrows.” He set out several arrow canisters from behind the counter with a flourish and retreated to the storage room.

A courier entered the shop. Rowan briefly looked up but returned to the arrows she was browsing. It was most likely for Elrindir or maybe Jenassa.

“Excuse me.”

Rowan looked up and turned to face the courier. “Yes?”

“Are you Rowan Corvid?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Got a letter for you. Your hands only,” he said, digging into his parcel bag and pulling out a letter.
Blinking slowly, Rowan handed him two silvers from her coin pouch and took the letter. “Thank you.”

The courier gaped at the silvers before stuttering out a thank you and leaving.

Elrindir seemed to appear from thin air to place a box carefully on the display counter. “Has word already spread that Whiterun’s dear Corvid can solve any problem?”

Rowan scoffed and flicked a bit of wax from the letter’s seal at him. Cracking the seal – a rose imprinted into red wax – she sat in one of the chairs around the fire pit.

Dear Rowan Corvid,

A vision from the Lady of Twilight has guided my hand in writing this letter to you. My Lady has shown me that you are in need of assistance, and She is willing to give it in exchange for completion of a task. There are no consequences for not agreeing to this task, and you may take my Lady’s offer whenever you wish.

If you choose to accept, travel to the Shrine of Azura outside of Winterhold. I patiently await your arrival.

Aranea Ienith

“So? What does it say?” Elrindir asked.

“Hm?” Rowan relaxed her tight grip on the letter. “Oh. It’s a job offer, up near Winterhold.”

“Winterhold, huh?” Elrindir glanced at the letter but made no move to look over Rowan’s shoulder and read it. “Well, if it’s up that way, then I say you should take it.”

“And why’s that?” The words had more of an edge to them than they probably should have had. Everyone knew what had happened with Nantea and her mercs by now.

“Because, even if the job’s a dud, you should go visit the College. All that crazy magic shit, someone up there’s got to know something about it.” He shrugged and moved back behind the counter. “I’m just saying, you could use the help.”

Frowning thoughtfully, Rowan glanced back at the letter. This is a Daedric Prince, she thought. You can’t trust them at all. Especially not with your magic. Azura probably wants your soul, or something like that.

But I really need the help . . .

To hell with it. What do I actually have to lose? Besides my soul, of course . . . .
Rowan didn’t leave for Winterhold right away. She still needed to test the repairs to her armor, fit the leather armor Adrianne had somehow managed to finish onto Ching Shih, and gather supplies for such a long journey.

Not to mention, leave the shard of Wuuthrad where the Companions would find it but not know she’d been the one to leave it.

A part of her wanted to ask Senna for advice on Azura, but she knew what she would say. Senna would give her that knowing, smirking look and ask her exactly why she thought she would have the *audacity* to tell a World Walker what to do.

She smirked as she approached Jorrvaskr. She would have to visit after she returned from Azura’s shrine, if only to have the hagraven laugh at her.

“Corvid!”

She brought herself out of her thoughts and saw Farkas standing at the top of the stairs. Smiling, she waved to him.

“Hey, Farkas.”

“You feeling all right?” he asked.

“Yeah, everything’s healed up.”

“Even your calf? Danica said it was pretty bad.” Farkas’ face pinched with concern even as he opened Jorrvaskr’s door for her.

Rowan nodded. “I took the stitches out yesterday, and Danica inspected it before I healed it. I’m all good.”

Farkas smiled briefly before his face fell. He closed the door behind them both and gave Rowan an uncharacteristically serious look. “You’re leaving again.”

_Holy shit, how did he know?!_ Rowan was careful not to let her surprise show. She nodded instead and walked towards the stairs.

Farkas followed her. “Why?”

“Why not?” she shot back as she descended the stairs. She hadn’t planned on being spotted before dropping off the wrapped shard, but now she needed a reason to be here. So, she took a left down the conveniently still-open passage down to the shrine.
After pausing in the entrance, Farkas followed her. “Not even a week ago, you were kidnapped and nearly killed. That’s a good ‘why not’.”

Rowan rolled her eyes. “I almost die every time I leave Whiterun. It’s not a big deal at this point.”

“It is a big deal,” Farkas growled. His presence loomed at Rowan’s back.

Whirling around, she glared at him, and he lost the intimidating presence. He looked at the ground rather than meet her eyes.

“Sorry,” he apologized quietly. “I shouldn’t have said it like that.”

Glaring at him, Rowan nodded slowly, turned back around, and continued down the stairs.

“Apology accepted, and you’re forgiven. I’m thankful you care about my safety, but let’s be real, I can die from anything, whether it’s my magicka turning on me, being killed in battle, or just an illness.”

Neither spoke as Rowan entered the shrine. Farkas hovered in the entrance like he always did when she visited, watching her light incense and make offerings but never entering the shrine itself.

After finishing her routine, Rowan knelt on the cushion she’d placed in front of the statue, settled her hands in her lap, and let the scent of the incense calm her.

She never knew what to say when she came here. Mostly, she just ended up rambling about whatever she’d been up to before cleaning up and leaving. Now, with Azura looming over her head, she looked into the statue’s eyes and asked for protection.

*I don’t know who you are, if you’re real or an actual deity, if it’s a bad idea to talk to you, or if you even care about me,* she thought, *but I’m for a bit of guidance and a lot of luck. I’m really not ready to die yet, especially since I still need to prove Akatosh wrong.*

The statue gave no answer – as per usual, but Rowan didn’t mind. Just the act of “speaking” her worries to the image of someone calmed her. Standing on creaking knees, she cleaned the altar until it gleamed and exited the shrine.

“Where will you go?” Farkas asked quietly.

“Winterhold,” she said calmly. “Someone’s requested me for a job.”

“Are you going alone?” he asked, voice strained.

She turned away from him and started up the stairs, smiling to herself. “Not this time.”

That night, when she heard howls in the distance, she snuck to the Underforge’s entrance, placed a cloth bundle soaked in rose water on the ground, and snuck away.

“Are you really leaving so soon?” Ysolda asked.

Rowan continued to lace the rest of her saddlebags onto Shih’s saddle. “Mm-hm.”

“But the armor you and Adrianne planned for Ching Shih isn’t even finished yet. Surely, you’d prefer to wait for the actual armor to be finished rather than just some makeshift leather armor,” Ysolda reasoned, her tone verging on pleading.
“The armor will be done by the time I get back, which be at least two weeks. I can’t wait that long for the job,” Rowan said. She kept her gaze on her gear rather than on the small group of people who’d come to see her off.

The Companions stood off to the side, their expressions obviously disapproving, but none of them tried to convince her to put her trip off. Farkas had tried enough of that the day before and gotten absolutely nowhere.

Rowan kept waiting for Vilkas to make a smartass comment, but all he’d done since arriving with the others was glower at her, eyes flitting over her bags of gear and supplies without comment and mouth pressed into a sour, grim line.

“You could at least take someone with you,” Ysolda continued.

Rowan patted Shih’s next. “I’m taking Shih, aren’t I? Who’s gonna bother me when I’m riding a giant, angry horse? No one, that’s who.”

Ysolda didn’t look convinced, just like she hadn’t the first four times Rowan had used that line.

“You, I’ll be fine. I’ll be using the main roads and won’t travel at night. I know how to hide my campsites. I have plenty of supplies and an excellent map. I’ll be back before you know it and I’ll get to tell you ‘I told you so’. ” Rowan pulled out her supply list from her robes’ front pocket and read it over for the hundredth time. At this point, she doubted she’d forgotten anything, but she couldn’t smother the spike of anxiety in her belly.

“If you say so . . . .” Ysolda murmured. “Just . . . promise me that you won’t take any unnecessary risks?”

Looking up at her, Rowan gave her a soft smile. “No unnecessary risks, I promise.”

Athis scoffed. “I’d hate to see what you call ‘unnecessary’.”

Rowan ignored him and continued to go over her list. “I’m just saying you guys are worrying too much. I'll be fine.”

“You swear?” Ysolda asked.

“Yes. I swear. I’ll be back in about two weeks. If it takes longer, I'll be sure to send a letter.” She smiled at Ysolda. “And you’ll promise me that you won’t drive yourself crazy worrying about me?”

“I’ll try.”

“That’s all I can ask for.” Rowan mounted Shih and nodded to the Companions. “Take care. Don't get into trouble while I'm gone.”

“The same to you, friend,” Aela said.

Farkas shifted in place. “Good luck and safe travels.” He nudged Vilkas and gave him a look, but Vilkas frowned and shook his head. Sighing, Farkas smiled weakly up at Rowan.

“I’ll be back soon,” Rowan said and nudged Shih onto the main road. She resisted the urge to look back at where the others were most likely watching her. If she did, she might change her mind and she couldn’t have that.

Rowan turned left and as she rode Shih up the path, was struck with a sudden sense of DeJa’Vu. She
laughed to herself, leaned down, and patted Shih’s neck.

“If I run into a bunch of trolls again, are you gonna help me fight them? I bet you will. You’re a big, angry terror and no troll can scare you,” she said to Shih.

Shih snorted in reply.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Surprisingly, the first half of their trip was mostly uneventful. Rowan kept a close eye out for a broken wagon and a jester, but Cicero was nowhere to be found. A few wolves tried to attack Shih, but she put her hooves through their skulls, ending the fight quickly. Rowan decided that their fur would make lovely padding and insulation for Shih’s main armor.

Rowan made camp as the sun began to set. She wanted to unload Shih but knew she couldn’t if she needed a quick getaway. Instead, she removed Shih’s bit and fed and watered her.

As night fell, Rowan’s skin prickled. She spent several minutes petting and murmuring to Shih, trying to calm her own nerves.

“At least you don’t seem bothered,” Rowan said. “You’ll keep a lookout, won’t you? No one can sneak up on me when you’re here.”

Shih shoved her head into Rowan’s chest, and Rowan clutched at her.

Rowan’s camp was left alone that night.

The routine continued for the entire first half of the trip. Rowan and Shih would cover as much ground as they could during daylight hours, make camp as the sun set, and Rowan would ask Shih to keep a lookout at night. Eventually, Rowan’s nerves settled until she felt relatively comfortable out in the open. She doubted it would ever be her preference, but she could tolerate it for the time being.

Their pace only slowed when the snow began.

“Well,” Rowan said as Shih slogged through another mound of snow covering the path, “at least there isn’t a blizzard. Yet.”

Shih snorted and shook her head; she was obviously unimpressed with all the white bullshit surrounding them.

Rowan patted her neck. “I know, girl. When we make camp tonight, I'll make sure to heat up your water. If my apples are frozen, I'll put them in there to thaw.”

The first day of travel through the snow was as uneventful as the other days had been, but the peace ended on the second day.

Rowan woke up feeling off. Something was different than yesterday, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

Shih felt the difference, too. Her ears flicked and her head tilted constantly.

I feel like I'm being watched, Rowan thought as she broke camp and loaded her gear onto Shih. Is it a bear? Or a pack of wolves? No, can’t be. Shih would’ve noticed them by now. That leaves—a person.

It’s okay. Don’t panic. You can handle it. You beat Nantea and her gang and you were injured.
Whoever this is, you can beat them no problem.

Being watched kept Rowan on edge the whole day. When she stopped to make camp, her fear had changed to irritation. She'd rather her stalker revealed themselves, so she could deal with them than play this game. She thought about calling out to the person, demanding they show themselves, but thought that might give away her advantage – if they couldn’t tell she already knew she was being followed.

Come to think of it, that might be why her stalker hadn’t revealed themselves. Or they might have been waiting for a better opportunity.

Rowan scowled and crawled inside her tent after murmuring for Shih to keep watch. “Whoever they are, they better hurry up or else I'll go find them my damn self, and it won’t be pretty.”

She fell into a restless sleep, waking at every sound. Finally, exhaustion pulled her into a deeper sleep.

However, she didn’t get to sleep for very long.

Shih’s roar woke Rowan when it was still pitch dark outside.

Rowan scrambled for her gear – she still wasn’t used to sleeping fully armed even now – and poked her head out of her tent flap.

Shih’s roars cut through the otherwise silent night. Rowan’s skin to prickle near painfully. Through the darkness, Rowan managed to spot someone dodging Shih’s furious stomps and charges. She couldn’t see enough to use her bow but shooting a mage light at the trespasser gave her enough light to charge and tackle them into the snow.

Grateful she’d slept in armor and furs, Rowan slammed her gauntleted fist into the person’s face. They grunted, cursed, and threw their own fists at whatever part of Rowan they could reach.

She hissed at the impacts, but most of the blows glanced off her armor. She tried to keep the attacker pinned with her legs and arm while she reached for a dagger at her waist like Farkas had taught her. Unfortunately, she was much lighter than her opponent. They tossed her to her side and scrambled on top of her to pin her.

Shih roared and trampled the ground around them as they wrestled. Rowan’s blood pounded in her ears, and her heart thudded painfully in her chest. Her fingers shook from adrenaline and the cold.

She managed to wedge her attacker’s arm between both their waists before they could grab their own dagger. She grabbed a knife – not her proper dagger but this would do – in her left hand. Cursing, she jammed the knife underneath one of the unprotected grooves in her opponent’s armor until it hilted.

“To Oblivion with you,” the attacker snarled.

Rowan jerked the dagger – not exactly to remove it but to let the attacker know she was in charge.

The attacker gasped. Rowan used their surprise to wrestle them to the ground again. This time, she jerked the dagger free. Blood gushed from the wound to stain her new robes. Blindly, she shoved the dagger between a different set of grooves. She bared her teeth despite her attacker not being able to see her.

“Fuck you, too,” she said.
She gathered her magicka for a lightning spell but flinched when her magicka pushed back. She faltered long enough to give her attacker an opening. Growling, they drove their own knife into her side. The blade glanced harmlessly off her armor for the most part, but the tip wedged itself between the glass scales. The knife sawed into her every time she moved.

With a sharp cry, Rowan forced past her magicka’s discomfort, grabbed it, and shoved a half-formed lightning spell into her attacker. Lightning crackled around them both in a shock of near-white light.

Rowan heard Shih roar and something that sounded like cracking trees. She flinched away from the noise. She couldn’t see where it was coming from. The lightning and raw magic had blinded her, and she was still blinking spots from her vision. The scent of ozone and burning flesh surrounded her, invading her throat and lungs.

Gagging, she shoved away from her attacker – or, their corpse, at least. They hadn’t moved, so she assumed they were dead.

Their knife was still caught in her armor; it wiggled and scraped at her whenever she shifted. She awkwardly reached around and – gently – tugged the knife loose. The new wound burned.

Making a noise of pain and annoyance low in her throat, Rowan used her still-finnicky magicka to examine the wound.

*Not really a stab. More of a deep scrape, though the edges are more ragged than I’d like.* Forcing her magicka to cooperate, she healed the wound. The blood staining her armor and robes quickly froze in the cold. *Great. I already need new robes.*

Stomping caught Rowan’s attention. She blinked against the darkness and managed to see Shih shuffling around the edge of their camp.

“Shih,” Rowan said cautiously. Shih didn’t look like she was going to bolt, but she was worked up and might attack Rowan if she felt threatened.

Shih paused at her voice. Rowan couldn’t see it but she imagined Shih’s ears were swiveling as she searched for danger.

Rowan lit another mage light and let it float between them to illuminate the now quiet clearing and the corpse cooling next to her. She stood slowly, wincing as her knees popped, the sound too loud in the silence.

Shih snorted and bobbed her head. Hesitantly, she stepped forward.

Rowan didn’t move. She knew better than to approach before Shih was ready.

Shih stepped closer and closer until she stood right in front of Rowan. She observed Rowan for several moments before nickering softly and shoving her head into Rowan’s chest.

Permission granted, Rowan pet Shih’s face and neck. “Good girl. You were so brave. Thank you for taking them on alone. If you weren’t here, I wouldn’t’ve known they were there. Thank you so much. You’re such a good girl.” Rowan knew her murmurings was mostly for her own comfort, but her tone also soothed Shih, so there wasn’t any harm in it.

Still petting Shih, Rowan looked around their campsite. Shih’s hoofprints marked most of the wreckage, though Rowan’s tent had been left untouched. Shih must have intercepted the attacker before they reached it. Rowan made a mental note to give Shih extra apples when she had them available.
Rowan sighed and pressed her forehead to Shih’s. “What do you think? Stay or pack up?” Neither were satisfactory options; one left them in an infiltrated camp while the other had them traveling in the dark.

Rowan gave a full body shudder at the idea of trying to find a new campsite at night or worse – not stopping at all. She could feel the paranoia creeping up her spine already.

“Guess we’re staying,” she muttered in defeat. She ran her fingers through Shih’s mane. “Stay close, girl. Anything could be out here.”

Rowan slept fitfully the rest of the night. Though “sleep” was a rather strong word for “tossing and turning and waking at every imagined noise for hours until finally dozing right before the sun came up”.

Shih eagerly awaited Rowan’s waking, going so far as to poke her head into Rowan’s tent and make low noises of irritation when Rowan didn’t pack quickly enough.

Despite Shih’s impatience and her own spiking nerves, Rowan took the time to inspect her attacker’s snow-covered corpse. He looked to be an Imperial – if Rowan judged his facial features right – and was clad in mismatched armor and bandoliers. A guild-less thief then.

She let out a sigh of relief. Just a thief. Nothing to worry about. Just a random encounter she couldn’t have prevented.

Shih didn’t care about Rowan newfound relief. She snorted and stomped her hooves in the snow to catch Rowan’s attention.

“All right, all right, just let me search ‘im,” Rowan said. She knelt down, shivering as the cold seeped through her robes and leg armor, and rifled through the thief’s many pockets. Her face scrunched up when she found little of interest or use. A few coins and lockpicks, another elven dagger, and a few dull gems were all the loot the thief’s corpse had to offer. With a snort of her own, Rowan packed away her meager loot, stood, brushed the snow from her knees, and mounted Shih.

“All right, let’s get out of here.”

That evening, Rowan took extra time to clean out another pace in their newest campsite. She placed a blanket in the space and sat down after she and Shih had finished their dinner. There was still plenty of light despite the setting sun, though Rowan had no plans for this to take too long.

As Rowan settled into her usual meditative position on the blanket, she rolled the tension from her neck and shoulders. Shih stood at the other side of the clearing, silent but strangely attentive in her watch.

With one last deep in hale, Rowan focused her thoughts inward.

Rowan didn’t meditate, not exactly. Rather than allowing herself to connect to the Pathways, she sought out her own magicka and . . . reacquainted herself with it. She should have done it right after absorbing the Word, so she would have an idea of what exactly had went on that day. However, with everything that had happened, the examination had fallen to the wayside. But the fight with the thief had reminded her how off kilter she and her magicka were. She couldn’t approach Azura in such a state; doing so would be practically inviting the Prince to kill or enslave her or whatever the Prince secretly wanted from her. No, best to do this now and be ready to fight if she needed to.
Now, with the snow chilling her even through her layers of fur and armor, she attempted to rebalance herself. She inhaled deeply, allowing the cold air around her to fill her lungs. She shivered and tensed to force the shudders out. She couldn’t concentrate if her body kept jittering around like that.

Reaching into her magicka well, she took in her magicka’s status with a gentle sweep, like running her fingertips through the surface of a lake. Her magicka hummed and gave a rolling stretch in response, reminding Rowan of a cat having its nap interrupted. She sent back her own inquisitive hum. Her magicka responding leisurely without a nearby threat to react to but allowed itself to be pulled from her core into her channels. Warmth spread from her center outwards. She sighed in pleasure as her magicka steadily made its way to even her frozen fingers and toes, thawing them until they buzzed pleasantly.

Her magicka thrummed at her ease. Rowan tilted her head back and gave a short pull/push at her magicka to entice her magicka to flow through her body continuously rather than stay in place.

Encouraged by the motion, her magicka did as requested.

Rowan shuddered at the pleasurable comfort of her magicka’s flow; the feeling gave her a sense of security that few other things could, and it almost made the drawbacks of her magicka worth the agony – almost.

With a last contented hum, Rowan released her magicka. It gradually cycled back to her well, leaving her comfortably warm, drowsy, and lazily sated. Rowan tilted her head back and let out a deep, near-moan of a sigh.

“Damn, that’s good,” she murmured. “Better than getting fucked.” She stood on weak knees and gathered up the blanket, shaking the snow off it. She stumbled to her gear and packed away the blanket. Taking out her map, she sat on a log she’d dragged next to the fire and traced her and Shih’s path.

“We should be close, if I’m remembering the shrine’s location and following its aura correctly,” she said. The usual prickle of nerves didn’t appear as she let her thoughts drift to Azura and what the Daedric Prince could want with her. Her magicka thrummed in her well, eager and attentive for the first time since she absorbed the Word.

Already dosing as she packed the map away, Rowan thought, *Maybe this won’t be as bad as I think it’ll be . . . let’s just hope I didn’t just jinx myself.*

Rowan directed Shih onto the partially hidden path she assumed led to Azura’s shrine. Come to think of it, she really should have asked someone for directions . . . Oh well, too late now.

She’d mostly been following the aura the statue’s magicka gave off – a darker, thicker, and more guarded presence than that of the Gildergreens and Temple of Kyanreth. The presence didn’t feel particularly malicious and gave off a distinct intelligence. The shrine knew of Rowan’s approach – or Azura was using the shrine to watch Rowan approach her shrine. Either way, Rowan was being watched.

“What do you think, Shih?” Rowan ignored the itch growing on her shoulders and leaned down to make sure Shih heard her. “You think this is the right path?” Shih snorted. “Yeah, you’re right. If it isn’t, we’ll just turn around. No exploring weird ruins or caves until we know what whack shit the Daedric Prince wants.”
The path gradually grew steeper and the snow deeper. Eventually, Rowan had to dismount and guide Shih through the thickest snow for fear of Shih stumbling and breaking a leg.

“This place fucking sucks,” Rowan grumbled, thigh deep in snow. She knew that it made sense for there to be a lot of snow on the path since this was, you know, Winterhold, and not many people even came to the town, let alone to Azura’s shrine, but this was ridiculous. Thick snow on an upward incline on a goddamn mountain. Fuck Skyrim. “‘Winter wonderland’ my ass, more like a billion tons of white bullshit that’s in my way. Should just fucking melt this shit—” Rowan paused, considered the idea, and said, “You idiot. Of course. You can just fucking melt the snow instead of having it shoved up your ass. Fucking Christ, and you call yourself a mage.” She lit a flame spell in one hand and kept hold of Shih’s reigns in the other. “Okay, Shih, don’t freak out. I'm just gonna melt this shit and get it out of our way.”

Shih grunted and only briefly flinched her head at the flames blazing in front of her. With her path now clear, Shih stepped less cautiously and readily followed Rowan up the path.

Rowan looked up to check the sun’s position and nearly stumbled at the sight of Azura’s statue. This must be the right path, she thought dumbly. No other path could put her so close to the shrine. She quickened her pace but with a stiffer gait than before.

The snow became shallower the closer Rowan and Shih got to the path’s mouth. Rowan paused to brush the worse of the clinging snow from her robes and Shih’s fur. Only when she’d calmed the worst of her nerves did she approach the shrine. Rather than climb the steps and greet the lone priestess, Rowan stopped at the shrine’s base and waited to be acknowledged.

Surrounded by quiet, Rowan couldn’t help but focus on every single noise. The wind whistling across the snow; Shih’s every shuffle and snort; the far-off praying of the priestess; her own thudding heartbeat – it all enclosed her in a wall of too much but not enough. The sounds were there but barely so, hovering at the edge of acknowledgement.

The shrine’s steady but wispy presence frayed her already shredded nerves. Why couldn’t it have been bolder, more in-your-face? Rowan could deal with that. Welcomed it even; she could fight against boldness, could shove her own magicka back with just as much force. But something like this? Vapor-like and creeping just alone the edge of her senses? She wanted to lash out, force it out of hiding and into her view. She couldn’t feel it and she needed to.

Rowan grit her teeth and closed her eyes, trying to focus on something, anything else to take her mind off the screeching silence—

“Greetings, Lady Corvid.”

Rowan jumped. Magicka crackled to her free hand automatically. She froze with her hand not even waist high, sparks dancing across her fingers.

Aranea smiled kindly. “I apologize for startling you. I should not have let my eagerness get the best of me.”

Slowly relaxing, Rowan lowered her hand and cleared her throat. “It’s fine. I should’ve been paying attention.” Her palms stung. She casually maneuvered them behind her back to hide the bloody nail prints in her palms.

Aranea smiled kindly. “I apologize for startling you. I should not have let my eagerness get the best of me.”

“‘You have had a long journey. Please, sit. I will make us tea before we discuss why you have come,” Aranea said, motioning towards her tent at the top of the shrine’s stairs. At Rowan’s
hesitance, she added, “Leave your worries and fears at the base of my Lady’s shrine, Lady Corvid. My Lady holds no surprises – good or bad – for you. I shall speak plainly and without dramatics. Worry not, you shall not be tricked while in my Lady’s presence.”

Rowan gave a short huff and nod. She ordered Shih to stay where she was and followed Aranea up the shrine’s steps. However, no matter how she tried to calm herself, her heart continued to thud behind her ribs.

“She has a vision that is true,” Aranea said as she tended to the fire.

Rowan sat underneath the tent but close enough to feel the fire’s warmth. Rather than linger on the shrine’s hidden but watchful presence, she watched Aranea.

Aranea filled a clay pot with fresh snow and hung it over the fire. Then, she sat next to Rowan, leaving enough space between them to not crowd Rowan.

“I believe you already have an idea as to what sort of bargain my Lady wishes to enact with you,” Aranea said.

Rowan nodded. “I have an idea as to what she might want from me, but I don’t know how she could help with my magic. She needs someone to retrieve Azura’s Star, right?”

“Yes, Malyn Varen’s research is blasphemous and must be stopped. My Lady would ask that you retrieve Her Star and return it here.”

“And what exactly is she offering in return?” Rowan asked cautiously. She swore she felt the shrine’s presence thicken momentarily, but when she reached out with her magicka to inspect it, she detected no changes.

Smiling, Aranea checked the pot and shaved some tea leaves from a pressed block into it. After sitting back down, she said, “My Lady has informed me of your difficulties with your magicka. They are to be expected given your level of power. In the near-words of my Lady, since no other has stepped forward to assist you in your suffering, She offers her own assistance.”

“And that means?”

“My Lady is greatly skilled in the matters of magic. While She has admitted that She cannot solve your problems completely, She can offer knowledge that few – if any – mortals would have access to. My Lady has informed me that this knowledge would allow you to access the Pathways without causing severe harm to your physical and metaphysical selves. At the rate that you are going, the number of meditation sessions your body can handle is numbered, though I do not know the exact limit. Eventually, your magicka will erode your veins before spreading throughout your body and eating away at it. You will literally rot while you are still alive.” Aranea took the pot off the fire and poured them each a cup of tea.

Rowan swallowed around the lump in her throat and took the offered tea. “Uh, did Azura, uh, tell you that? Or are you assuming?”

“My Lady showed me a vision of a World Walker who died long ago. They were only slightly older than you before their magicka killed them, though not before it drove them insane.”

Against her better judgment, Rowan found herself relaxing at Aranea’s bluntness. “I’ve been wondering how exactly it would kill me. Is that the main option?”

Aranea sipped at her tea as she thought. “My Lady showed me much and, I must apologize, but it
was quite a lot of information to take in. Nothing like connecting to the Pathways themselves but . . .
difficult. However, I know there are many ways your magicka can and will overwhelm you – given
time and opportunity. You, of course, are already aware of this."

Rowan hadn’t exactly known about the whole ‘rotting from the inside out’ thing but got the gist of
what Aranea was saying. This sounds entirely too easy and normal . . . “And Azura told you she can
help me.”

“Yes,” Aranea said, nodding. “She stated clearly that once you returned Her Star here, She would
impart the knowledge on you Herself through a metaphysical transfer of knowledge.”

There’s the weird part. “And how would that work?”

“Similarly to how my Lady gifts me with knowledge and visions, though on a more intense scale.
She will use the shrine to connect to you through your magicka and then she shall transfer the
knowledge to you. It is possible She may even speak to you,” Aranea explained.

Frowning, Rowan stared out at the fire and contemplated what she had been told. Obviously, she
couldn’t be sure anything Aranea told her was the truth. While Azura wasn’t known for lying, she
was – how was it always put? – “cruel but wise and always got what she wanted”. So, what did she
want from Rowan?

Might as well ask.

Rowan turned back to stare at Aranea. “What does Azura want from me? Besides retrieving the
Star.”

Furrowing her brows, Aranea tilted her head to the side and frowned. “Azura wants nothing from
you other than the completion of the task and your acceptance of your assistance.”

“That really can’t be it,” Rowan blurted out. Before Aranea could interpret an insult of some sort,
Rowan continued, “Look, no offense, but Azura’s a Daedric Prince, and I’m a mortal magic
powerhouse. I don’t mean to insult you or Azura, but you can’t really expect me to believe what
you’re telling me.”

“I understand. However, I assure you that my Lady requires nothing else from you. Not your loyalty,
devotion, and especially not your soul. She requires and wants nothing you are unwilling to give.”
Aranea paused to tap her fingers along the rim of her cup. “But, if you choose not to believe me, then
you may walk away with no consequences. My Lady has no interest in forcing or coercing you into
an agreement.”

Rowan held Aranea’s stare and chewed on the inside of her cheek. Fuck. Just fuck. Scowling, she
swirled her tea and looked past the fire to the snow-covered mountains. I shouldn’t have come here.
This was a bad idea. Should’ve just stayed my ass in Whiterun until my magicka killed me.
Goddamn. Fuck. Shit. Fuckin’ shit fuck goddamn—

You’re an idiot and you’re going to die.

“I won’t be Azura’s Champion. I owe her nothing after the deal’s complete. No loyalty, no favors,
no souls – especially not mine.” Saying the words felt like pulling her own teeth, but Rowan couldn’t
stop herself.

“Correct,” Aranea said serenely.

Face pinched, Rowan asked, “So, where do I start? I know the elf mage in Winterhold, but this
would go quicker if I knew where Malyn was.”

Aranea didn’t smile victoriously like Rowan expected her to. Instead, she sighed. “Unfortunately, I do not know where Malyn has holed himself up like the skeever he is. He has used magic to hide himself from my Lady’s sight. The elf who studies stars is the only clue I can give you, I’m sorry.”

Exhaling through her nose, Rowan shrugged. “All right.” She finished her cooling tea and stood, exiting the tent. “I’ll go get started then. See you when I get back.”

“Wait!” Aranea fumbled to set her cup down and follow Rowan’s quick exit. “Please, rest here for the night. You’ve traveled such a long way and you must be tired. Please, rest in the shadow of my Lady’s shrine. No harm will come to you here, I swear it.”

Rowan frowned. Her eyes slowly trailed up Azura’s statue, coming to a stop at its face. Azura’s serene expression gave nothing away and she stood powerful and unshakeable as she held the sun and moon in each palm, so unlike the bloody shrine beneath Jorrvaskr.

Rowan found herself nearly overwhelmed with a wave of homesickness. She wanted to go back to that dusty pit. Azura’s shrine was too open, too easily found. Anyone could come here if they wanted. Only those allowed in could enter the bloody shrine, and it was hidden and protected beneath a den of werewolves. It was safe and would endure for eternity. Azura’s shrine could be attacked, defiled, destroyed and—

Rowan tore her gaze away.

She shoved down her nausea and reached out to the shrine with her magicka. Its presence was . . . calculated. Every inch of was carefully measured, from how thick it sat around the shrine to the distance it kept from Rowan and what it let her see. The presence regarded her with only cool acknowledgement, like they were strangers passing on the street rather than two magical beings making a tentative deal with one another.

Her own magicka sparked and hissed its displeasure but it didn’t react violently like she thought it would. This reaction was more like a warning – don't let your guard down, don’t trust anyone, be ready to run – something that Rowan agreed with.

Rowan forced the stiffness out of her muscles. Azura didn’t care that she was here. They'd come to an agreement, and the Prince wanted nothing else from her. Her magicka would warn her if something changed. She’d be on her guard. She could stay the night. Nothing would happen.

Maybe this time I won’t be lying to myself, she thought. The past few weeks of exhaustion were catching up to her. She rolled her shoulder just to hear it pop. “All right, I'll stay the night. Just let me get Shih settled.”

Aranea beamed and said something about clearing space for Rowan’s tent by the fire, but Rowan only half listened before walking down the steps to Shih.

“Seems like we’ll be staying here tonight,” she muttered. She unpacked her gear from Shih’s saddle and dug out her own camping gear. She tended to Shih’s needs first, going through her evening routine of starting a fire, melting snow for Shih’s water, and feeding her.

Popping her back, Rowan gathered her tent and a bag of rations and returned to Aranea. Aranea fussed over a kettle on the fire while Rowan set up her tent.

Almost as soon as Rowan finished with her tent and sleeping roll, Aranea spoke up. “I’m not sure how you fare with Dunmer cuisine, but it’s all I have to offer. I never quite took to the local
“Oh, no, that’s fine. You don’t need to feed me,” Rowan protested, slightly alarmed that Aranea felt the need to feed her.

“Please, I insist.” Aranea stirred the pot, not quite meeting Rowan’s eyes. “I . . . was actually hoping you would indulge me a bit. Not many travel to the shrine anymore, even the most devout only come once every year or so.”

She just wants some company? Well . . . that’s not bad. I can do that. “I’m afraid I’m not very good company,” Rowan said, though she moved to stand across from Aranea near the fire.

Aranea smiled. “That’s all right. I doubt I am either.” She added several spices to the pot before asking, “So, tell me, what has been going on in Skyrim? Is that civil war still going on? The Nords were fighting the Empire about something, though I can’t for the life of me remember what it was.”

“The Civil War? Yeah, I think . . . At least, it should be still going on. I haven’t heard much of it myself. Nothing’s really happened around Whiterun. The most I hear is a few brief conversations about it but nothing big. I think it’s more of a stalemate right now. And the Nords are fighting the Empire about the White-Gold Concordat. They want to freely worship Talos again, at least that’s what I’ve heard about it.” Rowan frowned. Now that she thought about it, it really was weird that she had barely heard anything about the war. It was a large part of the game, after all. Maybe she was just early? Or maybe Whiterun just hadn’t become as affected by the war as it would later be.

Aranea shrugged. “Human conflicts last for so little time. I wouldn’t be surprised if the passion of the cause has already died out. Humans rarely want to fight for decades, especially against a much larger and stronger enemy. No offense.”

“None taken. You’re right, anyway. Humans don’t like fighting for decades. And if fights do go on for longer than that, we don’t like to hear about them. Or the government covers it up.”

“Hm, I’m familiar with that. One of the good things about being in Skyrim is that I no longer have to deal with the House politics.” She tasted whatever was in the pot and hummed happily. She spooned a bowl of noodles, vegetables, fish, and broth for Rowan and handed it to her, along with a pair of lacquered chopsticks.

“If you have your own utensils, you may, of course, use them. Traditionally, though Dunmer use chopsticks,” Aranea said.

Rowan waved off her concern and took the food. “I use chopsticks all the time, well, not since coming to Skyrim since Nords don’t use them, but at home I did.”

Aranea squinted at her as she thought. Her face brightened. “Ah, yes, I remember. Bretons have similar cuisine to Dunmer. Oh, and I apologize for my pronunciation. I know that isn’t the proper way it’s said, but it’s all the Nords can say.”

Rowan had no clue what she was talking about, so she waved off Aranea’s concern, and Aranea seemed content to leave the topic at that.

Rowan sipped at her broth and immediately let out a happy moan. The dish reminded her of jjamppong – something she hadn’t had for ages even before she’d been sent to Skyrim. Her family had Thai neighbors when she’d been in middle school and the grandmother had them over every Saturday night for jjamppong. The flavors weren’t an exact match, of course, though she hadn’t expected them to be.
“You like it, I take it?” Aranea asked with a smile. She slurped noodles from her own bowl.

“Yes. What kind of fish is this? It holds up really well.”

“Slaughterfish. Dunmer have been smoking and drying them for centuries. They survive everywhere in Morrowind. Though, traditionally, we would have more clams, mussels, octopus, and sometimes sailfin on special occasions.”

“What about the noodles? I haven’t found noodles anywhere in Whiterun.” Rowan slurped a huge mouthful of noodles, getting broth all around her mouth and spreading the pleasant burn from the spices.

“Nords making and selling noodles? Ha! That won’t ever happen. You have to buy them from a Dunmer, or maybe a Breton, if they’ve opened a noodle shop. I know there’s one in Windhelm, possibly another in Riften or Markarth. But trust me, if there’s a large or even mediocre population of Dunmer in some place, there’s going to be at least one noodle shop and one tea house. They’re the natural places our people congregate, other than silt striders and mushrooms.”

Rowan smiled. “I’ll have to visit Morrowind to get the traditional style then. Any suggestions?”

“Seyda Neen. That's where you’ll find the best ouafe min. They use a chili oil made from chilis that only grow in that region that they ferment for at least a year before mixing with mushroom oil and fermenting again for another three to six months. It's perfect. Once you try it, no other ouafe min will compare,” Aranea said wistfully.

Rowan looked down at her bowl. “Have you ever thought about going back, to Morrowind, I mean. People still live there, though I’ve heard it’s full of ash.”

Aranea shook her head and tossed another log on the fire. “No. Maybe one day I will return, but it won’t be for a long time. My place is here, tending to the shrine. When it is my time to return to our homeland, Azura will tell me so.”

Humming, Rowan said quietly, “I don’t put a lot of faith in gods or fate, but . . . I hope you get to go home sooner than you think.”

Aranea’s face bloomed open in surprise. “I—thank you. That's very kind of you. I shall pray that you find the home you are looking for, as well.”

Rowan's chest clenched painfully. She tried to cover the feeling with a smile but felt it falter. “Thank you. And thank you for the food.”

“Thank you for your company.” Aranea inclined her head towards Rowan’s tent. “Rest. You seem like the type to prefer early starts, and you need your sleep. No harm will come to you here, I swear.”

Nodding, Rowan finished her dinner and handed her bowl to Aranea. She crawled into her sleeping roll, more at ease in Azura’s shadow but still off kilter, though not because of Azura. She couldn’t get her mind off the way she hadn’t thought of her home dimension when Aranea had mentioned her home. She’d thought about the bloody shrine and its statue’s penetrating stare.

Rowan fell asleep to the memory of incense and old blood.
sorry this chapter's taken me so long. i fell into a rut in January and early February and haven't felt like writing or editing anything i've written. thank you for all the wonderful comments! they make me so happy, especially on the days when just thinking about writing is exhausting

And we’re just going to ignore that.

Rowan pulled her hood farther over her face and turned away from the College – motions that the few guards meandering around Winterhold would believe to be reactions to the cold wind. Really, Rowan just needed a distraction so she wouldn’t waltz straight up to the College.

Almost as soon as she and Shih had gotten within sight of Winterhold, the College had reached out to her, eager and beckoning and near-smothering in its insistence that she enter its walls. Rowan drew her magicka in as close to herself as she could. She wouldn’t be able to manage such control for long; her magicka would fight her hold soon enough. She definitely wasn’t looking forward to that inevitable core-deep ache.

Grumbling to herself, Rowan tied Shih to the provided posts outside the inn and, after tending to Shih, entered the inn. Or tried to. The door’s hinges were frosted over, so Rowan had to jerk at the door to open it.

“Winterhold, my ass. Should rename this place Satan’s frozen asshole,” she muttered under her breath, knocking snow off her shoulders, hood, and boots before entering the inn. She tugged her scarf further over her mouth and moved close to the room’s center firepit.

“Welcome to The Frozen Hearth. We’ve got food, drink, and rooms to spare,” the barkeep called out. “Let me know if I can get you anything.”

Rowan looked to the barkeep and nodded in acknowledgement but lingered near the fire for several more minutes until she could properly feel her fingers and toes. She ignored the bar’s few other patrons – one of which was well on his way to becoming blackout drunk if all the bottles on his table belonged to him – and approached the bar.

“I’m looking for an elven mage, an Altmer, actually. I heard he’s been staying here, is that true?” she asked.

The barkeep frowned. “If you’re looking for mages, you’ll have better luck at the College. It’s full of ‘em.”

Shaking her head, Rowan said, “No, this mage doesn’t study at the College anymore. He’s said to live here now. Does he?” At the man’s hesitance, she added, “I’m not here for trouble. I just need his help with something. He’s the expert on stars, or so I’ve been told.”

Still frowning, the barkeep relaxed slightly. “I don’t know about stars, but there’s Nelacar. He’s been renting a room here for a while. He might be who you’re looking for.”
“Thank you. Now, what sort of food do y’all have up here?”

Rowan ended up with a cup of mulled wine and hardy fish stew, though this one wasn’t nearly as pleasant to eat as the one Aranea had fed her. She ate while she figured out how to broach the subject of Azura’s Star to Nelacar. No way was she mentioning Azura or the quest. She could probably just say Malyn’s research was causing some disturbances and she’d been sent to stop it. Simple and not entirely a lie, and best of all, it was believable.

Satisfied with her plan, she finished eating and asked the barkeep which room was Nelacar’s. The barkeep pointed nodded to the large room off to the side, and she slid off her stool with a strange intensity humming at her core.

Oh, wait, that was her magicka fizzing against the wall she’d built around her well. Rowan poked a few holes in the wall for her magicka to escape from, reluctant as she was to attract the College’s attention.

Or Nelacar’s, she thought. Had to keep that freakish magicka under wraps from now on. Didn’t want anyone else planning a kidnapping now, did we? Ha ha ha ha . . . anyway.

Nelacar looked up from his book when she knocked on the open doorway.

“‘Yes?’” he asked.

“Hello, my name is Minerva,” Rowan said. She entered the room but kept a respectful distance from Nelacar. “Are you Nelacar?”

“Yes,” Nelacar said suspiciously. “What do you want?”

“I was told you studied stars, is that correct?”

Nelacar’s face scrunched up, and his back straightened. “Who sent you? Was it the College? The Jarl? We agreed there would be no more questions.”

“It doesn’t matter who sent me or even why. I need to know what you know about Malyn Varen, his research, and Azura’s Star. Tell me that, and I’ll take my leave as quietly as I came.” Rowan kept her voice low and neutral while her stare never wavered from Nelacar.

His face crumpled. “Please, don’t do anything rash! I’ll tell you everything you want to know!” He shifted awkwardly in his face and fiddled with his book. “I . . . assume you know Malyn was working with soul gems?” Rowan nodded. “Well, when I worked under him, Malyn said he was trying to figure out how Azura’s Star never broke despite absorbing multiple souls and being used for enchantments. What he was really planning was to make himself immortal. He was dying you see, disease. He wanted to store his own soul inside the Star and live forever. It drove him mad. Students died. The College eventually exiled him. After that, he took a few loyal disciples to Ilinalta’s Deep and hasn’t been seen or heard from since.”

Nelacar gnawed on his lips and tightened his grip on his book. “Look . . . I don’t care who sent you, but . . . don’t take the Star back to Azura! The Daedra are evil! They're the ones who drove Malyn insane!”

Inclining her head towards Nelacar as she turned to leave, Rowan said, “Thank you for your assistance, Nelacar. I’ll put this information to good use.”

“I—please! If you bring the Star to me, I can purify it! It would no longer be a Daedric Artefact but merely a reusable soul gem. Surely a mage such as yourself would find use in
that?” Nelacar pleaded, halfway out of his seat.

Rowan looked over her shoulder at him. “. . . I’ll think about it.”

And then she left.

She nodded to the barkeep before exiting the inn. She approached a guard for directions to Ilinalta’s Deep, and they marked it on her map with only a moderate amount of complaining. She untied, mounted, and directed Shih out of Winterhold moments later.

The College whined and tried to entice her to stay, but she pulled her magicka in close until she was out of its range.

_Nope. I’m currently in the middle of one magical disaster-in-process. I don’t need two, thank you very much._

“Come on, Shih. Let’s get out of here.”

Rowan stopped briefly at a courier station to mail a letter to Ysolda, warning her that she would miss the two-week deadline she’d made for herself.

_If only Skyrim quests didn’t take me all across the fucking country_, she thought as she paid extra to have the letter delivered ASAP.

She’d have to go to that lake past Riverwood – _Oooo, maybe I can visit Anise on my way back, that’ll be fun!_ – and find that sunken fortress, if she was remembering the dungeon correctly.

Shih automatically picked up the pace as soon as they were free of the snow. This time, no wolves or thieves bothered them, though a saber cat tried to make a meal of Shih on Whiterun’s plains. That scuffle ended with Rowan having to dig Shih’s hoof out of the cat’s skull and pick shards of bone out of the sole of her hoof.

Rowan avoided Riverwood for now; she wanted to retrieve the Star before she risked lingering anywhere for too long. So, she directed Shih off the path into the forest with little trouble. Shih only snorted with annoyance at having to now step over fallen logs and avoid potential holes.

Traveling off the path lengthened their journey about an hour or so, though Rowan didn’t mind; it gave her more time to figure out a plan. Or something pretending to be a plan. To tell the truth, she didn’t remember a lot about this quest. She’d only done it once in-game. She remembered you had to go inside the Star to fight Malyn at the end of it, and the Star’s inside was made up on soul gems or something and there was a narrow path she fell off a few times. She thought she remembered fighting a daedra at some point? Did Malyn summon one? If he did, then she could summon a frost atronach to keep the daedra busy while she fought Malyn, or at least so she could shoot poisoned arrows at him.

_That could work. It’d be better if I could summon two atronachs at a time – I’ll work on that on the way back to Azura’s shrine._

She dismounted Shih when she spotted the lake and led Shih to the lake’s opposite side where she could see the sunken tower. After frying a determined mudcrab with lightning, she hid Shih behind a group of trees, instructed her to stay, and snuck onto the almost submerged platform with the entrance to Ilinalta’s Deep.
“Show time,” she murmured and, with her bow in one hand, descended the ladder into the fortress.

Her face screwed up in distaste at the flooded room. Water filled her boots as soon as she stepped off the ladder.

“Note to self: invest in waterproof boots,” she muttered sourly. She made a face at the shackled skeleton. “What a bunch of drama goths. That just screams trying too hard.” She coated an arrow in magicka poison and advanced slowly, sloshing as little water as possible.

The next room was empty saved for some stacks of stones and bones, a balcony, and another corridor. The waterfall covered the sound of her steps, so Rowan moved a bit quicker. When she stepped out of the water, her soft squelch of her boots earned another grimace from Rowan.

Pushing her discomfort to the back of her mind, Rowan snuck forward to peer into the next room. A reanimated skeleton caught her eye first.

*Which means the mage is right . . . there,* she carefully aimed an arrow around a chair at the mage sitting on the room’s far side. She released the arrow.

*The now-dead mage.*

The skeleton clattered forward. Rowan shot an ice spike at it. Its ribcage and spine shattered on impact and the skeleton fell apart.

Humming, Rowan walked into the room and sat on one of the chairs. She pulled off her boots, dumped the water from them, and tugged off her socks to ring them out while giving the room a thorough glance. A few things of use or value but not much. The necromancer’s robes were probably the most valuable things in the room. Replacing her socks and shoes, Rowan shuffled around the room for anything worth taking. A few soul gem fragments, a black soul gem, some potions, a human heart—a human heart?! That would be useful, if she could keep it from rotting.

“Why’s it just on the table? Not even on a plate or anything,” she grumbled. She looked around. “Gotta be a jar or something around here—aha, there we go.” She picked an empty jar out of a corner and used the bottom of the mage’s robes to clean the dust and dirt off and out of it. Rowan then plopped the heart into the jar, sealed it with some cloth and twine, and stored the entire thing in her pack.

“Now, onward,” Rowan said, wiping her hands on her robes and taking out her bow.

And onward she went. The mages were almost pathetically underpowered and only summoned skeletons to defend themselves. Only one mage managed to spot Rowan and used a surprisingly powerful ice storm; Rowan was still peeling ice off her robes even as she debated whether or not to try for the hidden, underwater chests.

On one hand, more gold. On the other, she only had one water breathing potion.

*Second note to self, learn the water breathing spell.*

On the third hand, she would get absolutely soaking wet.

*Not if you strip down and change clothes afterwards.*

Now there was an idea.

“Exactly how bad of an idea is it to strip out of your armor, weapons, and clothes just to go find a
possibly empty chest in a room completely submerged under water? Rhetorical question – it's a heckin’ bad idea, but let’s do it anyway! Not like we’re still in Satan’s frozen asshole, after all.”

Rowan shimmied out of her coverings and weapons, arranging them in a neat pile out of the way near the wall. She tested the water with a foot and found it cold but not offensively so. With the potion of water breathing in hand, she stepped down the steps into the water and swam over to tread water above the entrance to the submerged room. She uncorked the potion onehandedly and downed it in two swallows.

Rowan dove deep and grabbed onto the submerged hallway’s algae-covered doorway to keep herself from floating back up. Cautiously, she released the breath she’d been holding and inhaled.

Water rushed into her lungs. She choked. Her hands slipped on the doorway, and she scrambled to correct her grip. Gagging, she exhaled as best as she could. The water painfully forced its way out of her lungs. She choked again and managed another, slightly less painful inhale.

She hovered, simply taking in thick lungfuls of vaguely painful water-air for several seconds before thinking, shit, that’s terrible and diving down the hallway. Each breath was syrupy – thick and uncomfortable, like she was breathing in partially set Jell-O.

Rowan swam quickly, unsure of how much time she’d wasted almost choking to death. The chest was thankfully unlocked and held a nice assortment of coin, gems, and even a pair of elvish gauntlets.

Just as quickly as she entered, Rowan exited the room. And just in time, too. Her breaths became more inefficient the longer she stayed under until the potion ran out. Rowan held half a breath and broke the water’s surface. She struggled to the bridge, coughing up lungful after lungful of water in between gasps for actual air.

Pulling herself onto the steps, Rowan flopped halfway out of the water. She coughed and coughed until the water fully cleared her lungs. Panting heavily, she forced her magicka through her channels to both check for water lingering in her lungs and warm herself up.

Satisfied she wasn’t about to croak right then and there, Rowan pulled herself fully out of the water, splayed out on her back, and let out a wheezy groan. “Okay . . . next chest, let’s just . . . not do that. Water breathing: useful, yes; nice, no. Bad.” Her lungs itched and ached. She coughed. “Okay, get up. Can’t have mages finding you with your tits and ass out.”

She grumbled the entire time but did indeed dry off and redress. She then made her way across the walkway and into the next few rooms, sneaking up on the patrolling mages and skeletons in her way.

A more experienced mage guarded the last room. Rowan barely managed to dodge the frost storm that greeted her. She fired back her own answering fireball, followed by arrows dipped in magicka poison. Two of the arrows connected, and the mage let out a shriek. Rowan summoned a fire atronach as a distraction, shoved a bookshelf away from the wall as cover, and fired arrows at the panicked mage.

The mage dodged a fireball but not an arrow to her throat and she went down with a gurgle. Rowan quickly moved out of her cover, crossed the bridge to the other side, and slit the mage’s throat after yanking out her arrows.

The mage’s only item of interest was an apothecary satchel; so, Rowan kicked away loose bones to clear a patch of stone floor and stripped again. She didn’t have another water breathing potion (thank
god for that) but this next chest wasn’t in a submerged room. At least she thought it wasn’t.

Guess we’ll see.

She carefully stepped down the slimy staircase into the water. A quick downward dive and she could see a door to her left. Taking another deep breath, she dived down and tested the door. Locked. She left the water, retrieved her lockpicks, and tried again. She broke two lockpicks and had to take three extra breaths, but the door unlocked, and Rowan gained access to two bags of coin, a few potions, a dwarven dagger, and some enchanted robes.

With a satisfied hum, she left the water, dried off, redressed, and raided the chest on dry land. That, too, had some rather nice loot in it. Rowan packed away her loot, took her hair out of its makeshift shirt-towel, and retied it into a bun. Though still noticeably damp, she was happy enough to move on and entered the next hallway.

She raided a locked closet, though it only held a few potions, and continued up the stairs. When she entered the empty balcony, she straightened out of her crouch. She pouted at the empty bookshelves. Not even a necromancy tome gathering dust, how disappointing.

Rowan stepped on the stones rather than into the small river flowing from the next door. Another hallway, followed by a staircase greeted her, and she crept down the stairs, eyes on the lookout for traps and ears open to any out of place sounds.

“More souls are needed for the Star. The last one died before he could be harvested.”

Rowan frozen at the bottom of the staircase. Softening her breathing, she flattened herself to the wall and peaked around the corner. Two mages sat across from each other at the far side of the room.

“We can’t take another villager from the surface so soon!” the female mage protested. “I told you to prepare everything properly!”

“We can just sacrifice another disciple. Apprentice Ayrwen would be no great waste,” the male offered placatingly.

The female made a thoughtful noise. “Yes. He’ll do.”

Rowan released one arrow and then another. Both connected, and the mages slumped over in their chairs, dead.

Humming a tune to herself, Rowan collected the room and its attached closet’s valuables. She’d sort of been hoping that the male mage was Malyn, but that would’ve made her life too easy, so she moved on. She let her flame atronach take care of the next mage and their skeleton, bored enough to not enter the fight herself.

She crept through the prison – unwilling to cease her stealth in enemy territory even against such underwhelming enemies.

The prison exited to a room partially filled with water. Another mage on the raised dais at the room’s back wall. He died from a few well-placed arrows, and up the staircase Rowan went.

She scowled when she got to the room at the top of the stairs. “Well, fuck. I thought he’d still be alive. All that creeping around for what? A few weak-ass mages and some skeletons?” Rowan frowned and stood at the room’s entrance, huffing and staring at the skeletons littering the floor. “I just fucking jinxed myself. Goddammit. Malyn’s gonna kick my fucking ass.” She shrugged. “Oh well, can’t help it now. Let’s see what we got.”
The skeletons were, of course, empty, and the corpse held nothing of interest except rags. The Star sat in the lap of the skeleton that she assumed belonged to Malyn. She picked up the broken Star cautiously and inspected it.

Rowan let out a low whistle. Malyn really did a number on it. The Star’s color was dull and unimpressive; the gems seemed to almost be fake; three of its “legs” had broken off; and even its metal had been worn down. A sticky film covered the entire Star, like it was seeping from the Star itself.

*That probably explains why it doesn’t have a presence.* Rowan ran her hands over the Star’s surface, trying to (most likely stupidly) coax some sort of reaction from it. She gently prodded it with her own magicka yet still nothing happened. She deepened her magical examination and instructed her magicka to enter the Star through a crack in its defenses.

The Star’s magic crackled along Rowan’s own, like she’d waltzed through an opening in a high voltage electric fence. Rowan jolted backwards. She nearly stumbled over the corpse and only just managed to regain her balance. The sharp taste of metal flowed over her tongue, and her hair stood on end.

Rowan expected a hostile retaliation from the Star to accompany the jolt she’d received. When nothing happened, she changed her theory – the jolt was from a damage defense barrier and had not consciously been in self-defense. She sent out another pulse of questioning magicka and received no response.

The Star’s insides were badly damaged – even worse than the outside’s appearance would have you believe. But as damaged and crumbling as the Star was, it was still intricate and beautiful and powerful.

She delved deeper, wondering if she could find Malyn like this. If she could, could she forcefully remove him from the Star? Or would she simply damage it further?

A delicate presence swept across the edges of her magicka.

She nearly dropped the Star; her sweaty hands fumbled to securely regrip it before it fell to the floor. Clutching the Star to her chest, Rowan spread her magicka through its winding pathways, trying to locate the elusive presence. She doubted it was Malyn. The presence hadn’t felt mortal or hostile, merely weak, cautious even.

She rounded a corner too quickly, and the presence skittered away. She stopped. Oh, well, she hadn’t thought that she was scaring the damn thing.

She pulled back most of her magicka and instead sent out only a few questioning tendrils. At first, she received no response, but after several long moments of waiting, a questioning tendril met her own. She allowed the tendril to explore her magic at its own pace, going so far as to open her magicka to the unknown presence.

The presence prodded her, cautiously at first but then with more tenacity as it explored her. The presence shared an excited shock with Rowan and reached out with more tendrils, intertwining them with her own.

Puzzled, Rowan let the presence do as it wanted, to a certain extent. She jumped when she felt the shock, and her confusion only grew as the presence pulled itself completely out of hiding and attempted to engulf some of her magicka. She pulled back, unsure if she liked where this was going. Her experience with the Gildergreen moved to the front of her mind; she was never in the
mood for that sort of painful invasion.

The presence whined and followed her. She sent out questions of pure emotion – the only way she could think of to get her confusion across clearly. Seeming to understand, the presence offered information and waggled another set of tendrils in front of her.

_Welp, I've come this far. Might as well go all in._ Rowan connected with the tendrils and cringed at the immediate onslaught of information. Images and emotions flooded her brain, threatening to split her head wide open. She began to pull back from the presence, but it held firm, pleading for her to understand. Reluctantly, Rowan held her ground and tried to make sense of the near-nonsense she’d been given.


Rowan tried to wrench herself free, but she only got a short distance away before the Star latched onto her again. It shoved more emotions at her – Please. Need. Need More. Dying. Please please Need something Need anything Please Please Please. The Star somehow caught sight of the Gildergreen in her memories and shoved that back at her, too. Yes, yes, yes, This! Need this! Please! Please! Need! Jan, Need Please! Jan!

With the Star’s howls nearly clawing her ribs open, Rowan did the only thing she could think of – she opened her magicka channels and hastily invited the Star inside.

The invitation was unneeded. The Star dove inside her channels and latched onto the available raw magicka and began leaching it as quickly as it could drink.

Rowan’s back arched in a painful curve. Her mouth dropped open, and she gasped, wide-eyed and agonized as the Star drank its fill. But even as her body weakened and begged for reprieve, her magicka gave and gave with no signs of slowing. Her reserves were endless. As long as her heart continued to beat, the Star could feed as much as it pleased.

Her stomach lurch. Saliva flooded her mouth, and her knees shuddered.

Sensing the change, the Star pulled back. Rowan felt every reluctant slide until its tendrils finally slipped free of her channels.

She immediately extracted herself from the Star, rushing when she shouldn’t have and giving herself a wave of vertigo so strong that she felt her physical body tilt and barely right itself in time.

As soon as her magicka was clear of the Star, Rowan leaned over and vomited. A trail of blood leaked from her nose, dripping down and mixing with the pool of vomit. Rowan coughed, spat, and squinted her straining, watery eyes. Grimacing, she stumbled away from the vomit and wiped her nose with her robes. She took out her water skin, rinsed her mouth, and took a few mouthfuls for good measure. When that didn’t immediately remove the taste from her mouth, she rummaged through her apothecary satchel for her mint leaves and popped a bundle in her mouth to chew on.

She held the Star propped up on her hip. She could feel its presence, as faint as it was, and it sparked happily in her grasp, sending out thankful tendrils to stroke over her skin like feathers. She hitched it higher on her hip before deciding it would be safer in her pack. She stored the Star in the case she kept her extra clothing in, bundled within the fabric to keep it from jostling too much.
She blinked her now itchy, watery eyes and sniffed. “Let’s hope that doesn’t bite me in the ass later,” she muttered tiredly.

“What else is there? Anything useful?” she asked herself, voice rough as she glanced around the room. A large book beside the chair Malyn’s skeleton sat in caught her attention. She hummed and picked it up, immediately grimacing at the bloody handprints crusted all over the cover and spine. *What a slob.* She gingerly opened the book, wincing as the spine cracked loudly.

Ah, so it was Malyn’s research journal. She snorted at the title. “What a narcissist.” She idly flipped through Malyn’s pompous writing; it was less about research and more about him summarizing the events that led to him shoving his soul into the Star. “What a waste of a journal. I mean, you went through all that trouble to break a Daedric artefact and didn’t even write anything about the process down? At least I do that, even if no one could ever understand it.” She shoved the journal into her pack dismissively and walked over to this room’s chest.

The chest held several pieces of armor, weapons, a few potions and alchemy ingredients, and some coin. Rowan was most excited about the Dwarven arrows she’d found bundled up at the bottom. Not a bad haul, though she’d need to sell most of it . . . Actually, when was the last time she cleaned all the junk out of her pack? Had she *ever* fully emptied it? She always made sure to restock anything depleted during her jobs – there wasn’t much use in being a healer if she didn’t have the tools to treat people – but getting rid of all the useless junk she found along the way? Not really. She only remembered selling off a few of the heaviest objects.

*I’ll take care of that along the way,* Rowan thought. She shakily made her way to the damp, slimy ladder. For a moment, she almost thought it wouldn’t hold her weight, but after a few moments of worrying creaking, Rowan deemed the ladder safe enough to climb. Quickly.

The rush of fresh air made her dizzy. She hadn’t noticed how stale the air inside Ilinalta’s Deep was. She coughed, trying to clear the ache from her lungs, and spat out a leftover bit of bile with a grimace.

*And now, back to the shrine.* Rowan gut lurched as she threw a leg over the side of the tower’s roof. She paused as the world spun. *Or maybe I’ll stay for the night. Just in case.*

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Rowan avoided Whiterun once again on her way back to Azura’s shrine. She planned to briefly stop in Morthal and then Dawnstar to sell off her extra gear and then move on, but when had anything ever gone according to plan for her?

Rowan and Shih hadn’t been more than an hours’ ride from Morthal – she could see the chimney smoke from the road – when everything went to hell.

Rowan hadn’t even known something was wrong until a weight knocked her off Shih’s back. She hit the ground with a broken off yelp, the snarling weight pinning her to the ground.

Shih howled, stomped, and kicked at her own attacker. A burst of red light lit up the darkness. A stench surrounded Rowan. She gagged. Claws dug into her armor; her robes became ribbons in seconds; her glass armor squealed. Hungry, red eyes glared sightlessly at her. Rowan fought not to panic and failed. The thing clawed at her neck. Only her armor saved her from having her throat ripped out. Thick, pungent wetness spilled over her face, neck, and shoulder. Rowan gagged. Snarling, she bashed at the thing on top of her with her fists, but it was like hitting stone. The thing didn’t even budge.
Letting out her own snarl, Rowan released her magicka. Raw magic latched onto the first thing it found— the beast on top of her. And then Rowan shoved.

One second. Nothing. Two seconds. The beast fumbled. Three seconds—

*Oh god, this thing is dead!* Rowan recoiled physically. But the beast was too heavy. She couldn’t move, and the only other place to go was the ground at her back. Bile rose in her throat. She sobbed and forced more magic into the corpse above her.

The corpse keened like a dying animal. It struggled weakly away from her, but its magic-bloated body wouldn’t— couldn’t respond.

Choking, Rowan forced more magicka into the corpse. She filled and filled its vacantness until it could hold no more and—

A blindingly blue light burst from the corpse. The light twisted and arced boldly before curling into a tight ball into the corpse’s abdomen and bursting.

Dust showered Rowan. She fought down the urge to scream. She laid on the ground, shuddering and near sobbing until Shih’s howls knocked her back into consciousness.

And then there was no hesitation.

Rowan shoved herself to her feet and tackled the first non-Shih shaped object. The second corpse hadn’t expected that and went down like the sack of rocks it felt like. Before it would turn its teeth or claws on her, she dug her hands into its abdomen and poured as much fury as she could manage into a lightning spell. The corpse howled and shrieked but it, too, died in a burst of ash.

Someone shouted in the distance. Rowan’s head snapped to the left and caught sight of light. Torches. People were coming.

The third corpse tried to scramble for the bushes, but an arrow to the back caused it to stumble.

“Vampire!”

Rowan jerked. Vampires. Of course. She stumbled to her feet, lightning crackling up her hands and arms. She couldn’t risk fire with Shih still so close. But lightning, lightning would do the trick nicely.

Her first and second lightning bolts hit the vampire in the back while the approaching group held its attention.

The vampire whirled around the face her, moving quicker than Rowan could blink, and rushed her. Two more arrows embedded themselves in the vampire’s back, but it didn’t falter. It launched itself at Rowan, a feral snarl on its face.

Sneering back, Rowan braced herself and raised her hands, holding one at collarbone level and the other at her belly.

Someone cursed, but it wasn’t Rowan. She was too busy keeping the vampire on top of herself from ripping her throat out. Only her hand around the vampire’s own throat kept it at bay and even then, only just.

Rowan’s second hand was crumpled between her and the vampire’s writhing body. Her wrist twinged even as she pooled magicka in her palm. Her arm slipped. The vampire’s breath stung
her skin.

With barely a thought, Rowan released the magicka. The force that which it tore through the vampire’s abdomen knocked the breath from her lungs and rang brightly in her ears.

The vampire froze, its mouth wide open and fangs dripping foamy saliva. It choked, shuddered once, twice, and then crumbled to ash above her.

Rowan wheezed and coughed and choked. Vampire ash tasted sour and bitter and left a death-like film over her mouth and throat. Her eyes stung and watered, and she wiped at them furiously to ease the burn.

“Get her up!” a fierce voice ordered. “You, give her a cure disease potion! Now!”

Hands quickly tugged Rowan into a sitting position. Someone settled down behind her to prop her up. A bottle was shoved against her mouth. She jerked away and bared her teeth. Magicka crackled over her body, ready for another fight even as exhaustion pulled at her body.

“Easy, easy, it’s a potion of cure disease. You need to take it or else you could become a vampire,” a softer, closer voice than the first said.

“You three, get her horse. The rest of you, patrol for more vampires,” the first voice ordered. “Damned monsters are getting bolder.”

Rowan pulled away from the potion to cough but let it be pressed back against her mouth. She sipped the potion carefully; if it wasn’t a cure disease potion, she would taste the difference. Luckily, it was what the man said it was.

“Thank you,” she said after finishing the potion.

“You’re welcome, traveler. Wish we had gotten here sooner. You shouldn’t have had to take on three vampires by yourself.”

Someone snorted. “You saw her fighting. I bet those monsters wouldn’t have had a chance if they hadn’t snuck up on her! She ripped them apart!”

Murmurs started up amongst what had to be a group of guards. The first voice spoke up. “Enough chatter. Thrugr, wash her eyes and face. You lot would let her go blind before you stopped gossiping.”

“Of course, sir, sorry sir.”

The person behind Rowan gently pulled her head back. “We’re going to wash the ash out of your eyes now, all right?”

“Yeah, okay,” Rowan rasped.

Though she tried not to, she still flinched when cold water was poured over her face. She sighed at the relief it brought. She hadn’t noticed her entire face beginning to sting, so preoccupied with her eyes as she’d been.

“Can you open your eyes? We need to make sure we flush as much of the ash out as possible.”

Blinking the water from her eyes, Rowan squinted at her company. A group of Morthal guards surrounded her, their faces, both helmed and bare, were lit up from the light of their torches. The
ones not immediately helping her had their weapons ready.

“If you wash my hands off, I can finish my eyes,” she said, coughing again.

“Very well, hold out your hands over here.” The guard holding the waterskin motioned to the empty space at her side.

Rowan held her hands out. In the torchlight, she finally saw the ash, clumped with her own blood, covering her hands, ruined robes, and chipped armor. She wrinkled her nose in disgust and anger.

“I just got these robes,” she muttered as the guard washed her hands.

“I can’t say for sure, but I think the Thaumaturgist’s Hut might have a pair or two of robes for sale. Though, I can’t say I understand why you’d wear robes over your armor,” the guard said.

“She’s a mage, Thrugr, of course she’s going to wear robes,” the female guard propping her up said.

“Yeah, but over armor? How many mages do you know that even wear armor? Thrugr shot back.

“All right, all right, stop arguing like the brats you are. Give the armor-wearing mage the waterskin so she can finish cleaning her eyes,” the guard who Rowan believe to be the captain said.

“Yes, sir.” Thrugr handed over the waterskin without another word.

Rowan upended the water over her open eyes without any fanfare. The sting of the water felt more like relief than pain, and Rowan let out a deep sigh even as she furiously blinked water from her vision. She handed the waterskin back to Thrugr.

She wiped her eyes. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

The Captain kneeled next to her. “Let me see.”

She squinted at him. He took her chin in hand and tilted her face in one direction and then the next. “Your eyes will be irritated for at least another day or so. Try not to rub them. You’ll have a cough for about the same time. If it gets worse or your lungs start to burn, see Lami at the Thaumaturgist’s Hut. She’s gotten good at potions to ease the hurts of vampire ash. That cure disease potion should set you right, but if you feel any sensitivity to sunlight, aches in your joints and jaw, increased senses, and a hunger you can’t sate, take another. That’ll knock it out for good. If it doesn’t, see Falion, the court wizard. Necromancer or not, the man can get rid of a vampiric infection.” He tilted her head further back. “Looks like your armor protected you from the worst of the attack, but there’re some scratches along your jaw and hands. Nothing major, but they could get infected if not seen to.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Rowan said. She felt along her jaw for the scratches. The Captain was right, several scratches from the vampire’s claws littered her skin. She cast a healing spell, feeling the wounds close first on her jaw and then on her hands before attending to the bruises.

“A healer, ey? Sorry, should’ve known for the robes but, heh, they aren’t much to look at anymore,” the Captain said.

“Mainly a healer, yes, though I practice other Schools, too.”

“I’ll say,” the female guard said. “What sort of spells were you using? I recognized the lightning but
Rowan's mouth twisted into something resembling a smirk. “A few spells I've been working on in my spare time. They need some fine tuning, though.”

“Oh!” Thrugr said. “Sorry, we haven’t even asked your name.”

As the female guard helped her stand, Rowan debated on lying. Did anyone know of Rowan Corvid the Worldwalker here? Hopefully not.

“I’m Rowan Corvid.” For now, her name would do.

“Corvid, huh? Well, welcome to Morthal, for what it’s worth.”

Rowan couldn’t stop the smile on her face. “It’s not the worst thing I’ve ever experienced.”

Thrugr raised an eyebrow but left her comment at that.

Another guard brought Shih forward by her reins. “Quite a tough friend you’ve got here. Fought off two vampires and barely a scratch on her.”

Rowan snorted. “Shih’s the toughest horse in Skyrim. You won’t ever find one as good as her.” She took the reins with a soft ‘thank you’.

“Come, we will escort you to Morthal,” the Captain said.

“Thank you,” Rowan said.

The guards fell in line around her and Shih. While Rowan was still wary of another attack, she felt safe enough for conversation.

“You seem like you have a lot of experience with vampires. Are they common around here?” she asked the Captain.

He grumbled. “Too common. The skies here aren’t as clear as they are elsewhere in Skyrim. It lets them move a bit more freely than they should be able to. And the swamp’s a perfect hiding place. The place is already crawling with spiders and chaurus, why not add vampires? Some of the wretches even hide in the swamp water like the chaurus, pike, and slaughterfish and leap out and drag travelers under. Lami needs a full escort just to gather alchemy ingredients, even on cloudy days.”

“Sounds like an infestation,” Rowan said quietly. The Captain seemed irritated enough, and Rowan didn’t want to provoke him.

The Captain grunted his acknowledgement, but Rowan could see his mind was elsewhere. She fell silent as they approached Morthal.

The city looked . . . haunting in the dim light. Fog rolled off the water to cover the ground and obscure the walkways over the lake. A chill rolled down Rowan’s spine at the warped reflections of the guards’ torches in the passing buildings’ windows.

“This is where we leave you, Corvid,” the Captain said. “The Moorside Inn is right there. You can tie you horse up out front. The vampires don’t enter the city, and there’s always a patrol going.”

She nodded. “Thank you, Captain.” She nodded to the other guards. “Thank you, as well. Good evening, guardsmen.”
She removed Shih’s bit and tied her to the fence in front of the inn. After leaving a bucket of feed along with three apples, she entered the inn.

The inn was surprisingly full, and Rowan, in her shredded robes and chipped glass armor both caked in vampire ash and streaked with blood, earned quite a bit of attention.

The orc bard even stopped his tuneless song to gawk at her.

She flashed an overly bright smile to the room. “Evening.”

“Welcome to the Moorside. If you need anythin’, I'll be ‘round. Good to have a customer,” the Redguard woman behind the counter greeted.

A Nord man surrounded by mead bottles snorted at his table. “And what are we, ghosts?”

The barkeep glared at him. “When’s the last time you payed your tab, Benor?”

“When’s the last time you had any mead worth paying for?” he shot back.

Before an argument could start up, Rowan walked to the bar. Her back prickled as the patrons’ gazes followed her. “I’ll have a room for the night, a bath, and some of whatever smells so good, if that’s all right.”

The barkeep smiled. “Sure thing. Name’s Jonna and you, stranger?”

“Rowan Corvid.”

“Hey, wench, what happened to your robes? You meet the wrong end of a briar patch?” Benor shouted.

Jonna bared her teeth and glared over Rowan’s shoulder. Before she could shout at him, Rowan coldly looked over her shoulder and said, “Three vampires attacked me outside the city. One knocked me right off my horse.”

Benor shot straight up. “So close to the city? They’ve never come so close before!”

“Well, they did. I blew them apart with magic. The guards heard the fight and rushed to help me. That's what happened.” She turned back to Jonna. “While I wait for the bath, can I have a bucket of water first? I’d like to clean off the worst of the vampire ash.”

Smirking, Jonna nodded. “Of course. Here, this will be your room.” She led Rowan off to the side of the main hall and unlocked a door. The room, while small, was clean and neat. “Go ahead and get settled. I'll bring a bucket in a second and start a bath for you.”

“Thank you.”

Closing the door after Jonna, Rowan stripped out of her ruined robes and inspected them. She sighed. They were only good for rags now; no amount of stitching would fix them. “I really need to start carrying extras.” She then took off her armor to inspect the damage. Her gauntlets and chest piece were the worst off. The vampires had left deep scratches in the glass, though they hadn’t gone all the way through. She had the materials to repair the damage, but Morthal didn’t have a smithy. So, she was stuck with damaged armor for now.

She looked up at a knock on the door. She opened it to find Jonna, a bucket of water in hand.

“Here ya go,” Jonna said, hanging over the bucket. “The bathwater is heating up now. Would you
Rowan hummed. “I’ll eat at the bar. Thank you.”

Jonna smiled. “You’re very welcome.”

Jonna left, and Rowan closed the door again. She stripped out of her armor and padded underclothing and wiped herself down with a cloth. The water quickly turned a murky gray, but Rowan was cleaner and didn’t stink of vampire ash anymore. She changed into clean clothes, stored her things away, and exited her room.

Jonna perked up when Rowan sat down. She placed a plate of grilled slaughterfish and mushrooms over a bed of some sort of seasoned greens in front of Rowan. “Any requests for drinks? We’ve got mead and wine.”

“Wine’s fine, thanks.” Rowan dug into her food with relish. Morthal might not be getting a lot of business, but Jonna’s cooking was excellent.

Rowan hadn’t expected to be bothered. Most of the inn’s patrons had left, most likely to question the guards about the vampire attack, and the inn was quiet.

A wave of sweet deathbell washed over Rowan, and she paused with a forkful of greens and mushrooms halfway to her mouth.

“Hello, stranger,” a woman purred. A beautiful woman dressed in tavern clothes leaned against the bar next to Rowan. “What might a lovely young thing such as yourself be doing in a boring town like this, hm?”

Rowan froze, mouth still open and mushrooms sliding off her fork. “Uh . . .”

“Alva.” Jonna sneered and roughly dried her hands with a towel. “Don’t you have better things to do than harass my customers?”

The vampire. Rowan’s heart stuttered. Alva’s eyes quickly flicked to her and then back to Jonna.

Alva pouted attractively. “You can hardly call it harassing if my attentions are welcome, Jonna.” Her left hand teasingly trailed up Rowan’s forearm to trace patterns on her shoulder.

A strange warmth spread from the contact, one that crept like spider legs along Rowan’s shoulder, back, and spine. Rowan’s magicka hissed; it crackled over the surface of her skin, fighting back the intruder and literally consuming the spell before it could sink in. Rowan tried to contain her shiver.

Scoffing, Jonna said, “Go back to seducing married men and leave my customers alone.”

Alva sighed and let her hands slip teasingly away from Rowan’s shoulder. She turned to Rowan, smiling, and said, “If you ever get lonely, come see me. I’m sure we can have some fun together.”

With that, she sashayed out of the inn.

Rowan didn’t watch her go.

Jonna frowned. “Sorry about that. Alva’s gone through a change recently, and it hasn’t been a good one.”

Rowan took a gulp of wine. “What sort of change?”

Jonna’s frown deepened. “I’m not sure I should say. Nothing’s known for certain, but it’s practically
fact rather than gossip at this point.”

With a shrug, Rowan went back to her food. “Suit yourself.”

Jonna tapped her fingers irritably against the counter. Finally, she asked, “You won’t go spreading gossip, now, will ya?”

“Nope. Never been one for it, really,” Rowan said.

Jonna huddled in close to Rowan after looking around the inn. Only the orc bard remained, crooning offkey to himself in the far corner of the room. “Alva’s got her eyes on Hroggar, Joltta's husband. They've been seen sneaking off together. Rumor has it that they might even elope, won’t even give Joltta the right to a divorce, even if she don’t want it. She doesn’t want to believe what’s happening right in front of her, not even when she wakes up to a cold bed. I think she’s just trying to keep it together for her daughter, Helgi. Poor thing loves her father to bits.”

“Why doesn’t Hroggar just divorce Joltta? At least then it wouldn’t be an affair,” Rowan said.

Jonna wiped down the bar roughly, a scowl on her face. “Probably because he likes the thrill of it. He don’t really love Alva, just like sinking himself into a pretty, young thing behind his wife’s back for a while. I doubt the affair means anything to Alva either. She propositions just about anyone who crosses her path, and while I don’t have a problem with anyone having their own fun whenever they want it, there’s nothing right about seducing a married man just for a thrill and some sex.”

Rowan hummed. “Ya know, for such a small town, y’all have quite a bit of drama going on here.”

Jonna barked out a sarcastic laugh. “The people here are just glad it’s not a big city. The drama’s just an irritant.” She wiped off her hands. “I’ll go check on your bath. Holler if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

That night, Rowan drifted off into what she hoped would be a dreamless sleep. What she ended up with was far from it.

She was trapped. Trapped somewhere—a building of some sort and she couldn’t get out. Her magicka was gone like it never existed.

She couldn’t breathe. Every inhale clawed her throat apart. Something in the air scraped her lungs and choked her.

Hot. Hot hot hot. It was too hot! The heat licked at her legs and up her back and soon her feet were black and blistered and she couldn’t move, she couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t escape—

A pair of hungry, glowing red eyes stared at her from the darkness.

She ran.

Tried to. She tripped and fell to the floor – floor? What floor? Was she even in the building anymore? She smelt the mineral tang of wet earth, freshly dug.

She tried to stand but fell again, this time onto something charred and squishy—

A child’s eyes stared up at Rowan, unseeing but still filled with terror. Even through the blackened
flesh, Rowan could see where her throat had been torn through by teeth.

Rowan scrambled backwards. The child’s corpse vanished in a cloud of smoke. Choking and gasping, Rowan hit a stone wall.

The stench of death surrounded her.

A clawed hand grasped her throat and jerked—

Rowan woke to racing heart and straining lungs. She gasped for clean air and tossed the blankets and furs off herself, not caring one bit as her sweaty, clammy skin immediately chilled in the cool morning air. The cold was better than being burned alive.

Her eyes watered, but she didn’t cry. The smell of smoke lingered in the air.

She took deep, calming breaths and rubbed at the unbroken skin of her throat. *You’re not dead. It was just a dream. You’re fine.*

Someone knocked softly on her door.

Sighing heavily, Rowan sat up, shoved her feet into her boots, and shuffled to the door.

“Yes?” she asked Jonna tiredly.

Jonna smiled apologetically. “Sorry for the early wakeup call, but . . . a guard is here. The Jarl is asking to speak with you.”

Rowan rubbed her eyes and let out a grunt. “Tell the guard I’ll meet the Jarl after I eat breakfast and get dressed.”

“Sure thing. You want a Nord breakfast, right?”

“Depends, what else ya got?”

Jonna grinned and turned to leave. “Leave that to me.”

Rowan watched her go with raised eyebrows but decided to go with it. She hadn’t found anything she was allergic to yet, so trying new things hadn’t done her any harm.

She closed her door and set about getting dressed. She changed out of her sleep clothes into her armor and pulled her hair into a tightly braided crown before shoving her helmet over her head. Feeling naked without her robes, she unburied a hooded, furred cloak from the depths of her pack and tugged it on.

She stood in the middle of her room, humming happily and burying her face in the furs. *Mmm warm . . .*

All right, time to face the day.

After a breakfast of something Jonna called ful medammes, a plateful of some sort of cooked beans served with a boiled egg and whole wheat pita bread and coffee (that Rowan shared with Jonna, of course), Rowan was off to the Jarl’s house.

Rowan briefly stood on the inn’s steps, shivering in the morning air despite her fur coat. The sun was just rising, and few people except the guards were even awake yet.
Rowan forcibly kept her eyes on her white puffs of breath instead of acknowledging the intact house in front of her. And then she walked to the Jarl’s longhouse, keeping her eyes firmly ahead. She nodded to the patrolling guards and greeted those guarding the longhouse’s door.

“I was told the Jarl was expecting me?”

The guard to her right nodded. “Go on in. But don’t even think about causing any trouble. We’ll be watching.”

Rowan didn’t bother with a response. She entered the longhouse, shaking off the brief stint in the cold before approaching the occupied throne.

“Good morning, Jarl Ravencrone,” Rowan said, politely giving a pseudo-bow by deeply nodding her head.

Jarl Idgrod hummed. “How strange to address me by name when none in Morthal have spoken of it to you.”

Rowan furrowed her brows. She looked up at the Steward standing at Jarl Idgrod’s right hand side. He was no help, giving Rowan a helpless shrug.

“I heard you name outside of Morthal,” Rowan replied slowly.

“Outside of Morthal, indeed. You first heard my name and many others in a place far from Skyrim,” Idgrod said. “But enough of that. Tell me what you saw last night.”

Confused, nervous, and just little bit irritated, Rowan said, “Last night I was attacked by three vampires. I fought them off with—”

“No, not the vampires that attacked you. Tell me what you Saw,” Idgrod interrupted.

“What I saw?”

“Yes. Tell me of what woke you from your slumber in terror.”

Rowan froze, her mouth open. She vaguely recalled Idgrod having some sort of visions, but nothing as . . . spot on as what she was currently experiencing.

Unsure if she should answer, Rowan released her magicka as a steady cloud, reaching out and testing Idgrod’s own senses. Idgrod’s only reaction was to incline her head and allow the inspection. Her calm and steady demeanor never wavered.

Swallowing thickly, Rowan said, “There was fire. A housefire, I think. People died – at least, I know a kid died, but it felt like more, don’t know how many though. And there . . . at the end, there was this, this thing that came up behind me and used its claws to . . . rip out my throat.” Her voice trailed off in the room’s silence.

The Steward, guards, and young woman standing behind the throne all looked as shocked and horrified as Rowan felt when she woke up. Idgrod said unmoving in her chair, looking unchanged except for the tired nod she gave.

“Though this was expected, it is unfortunate that it has come to pass,” Idgrod said. Her dark eyes pinned Rowan in place, and her words felt like physical blows to Rowan’s gut. “I give you permission to investigate the suspicious events going on in the shadows within my Hold. Go wherever you wish, ask whatever questions you will. If any object, inform them of my decision.”
Good luck to you.”

Dismissed, Rowan blinked dumbly, turned on her heel, and walked towards the exit.

“Idgrod, can we really expect a stranger to investigate such serious matters?” the Steward asked.

“She knows the seriousness of the situation. And she – better than even I – knows what shall come to pass. Have faith, all shall be revealed in time,” Idgrod replied.

“. . . Of course, dear.”

Rowan exited the longhouse and, after blankly acknowledging the guards’ greetings, stood in the center of the road.

That . . . did not go how I expected it to.

But did it go badly?

Rowan couldn’t really describe what just happened as bad just . . . weird. Like, weird as fuck, man. She hadn’t expected that, though she probably should’ve now that she remembered that Jarl Idgrod was known for visions.

Would’ve been nice to known she could see shit that didn’t revolve around Skyrim, Rowan thought bitterly. She moved out of the road and sat down on the closest dock. So, what to do now?

She could always just . . . leave.

She could leave. Just hop on Shih and scram. No one would know she knew about the house fire . . .

Her head fell backwards, and she let out a frustrated sigh. No. No, she couldn’t just leave. That option was completely out of the question.

So, what could she do?

Glaring out at the swamp water, she muttered darkly, “Guess it’s time to fuck up some vampires. Hope I don’t die doing it.”
Rowan planned to immediately find and investigate (aka break into) Alva’s house. She remembered that Alva’s journal was somewhere in her house and that it was a big part of the quest. If she could get that during the day, then she – hopefully – wouldn’t have to deal with an awake vampire trying to kill her.

Of course, as always, nothing went to plan. She’d barely begun to search for Alva’s house when someone started shouting.

Like an idiot, she froze in a suspicious, sneaky stance. Upon realizing no one was yelling at her, she hastily straightened into a relaxed, standing position. No, nothing suspicious going on here, Mr. Guard, just standing admiring the . . . swamp water.

Rowan crept back to the inn, keeping close to the wall, just in time to see a group of guards run into town. One guard was holding a limp form, blood slathered over his arms and armor.

Déjà vu washed over Rowan. If not for the muggy air and stench of swamp, she could’ve been back in Whiterun, watching Athis rush an unconscious Njada to Jorrvaskr.

She stepped forward unthinkingly as a crowd began to gather. “Is someone hurt? I’m a healer,” she called out.

Heads snapped to her. Eyes narrows in suspicion. The guards stopped in place. A female guard shoved the one carrying his bleeding burden towards the guards’ quarters. He lurched forward and disappeared into the longhouse.

“A healer? Well, get your ass in there. He’s not goin’ to last much longer,” the female guard barked.

Rowan shoved her way through the crowd and followed the first guard into the guardhouse.

The guard was at the first available bed, using a knife to cut away the lower half of the unconscious person’s layered robes.

She shrugged off her pack and pulled her healer’s satchel from its depths. “What happened?”

The guard jumped and whirled around, knife held defensively. He blinked dumbly when he saw her.

“What?”

She nodded to the injured person. “What happened to them? I need to know so I can treat them.”

“Gar ‘s what we think,” he said. “Found ‘im splayed out on the ground next to one of the swamp pools and his leg’s completely mangled. Got a chunk missing.”

She hissed between her teeth. Peeling the cloth out of the way, she saw exactly what the guard described. “Shit. Do gar teeth break off in the wounds?”

“Sometimes. Not as bad as slaughterfish, but bad enough.”

“Is there a way to get clean water around here? It’ll make it easier for me to clean out his wounds,” Rowan said, digging through her satchel to pull out everything she thought she’d need. She neatly lined everything up on a nearby table.

“We managed a well, though we’ll still have to treat the water.”
“Good, can you get on that? I need to stop the bleeding or else they’re gonna die.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said and left.

Rowan immediately got to work. She cut away the rest of the cloth in her way and made a tourniquet above the injured’s knee. That way there was a chance she could save them just in case the leg was a lost cause. Of course, she couldn’t operate until her patient was stable and that meant getting more blood into them. But apparently needles and blood transfusions weren’t a thing, so Rowan had whipped up her own method with her own mediocre alchemy skills and Danica and Arcadia’s help.

She opened a labeled tin, took a bit of its smooth red paste, and slathered said paste on a linen bandage. Then, she tied the bandage around the patient’s wrist, the paste-slathered side pressed against the skin. The paste was basically a regenerative health potion in paste form with some other added ingredients to help it be more easily absorbed into the skin. While still experimental, Rowan and Danica had had promising results; the paste didn’t need to be as regulated as potions when healing someone, was easier to administer to unconscious or unruly patients, steadily released medicine, and other ingredients could be added to fight infections or diseases. The only things Rowan didn’t like about it was that it was slow acting and so far, couldn’t specifically be tailored to compensate for blood loss, like she’s initially intended.

What I wouldn’t give for medical needles right now, Rowan bemoaned briefly before charging magicka into her hands and sweeping them over her patient.

Obviously stressed, minor head wound, slight water in the lungs, and the beginnings of an infection in the leg along with the gigantic wound. Altogether, not the worst she’d ever seen but definitely bad.

She tied another bandage with a white paste to the patient’s other wrist for the infection and turned her attention to the leg.

Part of the calf was gone, and several other bite marks littered what was left of the leg. Swamp water, dirt, and decaying plant matter streaked the leg, most likely the source of the infection.

She could heal the leg, but it would take time and lots of magicka and even then, she doubted the full muscles could be regenerated – if the patient didn’t die from magicka exposure. But enough that her patient could walk and not have to lose their leg? That she could do.

But first, she needed to clean the leg.

Hopefully that water gets here soon, she thought, taking a large bottle of cleanser and dousing a rag in it. The cleanser would obviously do the job, but she preferred to start with water to get the worst of the blood and muck out of a wound.

Something, or more likely someone, shuffled further within the building. Rowan paid the noise little mind, though she flared her magicka outwards in case of a threat.

The bleeding had slowed but not stopped, so Rowan took a handful of gauze, pressed it to the wound, and lifted the limp limb as high as it would go.

A man stumbled into the room from the back hallway. Grunting, he rubbed a hand roughly over his eyes, mouth, and beard. He opened his eyes, caught sight of her, and stared.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he demanded when he gathered his wits, stomping angrily over to her.
She didn’t turn to look at him. “Guards found them in the swamp. Said they were attacked by a gar. I’m a healer, so I volunteered.” She glanced up. “And you are?”

“Captain Ivearr Soriksen. We’ve met before,” he said, giving her patient a hard stare.

She nodded and turned her attention back to the wound. “Good morning, then, Captain.”

Ivearr snorted. “You got everything under control? Need anything – supplies, extra hands?”

“I sent the guard who brought them in here to get clean water, and I might need a pair of hands if this gets out of hand but for now, everything’s under control.”

He nodded. “I’ll find out where that water is. And I’ll round up some potions, just in case. Doesn’t look like they were attacked by a vampire, but you can never be too careful around here.”

“Thank you. Much appreciated.” Rowan lightly pulled the gauze from the wound. The bleeding had nearly completely stopped.

“Definitely a gar. Can you see where their small teeth ‘ve broken off in the bite?” Ivearr pointed out the small, splinter-like marks around the wound. “This one right here ‘s the tip of a large tooth. Gonna be a nice souvenir if they live.”

“They will.” Rowan lowered the leg and pulled over her fine tip tweezers. “Help me turn them on their side.”

Ivearr obeyed without question, steadying the body until he was sure it wouldn’t move as she worked. “I’ll get one of my people in here to help ya. No sense havin’ them just loiter outside like beheaded chickens.” He gracefully stepped off the bed, barely even shifting it.

“Thank you.” Rowan pulled out a magnifying glass to better see the teeth and went back to work.

Ivearr exited, and Rowan heard him shouting orders until the door closed and cut him off.

Rowan directed her magicka over her patient as she worked, monitoring their status as closely as she could without practical medical equipment.

*What I would do for a heart monitor right now.* She carefully removed the tiny teeth one at a time, setting them in a wide-brimmed glass jar to join the already-forming pile.

The door opened.

Rowan glanced up. A red head woman with freckles splattered across her cheeks, nose, and forehead was watching her with hawk-like eyes.

“Can I help you?” Rowan asked, turning her attention back to her work.

“Captain Ivearr sent me to assist,” the woman replied, her voice deep and firm.

Rowan nodded. “All right. Sit on the other side and keep them propped up. I need to get all the teeth out before I can start healing them.” The woman immediately obeyed. “I’m Rowan Corvid. What’s your name?”

“Valesi Maulhand.”

“Cool. How’d you earn that name?”
“How’d you earn yours?” Valesi shot back.

Raising an eyebrow, Rowan gave her an unimpressed look. “I chose it.” She looked back to the wound. Looked like there were only a few more teeth left.

“I killed a man who tried to rape me when I was seventeen. When he found me with the corpse, Captain Ivecarr said it looked like the bastard’d been mauled by a bear. He gave me the nickname when I told him I’d killed the bastard with my bare hands.”

Rowan looked back up at Valesi; the woman was wearing a dull expression. Shrugging, Rowan said, “Huh. That’s fucking badass.”

The corner of Valesi’s mouth twitched.

Rowan removed a few more teeth and searched the wound. “Looks like they’re all gone. Tell me what you think. You have more experience with these wounds, correct?”

“Yes. Every now and then, travelers wander into the swamp looking for a shortcut to town. Most come out with wounds like these from gar or slaughterfish or injuries from the spiders, if they come out at all. Most of the time, we only find their bodies.” Valesi inspected Rowan’s work, running her thumb lightly over the wounds. “I don’t feel any other teeth.” She looked up. “How are you going to treat it? I may have little knowledge or experience with healing magic, but even I know you can’t regenerate all that missing muscle.”

“You’re right; I can’t regenerate all of that. But what I can do is regenerate enough of the muscle so they can walk again.”

They both looked up at a knock at the door.

The first guard nudged the door open, and he and another guard carried in two buckets of water each.

“Sorry for the wait,” he said. “Had to wait to it to boil, ya know.” He looked at the patient. “How are they?”

“Alive,” Rowan replied. She set one of the buckets on another table, pulled it close, and added some cleanser to it. Taking out some cloths, she handed one of Valesi. “Help me get them cleaned up. Then, I can start healing them.”

“Do you think they’ll survive the process?” Valesi asked, taking a cloth and starting to clean the patient’s leg. “I’ve heard too much healing magic is dangerous.”

“It is, but I’ve learned how to reabsorb the unnecessary magicka that lingers after a major healing inside a patient’s body.”

“How does that even work? I thought magicka couldn’t be reabsorbed once it was cast?” the second male guard asked.

“What’re your names?” Rowan asked, cleaning her side of the leg.

“Tolgan Trotter.”

“Saerod Hearth Cloak.”

“Well, Tolgan, Saerod, it’s not that magicka can’t be reabsorbed after it’s been cast – it’s just that it’s
very, very, very dangerous for the mage to do so. See, once a spell’s been cast, the magicka changes shape. And to be brief about that subject: magicka is in its raw state or shape when it hasn’t been cast. Once it’s been cast, it becomes what we call ‘processed magicka’ or ‘used magicka’, which means it’s been used in a spell or enchantment. The change in shape makes it less compatible with the mage because people aren’t really built to house processed magicka. To try and do so is like casting a spell on yourself from the inside out without intentionally doing so – very dangerous and potentially lethal. So, what you have to do is break down the spell before reabsorbing the magicka . . . which is a really complicated and physically exhausting process, so I won’t get into that right now.”

Since the nords were all properly confused, Rowan laid her rag off to the side, rinsed her hands, and inspected the now clean wounds. Good, good, just one more thing. She took another tin and slathered a clean, green gel onto the wounds; it would ease the healing process, and since she was using it before a healing, would act as a pain reliever, anti-inflammatory, and mild restorative.

“I’m about to start healing them. If magic makes any of you squeamish – leave. I need to concentrate,” Rowan ordered.

Saerod grimaced and immediately exited. Tolgan shifted from foot to foot.

“You don’t mind me watching, do you?” he asked.

“No, just sit down and don’t bother me. You can ask questions later.” Rowan placed her tools in another bucket with added cleanser to be properly cleaned later and stacked her tins of salves out of the way. She rinsed her hands, dried them, and turned back to her patient.

Their pulse had steadied; their breathing had evened out; and a bit of color had managed to return to their face.

Tolgan stumbled into a chair, not taking his eyes off Rowan as she readied a healing spell. Valesi stayed absolutely still, though she, too, kept her gaze on the spell.

Rowan closed her eyes and hovered her hands over the worst wound. She released the spell, and her magicka immediately set to work healing what it could.

“Oh, wow,” Tolgan murmured. Rowan could picture his face with a wide-eyed stare and open mouth as he watched the flesh regenerate before his eyes.

As her magicka traced the broken veins and missing muscles and tissues, Rowan felt like ants were crawling up her back. She squirmed her shoulders to try and dislodge the feeling and only vaguely succeeded. Regenerating completely missing flesh was always less comfortable than stitching torn flesh back together. Her magicka had to map out what it was healing, what was missing, what was still there, recreate nerves and blood vessels, and everything just skittered around in her magicka’s form of consciousness, sending too much feedback to her and constantly threatening to overwhelm her . . . She’d definitely need some Alone & Deadly Silent Time after this.

Rowan’s magicka tittered as she reigned it in; it wasn’t pleased with being allowed to do so little – but she wasn’t going to risk giving her patient cancer if the magicka couldn’t understand when to stop regenerating cells. Better to have less meat on their leg than to die weeks later because of an incurable illness.

Ever so slowly, Rowan eased back her magicka, breaking down her spell bit by bit and reabsorbing the buzzing magic. The glow she can’t currently see gradually dies down, as well, until only the slightest bit encapsulated the section of muscle she was finishing.
At last, she slid the final bits of her magicka away from the new flesh, broke down her spell, and reabsorbed her magicka. She collapsed back in her chair, overly hot yet somehow clammy, breathing labored, throat dry as sand, hands body trembling, and a steady stream of blood flowing from one nostril.

“You did it . . .” Tolgan whispered in awe.

Rowan wanted to – needed to, really – inspect her work but couldn’t muster up the energy to open her eyes. Already she was starting to nod off, tilting slightly to the side and breathing deepening.

Tolgan and Valesi were speaking, but Rowan couldn’t make out who was saying what. Instead, she slowly drifted off to sleep with a soft sigh.

Her skin prickled. Goosebumps appeared on her back and arms. She stared out into the pitch-black forest surrounding her. She was alone. And she was being watched.

She lit a mage light yet it did nothing to push away the darkness; she couldn’t even see her own hand.

Her heart fumbled over a beat. She tried to smother the cough – she had to be quiet, quiet quiet quiet, or they might hear. They had such good hearing. They could probably hear her stuttering heart and too loud breaths.

She coughed.

A yowl pierced the silence.

Rowan whirled around in time for her mage light to reflect off blood red eyes, and then it was on top of her – snarling and spitting and lunging for her throat with ragged animal teeth—

Rowan shot up in bed, gasping and coughing around the scream smothered in her throat. Sweat pooled thickly beneath her clothing, causing the fabric to stick to her skin uncomfortably. Her heart pounded inside her ribcage rabbit-quick; the rushing blood and her sudden movement gave her a long moment of vertigo, and she had to steady herself by leaning over the side of the bed and curling in on herself.

Her stomach rolled. Several fat drops of saliva fell from her mouth into the bucket sitting conveniently next to her bed. She leaned further over, steadying herself with one arm on the bedside table and another on the bed itself, and vomited.

Sniffing and spitting to clear her nose, Rowan shoved her damp hair out of her face and looked around the room with itchy, watering eyes.

Not the inn.

She blinked and continued to pant.

Guard house.

She swallowed, grimaced, and spit again. She coughed.

Yes, the guard house – her patient . . .
Was right there, in the bed across from her, still unconscious but breathing and looking much better than she felt.

She sat up with a bit of struggling; her muscles were stiff and her joints aching. She'd been stripped of her outer coat, scarf, toolbelts, and boots. Her things sat neatly in a chair next to the bed she rested in. On the table stood a pitcher of water, a mug, a bowl, and several rags.

Slowly, she stretched her muscles, sighing in relief as several tense joints popped and cracked. She poured a mug of water, gulped it down, and poured another, sipping at it as she poured water into the bowl one-handedly. With her second water mug finished, she dipped a cloth in the bowl and set about wiping herself down as best as she could. She started by wiping the blood from her nose but found someone had already done so. Frowning, she turned her attention to the sweat cooling all over her body and making her feel sticky and gross.

When she finished her mini-bath, she pulled her pack towards her, disrupting the neat pile, and took out a stamina potion to gulp down.

Refreshed, she redressed, fixed her hair, and went to inspect her patient properly.

Several minutes into her inspection, the door opened. Captain Ivearr stepped inside, his eyes on her empty bed. His gaze swept over to where she now stood, and he snorted.

“Figures. You mages look like you’re dyin’ one moment and the next you’re walkin’ ‘round like nothing happened.” He settled into one of the nearby chairs. “So, how’re ya feeling?”

“Tired, achy, and hungry, but nothing that can’t be fixed,” she replied.

Ivearr’s hard stare never wavered. “You were bleeding from your nose.”

She shrugged. “It happens, and that’s not even the worst it’s ever been. Just something that comes with the territory.”

Ivearr grunted, and though he didn’t say anything else, it was clear he didn’t buy her short explanation.

“How’s the patient?” he asked instead.

“Good,” she said, testing the new pink scars on their leg. There was an obvious chunk missing, and without the overlaying section of fat, the outlines of the muscle sections were clearly visible. “They should be able to walk with some practice.” She changed the salve covered bandages for new ones and asked, “Do you know if they were traveling alone?”

“Not yet. We haven’t found anyone else, but they’re wearing silk – obviously, whoever they are, they aren’t a fighter and no one travels through Skyrim alone unless they are one, especially not a merchant.”

Rowan hummed. “Maybe they were with a group and got separated? If they were just one merchant with their guards, then you should’ve found the guards by now, right?”

“Maybe, but the swamp’s tricky and large. It’s got a mind of its own and likes to keep those that are foolish enough to wander into its depths,” Ivearr said cryptically. “And while I doubt we’ll find anyone else who’s lost out there, we’re sending out another search party.”

Rowan perked up. “When?”
Ivearr frowned. “Soon. When the first one returns from searching their section of the swamp.”

“First? How long was I out?”

“A few hours.”

“I’ll go with the next search party. I may not know the swamp, but I’ll be useful against whatever’s out there and if others are found injured,” Rowan said immediately.

Ivearr’s frown deepened, but he didn’t protest. “Fine. You can go if you can keep up and hold your own. If ya can’t, you stay behind.”

Giving him a mock salute, Rowan said, “Sir, yes, sir.”

After eating a thick, strange stew filled with mushrooms, crab, and dark greens with crusty bread, Rowan joined the gathering guards near the bridge out of town to stand next to Valesi. A few guards and townsfolks gave her odd looks, like they were waiting for her to burst into flames or grow a second head. But she could deal with that. So long as no one tried to stuff her in a chest, everyone would get along just fine.

Captain Ivearr stood in front of the group, his arms crossed over his chest as he frowned. “Now, listen up! You know the drill. A bunch of fools’ve gotten themselves lost in the swamp. You all are gonna go and look for ’em and bring ’em back here, all nice and safe. I don’t want no funny business, and definitely no hero business. You’re a team – act like it, fight like it, survive like it. Watch each other’s backs out there.” He nodded to Valesi. “Maulhand’s in charge, like always. Do as she says or she’s got permission to knock some sense into ya.” He addressed Valesi. “Bring ’em back safe.”

“Of course, sir,” Valesi said, in that stiff way of hers. She turned to the guards. “Move out.”

Rowan fell into step with the group but didn’t interrupt their formation. As soon as they crossed into the swamp formally, she summoned a frost atronach, startling most of the guards.

“Shor’s beard! Warn us next time!” one of them shouted, leaning dramatically away from the atronach.

“Does that only apply to atronachs, or is that for all spells?” Rowan asked, semi-seriously.

Valesi snorted. “Keep moving. Corvid’s a mage. She doesn’t have to broadcast every spell she casts. Just stay out of her way.”

There was some grumbling, but a “Yes, ma’am” sounded throughout the whole group.

“My atronachs only target enemies,” Rowan offered helpfully. “As long as you don’t attack me, you’re fine. And my aim’s very good. I haven’t hit a companion yet.”

She did not mention that she always traveled alone.

The guards did not look appeased.

Everyone was at least mildly uncomfortable. Except Valesi. But Rowan doubted she even know how to be uncomfortable.
The swamp held a stillness that Rowan couldn’t enjoy. It wasn’t a stillness born of peace but one that practically screamed ‘DANGER’ with every step further she took into the swamp.

A mosquito buzzed in her ear, and she swatted at it just to relieve the tension in her body.

“Watch where you step,” Valesi warned. “Most of the fungi are toxic in some way. The large fungal pods, moss beds, and giant lichen are all right to step on, but be cautious with anything else.”

Rowan nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind, thank you.”

“Commander,” a guard called out, “over there!”

The entire group turned to look where the guard was pointing. Multiple sets of footprints, hoof prints, and even a set of tracks from a carriage of some sort littered the mud. The entire scene was a mess of trampled plant life, disturbed mud, and chaotic movements; the group’s fear and confusion permeated the area.

“The tracks lead further off from where the merchant was found,” another guard commented.

“You’re right. We found ‘em to the northwest; those go further north.”

Valesi ignored the chattering guards and approached the scene. Her brows were furrowed, and there was a look of intense concentration on her face. Rowan watched, puzzled, as she sniffed cautiously before rearing back and shoving a loose cloth hanging around her throat to cover her mouth and nose.

“Cover your mouths!” she ordered, turning away from the scene. “The fools trampled a patch of black blister!”

Rowan did as ordered, her confusion growing even as Valesi urged the group to follow the tracks away from the original scene.

“What’s going on?” she asked, quickening her strides to keep up with the nords. Her atronach stomped along, disturbing the unsetting quiet and leaving thin disks of ice in the soggy mud.

“Black blister is a black fungus that looks like a patch of twisting blisters. Looks almost exactly like witch’s butter but they grow on different types of rotting trees. If the blisters burst, they release spores that cause hallucinations in humans and some animals. Worst part is that the spores linger for hours, sometimes even days if the patch is large enough,” Valesi explained.

With wide eyes, Rowan glanced over her shoulder at the quickly fading scene. “So, what’re the chances the group we’re looking for is already dead?”

“High. Panic spreads so quickly in outsider groups. It’s most likely that someone got trampled by a horse, run over by the carriage, killed by something in the swamp, or even killed by each other.”

“Guess we better hurry.”

Their group trudged deeper into the swamp, stepping carefully over thicker sections of vegetations, avoiding the unfriendly swamp inhabitants, and sometimes sloshing through shallower waterways.

With every step, Rowan despised the swamp more and more.

After nearly losing a boot for what seemed like the millionth time, she hissed curses beneath her breath, miniature sparks dancing along her fingers and disturbing the guards closest to her.
“Hey, uh, you all right there, mage?” one guard asked.


Her frustration was abruptly cut off as a voice broke the silence.

“Kun! The horse! Kun! Kun!” someone shrieked.

A snap – the sound of wood splintering and cracking – a horse’s guttural roar –

And then a horse burst through the fog right at their group.

Rowan made a completely undignified, strangled choking sound at the back of her throat as she flailed out of the way.

Amidst the scrambling guards, Rowan’s atronach grabbed her attention – or, more accurately, her atronach charging the horse did.

She whirled around, slipping in the mud and falling in her panic. She flung her arm out, releasing a burst of magicka through her atronach. Her atronach shattered; ice chunks and shards flew in all directions. The horse startled, rearing up and cutting sharply to the left. The horse’s reins flapped wildly behind it while the trace dragged pieces of the front arms through the mud and underbrush.

Rowan scrambled to her feet. Two of the guards tied to catch the reins, only narrowly avoiding a rear hoof to the head each. Managing to gather her wits, Rowan cast Calm on the horse. The horse settled back on all four feet and snorted softly; it flicked its tail once before sniffing at the leaves of a scraggly tree.

A guard grabbed the reins hesitantly. He and his companion stood as far from the horse as they comfortably could. One of them looked over their shoulder at Rowan but didn’t speak.

Rowan ignored the new silence and leaned forward to place her hands on her knees and pant. *Way too much excitement that I didn’t have warning for.*

She jumped when a hand touched her shoulder.

“You good?” Valesi asked.

Rowan huffed. “Yeah, just didn’t expect to nearly get trampled by a horse.”

With a snort, Valesi said, “The swamp’s always full of surprises. Come on, let’s check on the survivors.” She turned back to where the horse had come from and called out, “This is the Morthal Guard! How many injured do you have?”

Chatter started up in language Rowan didn’t recognize, though it reminded her vaguely of Chinese. Then a low, female replied, “Several! But we are also missing one of our group. We were searching for them when we stumbled into the fungus.”

Valesi sighed and rolled her shoulders. “We found your missing member. We’ve got a healer with us who treated them. So, we’re coming over. Don’t attack us or freak out. The hallucinogenic spores most likely haven’t completely left your systems. You’re going to be sensitive to outside stimulus for a few hours still, even if the mania and general madness has settled down.”

“We will gather by the cart. Is our horse all right? She was the most affected by the spores,” the same voice answered, exhaustion leaking into their voice.
Valesi motioned for the guards to fall back in line. The guards leading the horse brought up the group’s rear. “Yes, the horse is fine. The healer used a Calm spell on her, and there appears to be nothing else wrong with her.”

“Thank the gods.”

Rowan shifted her pack to one shoulder so she could easily dig out her healer satchel. When she caught sight of the cart, she pulled ahead of the group and called out, “I’m the healer. Who’s hurt and who’s the worst off?”

Heads immediately shot up to stare at her, but she continued to stride forward.

A tall, lithe human stood. Their features were sharp, elegant, and though weary, they and their companions (more than ten people, if Rowan’s first glance was right) appeared relieved to see the group of guards approaching. “Kalei, Cao, Shen, Amadeo, and Lâm are the worst. They are resting inside the cart. They were injured before we were forced into the swamp, and their wounds have only worsened.”

“What do you mean you were forced into the swamp?” Valesi asked, frowning.

“Vampires,” the human said. “Their thralls attacked us on the road and drove us into the swamp. The others were injured during the fight. We gave them potions of cure disease and tended to them as best as we could, but Kalei is our healer and she was knocked unconscious during the fight.”

“How bad is her head injury?” Rowan asked, already climbing into the back of the large, covered wagon.

“She’s been in and out of consciousness and has developed a fever. We believe there’s an infection in the wound, and nearly all our remaining healing supplies have been used up. And then we stumbled into the fungus’ spores . . .”

“All right, I’ll get started on her and work my way through the rest of y’all,” Rowan said and hopped past the heavy tarp.

Elegant lanterns lit up the wagon’s inside, highlighting the truly massive area that was big enough to fit all the people hovering outside with room to spare for all the carefully organized and secured crates, trunks, bags, and barrels.

Frowning, Rowan froze, half in and half out of the wagon. The space was just too big. Had she not seen the entire wagon when approaching it? No. She definitely had.

Magic, she thought. It had to be an enchantment of some sort. While she wanted to investigate with her own magicka, the injured laid out on the wagon’s floor, attended by three young, triplet humans. The teenagers looked up with wide, startled eyes. Sparks glittered over one of the teenagers’ knuckles.

Rowan stilled. She forced herself to relax. “Hi. I'm Corvid. What're your names?”

“Monir.” “Shirin.” “Amir.” They each answered one after the other, like they were used to sounding off.

“Nice to meet you. I’m a healer. Mind telling me who’s the worst off."

Monir spoke up from beneath her black headscarf. “Kalei is.” She motioned to the woman she was tending to. “She was conscious earlier, but then we hit the spores and couldn’t watch her . . .”
Nodding along, Rowan edged further into the cart until she could sit amongst the group. She sat her healer’s bag within arm’s length and shrugged off her pack. “Are you three training as healers or do you only have basic training?”

“We’re Kalei’s apprentices,” Shirin answered, her voice lower but bolder. Her own burgundy headscarf was embroidered with delicate white flowers, and her dark eyes were ringed with kohl.

“Good, so you three can help me. I’m gonna get started on Kalei, but what are the other injuries? And is everyone unconscious or asleep?” Rowan asked.

“Kalei and Shen are unconscious. Shen’s one of our main fighters and they used too much magicka and too many potions while fighting off the vampires and thralls. They’ve been unconscious for hours. Everyone else is asleep,” Shirin said.

“Sounds like standard exhaustion and over-ingestion of potions, but if I don’t like what I find when I examine them, I might force them to wake up. Otherwise, there’s not much we can do until the potions work through their system or they vomit the potions up.” Rowan shuffled closer to Kalei to peel off the bandages to inspect her head wound. “Oh, yeah, that’s definitely an infection. How long have you all been in the swamp? I thought it was only a few hours, maybe a day or so. Not long enough for an infection to be this far along. Unless this swamp is more fucked up than I thought.”

“We’ve been here maybe a day? I don’t know when we were first attacked . . .” Shirin trailed off, looking to Amir.

“We were attacked around fifteen minutes after one in the afternoon and were chased into the swamp almost immediately after that,” he said.

“We left Morthal at about five and found your group nearly an hour later. This has to be something from the swamp. Give me a second to ask Valesi about it.” Rowan clamored back to the carriage’s opening and stuck her head out from the curtains. “Hey, Valesi!”

Valesi and the group’s leader were still speaking, but Rowan’s shout interrupted them. They both turned to look at her.

“Yes?” Valesi asked.

“Is there something in the swamp that speeds up infections? Kalei’s wound is very swollen, red, and has grey and green discharge.”

“Was the wound washed with swamp water? Even if it was boiled, unless it’s treated with mage tassel and mudcrab chitin, there’s too many plants, fungi, and creatures living in the water for it to be used for wounds or drinking. We collect rain water in town because it’s safer.”

Over her shoulder, Rowan asked, “Did you wash her wound with swamp water?”

The triplets shared guilty looks.

“We tried to boil and treat it, but we weren’t sure if it worked,” Monir said.

Rowan turned back to Valesi. “Yeah, they did. Any specific way to treat it?”

Valesi shook her head. “No, you can only cleanse the wound, keep it dry, and put a disinfectant on it.” Her face pinched into a frown. “Can’t you just heal it?”

“No. She’s taken too many potions. It’s too risky to try healing magic. I’ll clean the wound and use
Before Rowan could disappear back into the carriage, Valesi said, “It’ll be dark soon, so we’ll be moving back to Morthal. Be prepared for the carriage to move.”

“How are you going to move it? The front’s broken, so we can’t reattach the horse.”

Valesi scoffed. “We live in Morthal. We can fix this no problem, especially to get us back to town. You do your healer thing. We’ll handle this.”

Shrugging, Rowan returned to her patients. “All right, you three. I’m going to treat Kalei. If I give you guys some supplies, can you treat the minor injuries?”

“Yes, ma’am.” They answered in unison.

Rowan handed out bandages, cleanser, waterskins, rags, and minor potions to the triplets and set to work on Kalei’s wounds.

Halfway through her work, the carriage began moving. The triplets only briefly looked to Rowan for an explanation and, once she gave it, returned to their own work. Together, the four of them worked quickly through the injured. The triplets were highly competent, rarely needing more than a few demonstrations to assist Rowan with the more complicated injuries.

By the time the group’s leader poked their head into the carriage to tell them they’d arrived in Morthal, almost all the injured had been fully treated.

“Give us a few minutes and we’ll be finished here. They’ll just need rest now,” Rowan said. She swigged a stamina potion, the constant use of her magicka finally getting to her.

The leader sighed in relief. “Thank you. You don’t know how much your help means to us. If there’s any way we can repay you—”

“You don’t need to pay me or anything like that. I’m just glad I could help. Let me finish up here and I’ll get out of y’all’s hair.”

“My name is Xiang. I apologize for not introducing myself earlier,” she said quickly.

Frowning in confusion, Rowan said, “It’s fine. I understand you were worried about your friends.” She held her hand out to Xiang. “I’m Rowan Corvid.”

She stared at Rowan’s hand for a few moments, bemused, before shaking it gently. “Yes, Valesi told us you were a traveling mage and that you had also been attacked by vampires.” She released Rowan’s hand and tapped her manicured nails on the carriage’s side. “I must admit, I’m both puzzled and relieved to meet another Vetān so far from our homeland, especially one from the most Northern part. Tell me, how did you come to be in Skyrim? You did not come alone, did you?”

“Um . . .” Rowan fumbled for a moment. While she wasn’t sure what “Vetān” meant exactly, the word sounded similar to Breton in Xiang’s accent, so Rowan would go with that assumption. Licking her lips, Rowan decided on the almost lie that she’d told Anise. “An acquaintance dumped me in Skyrim with money and a pack and told me he’d take me home if I survived here on my own for two years.”

“Um . . .” Rowan fumbled for a moment. While she wasn’t sure what “Vetān” meant exactly, the word sounded similar to Breton in Xiang’s accent, so Rowan would go with that assumption. Licking her lips, Rowan decided on the almost lie that she’d told Anise. “An acquaintance dumped me in Skyrim with money and a pack and told me he’d take me home if I survived here on my own for two years.”

Strangely, Xiang didn’t appear shocked, confused, or even affronted; instead, she gave Rowan a sagely nod, like she understood some unspoken cultural hint in Rowan’s words that Rowan herself wasn’t a part of.
“I understand.” Xiang reached out and tenderly squeezed Rowan’s forearm. “I shall leave you to your work. If you require anything, do not hesitate to ask one of the others in our group. I must meet with the Jarl now. Thank you again, sister, for your help.”

“You’re welcome . . .” Rowan said, puzzled beyond belief. As Xiang left with Valesi, Rowan shook her head, shoved her confusion away, and returned to her work.
Since she’d lost an entire day, Rowan decided to find Alva’s journal the next day rather than risk Alva waking up while Rowan was in her house. However, a woman approached her as she made her way to the inn.

“Hello,” Rowan said, pausing with her hand on the inn’s door.

The woman wrung her hands and stared at the ground. “The Jarl said I should speak with you.”

“Oh . . . okay.” When the woman didn’t move towards the inn or away from it, she added, “Do you want to speak in my room or . . . ?”

“I . . . my house, would be preferable . . . please,” she murmured.

Nodding, Rowan stepped away from the inn and followed the woman to the house almost directly across from the inn. The house that was supposed to be the burned down house. Obviously, it was still standing. Smoke drifted cozily from the stone chimney, and a light lit up the inside welcomingly.

Choking in her heart in her throat, Rowan followed the woman inside the home, closing the door securely behind herself.

“Please, sit, I’ll . . . I’ll make us some tea,” the woman said.

Rowan sat stiffly at the table and watched the woman drift around the kitchen. AS a mug was placed in front of her, Rowan said, “So, uh, I guess you know that I’m Corvid. What’s your name?”

Startled, the woman immediately began fussing. “O-oh, dear! I apologize – I am so sorry! It was so rude of me to just, just walk up to you and not even introduce myself, I just—” She cut herself off and took a deep breath. “My name is Joltta. Hroggar is my husband and the father of our daughter, Helgi.” She paused, as if waiting for Rowan to react in some way. When Rowan continued to give her a forcibly blank stare, she continued, “I’m sure you’ve already heard the gossip around town, but I want to tell you it’s not true. Something is wrong with Hroggar. He, he hasn’t been himself in months. Ever since Alva arrived – and I know what that sounds like, but it’s not an affair! I just know it . . .”

She began crying, muffling her hiccups and sobs with her hands.

Awkwardly, Rowan averted her eyes and handed Joltta a handkerchief. Joltta stuttered out a ‘thank you’ and wiped her eyes and nose.

“I know the Jarl told you to talk to me, but why did you approach me?” Rowan asked.

Hiccupping softly, Joltta murmured, “I want to ask you to figure out what’s happened to Hroggar.
Alva’s done something to him – cast a spell on him or something. I want you to find the truth.”

Well, she was already going to deal with Alva of her own volition, why not agree to do basically the same thing for Joltta? “Sure.” Wow. Brilliant, Rowan, truly a response fit for a living legend.

Joltta looked up. “You, you’ll do it?”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of it.” Rowan stood, trying to make it look like she wasn’t desperately trying to escape an awkward situation. “In fact, I’m gonna go start on that now. Just don’t tell anyone, all right? Something like this needs a bit of secrecy.”

Joltta nodded, still clutching the handkerchief to her mouth. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll, just, go now, and get started on that. Goodnight.”

Rowan slipped out the front door, pressing herself against it briefly to calm herself before hurrying down the steps and across the bridge. She was going to go the fuck to sleep and deal with this mess in the morning.

Something moved at the edge of town. Rowan froze.

If it’s a fucking vampire, I swear to god I will burn this town to its soggy ground, Rowan seethed. She waited until the moonlight lit up the figure.

Hroggar, she thought, somehow surprised he would be leaving town at such a late hour. Is he meeting Alva? She looked at the inn’s door and back to where Hroggar was disappearing into the swamp. Fuck, I’m gonna regret this.

She followed Hroggar into the swamp.

Oh, this was definitely a bad idea.

Rowan could barely see where she was stepping. Hroggar was a constantly fading presence in front of her. Though she didn’t dare light a mage light or else risk giving herself to the vampire surely waiting in the swamp. She couldn’t understand how Hroggar wasn’t shuffling along like she was; he wasn’t carrying any sort of light either.

As Hroggar approached an open section of the swamp with a figure standing at its center, lit up by the bright moon, Rowan searched for a quick place to hide. She ducked behind a tree just in time for the second figure turned to face Hroggar. She couldn’t exactly make out who the second person was, though she was sure it was Alva, and she couldn’t hear what they were talking about. So, she risked moving closer.

She managed to slink from tree to tree until she was within sight and hearing distance of the pair and – yes, that was definitely Alva.

“Time to renew my spell, pet.” Alva cooed. Pale blue light drifted from her hands and wrapped around Hroggar. Rowan watched Hroggar briefly tense and then become dangerously relaxed, his head even lolling slightly to the side.

Alva stroked the side of his face with the back of her hand and smiled. “Just a bit longer and you won’t even question me.” She gripped his head with both hands. “Soon, this city will be ours and
with it, the beginnings of our army. We'll turn Skyrim into a blood farm, and no one will be able to stop us. I just need a little more patience.” Her grip gradually tightened until she pulled her hands away. She licked blood from her nails and ordered, “Now, return to your little wife and daughter, pet. Before I decide to have more than a nibble of you.” She then turned and walked deeper into the swamp.

Seeing her chance to escape, Rowan huddled over her hands and cast Muffle before quickly rushing back to Morthal.

Bed or Jarl? Bed or Jarl, bed or Jarl? Rowan asked herself as Morthal came into view. She’d beaten Hroggar back to town, but she didn’t want to be out and about when he returned. There was risk he would tell Alva, and Rowan couldn’t risk the vampire becoming suspicious of her.

Rowan decided to try the Jarl first. If she was asleep, then Rowan could (finally) go to bed.

The guards outside the longhouse nodded as she approached.

“The Jarl’s expecting you,” one said, motioning her inside.

Oh, well, okay then.

The inside of the longhouse was dark and silent. Only one person sat at the room’s stone fireplace, a mug of steaming liquid in their hands.

“Such a short time you’ve been in Morthal and you’ve already made quite the impression,” Jarl Ravencrone said, her dark eyes glittering in the almost nonexistent light. “But that’s not why you’re here. Tell me what you’ve found.”

Rowan told her what she’d watched happen between Hroggar and Alva in the swamp, watching the Jarl’s impassive face.

When Rowan’s story ended, Idgrod sighed. “So, the worst has yet come to pass, but it may be stopped before it can truly begin.” She looked at Rowan. “Unfortunately, I cannot pass judgment on your word alone. Morthal’s people will not accept your word against that of one of their own, even if Alva is no longer human. Only once you have solid proof shall the others be swayed.”

Not really knowing what to say, Rowan nodded. “Yeah, I have an idea of what else I need to do.”

With a decisive nod, Idgrod stood. “Then, I shall see you once your investigation is done. Good hunting, Corvid.” And with that, she walked into what Rowan assumed to be her bedroom.

Exhausted, confused, and annoyed, Rowan turned on her heel and left. Sleep was what she needed. Everything else could wait until morning.

While an almost full night’s sleep didn’t make Rowan thrilled to deal with Morthal’s bullshit, it did make her more tolerant of it.

During breakfast, Rowan made sure to write down her experiences in her journal; she’d gotten lax over the past week or so with everything that was going on and needed to catch up. Afterwards, she
tended to Shih, spending precious minutes complaining to the bored mare about Morthal and vampire bullshit. She then checked in on her patients. Her first patient – Jeevan – was healing nicely and had briefly regained consciousness during the night, as she was told by one of the caravanners keeping Jeevan company. Rowan refreshed his paste and bandages before moving on to inspect the rest of the caravan. The other members – except for the injured she’d treated yesterday – were recovering from simple exhaustion and minor injuries. The patients from last night were doing much better; they were awake, eating, and chatting with their fellow caravanners and looking very Not Dead. Many of the caravanners seemed curious about her, but only Kalei addressed her.

“So,” Kalei grunted. Monir helped her into an inclined position, and Kalei thanked her. “So, you’re the travelin’ healer ever’one’s talkin’ ‘bout.” Kalei’s voice was rougher with a different but similar accent to Xiang, more like a drawl than Xiang’s crisper words.

“Don’t see how. There’s not much to tell,” Rowan said. She kneeled down and jerked her chin at Kalei. “Mind if I check your wound?”

“Go ahead. My apprentices say you’re skilled.”

“Go ‘head.” She eyed Rowan as she shifted to inspect her wound. “Xiang said you got dropped off by a friend. Left you with some money and told ya to survive.”

Rowan nearly paused at her tone; it was that same knowing/implying tone that Xiang had used yesterday. She decided not to acknowledge it. “Yeah, though they’re not really my friend. Just someone I had just met. Guess they thought it’d be funny.”

Kalei let out a raspy chuckle, her full lips smirking. “Funny. Yeah, probably so. Those types tend to think that sort of thing’s funny.” She tilted her head when Rowan applied more paste to her wound. “Seems like you’ve been doin’ pretty well on your own.”

Rowan hummed. “I was lucky. I made a friend almost immediately when I woke up near Riverwood. She helped me out, pointed me to Riverwood, and I got a job there. And I was dropped off with plenty of money, too, so I’ve been pretty comfortable.”

“What sorta job?”

“I worked at the mill. I just cut wood, nothing fancy. And I apprenticed with the smith there, too.”

“Wood cutting and smithing . . . not exactly common jobs in your neck of the woods.”

Rowan kept her face carefully blank as their conversation attracted the cautious curiosity of the group. “No, definitely not.” At least she wasn’t lying about that.

“You any good at smithing?”

“Alvor said I picked it up pretty quickly, especially for someone who’d never been around a forge before.” She tugged at the collar of her coat to show a glimpse of her chipped armor. “I made this. When I get to somewhere with a forge, I’ll fix it up.”

“Hard to find a mage who wears armor. Most don’t want to risk it interfering with their magic.”

*Armor could interfere with magic?* Feeling out of her depth, Rowan shrugged. “I haven’t had any problems.” She applied new bandages to Kalei’s wound and stepped back. “You’re healing nicely. The infection’s almost gone, too. If you feel up for it, tomorrow I’ll heal it the rest of the way.”

Kalei rolled her neck. “Sounds good, Bo-Ra.”
Rowan eyed the older woman in confusion at the name but didn’t comment. “I’ll be back to check on everyone this evening, but if something goes wrong, just come find me.”

Kalei waved her off. “Don’t worry, Bo-Ra. Me and the kids’ve got everythin’ spiced. You go on and do your thing.”

Instead of replying, Rowan shook her head, gathered her things, and stepped out of the wagon.

She had a vampire to deal with.

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I just need to get in, get the journal, and get out. Rowan told herself for the thousandth time. She glanced up from her notes to Alva’s house. She’d been timing the guards’ patrols, figuring out how long she would have to pick the lock before she was spotted. Based on the game, she guessed that high leveled (or skilled, as it would be called in real life) sneaks could pick the lock in broad daylight and not by spotted but a) she doubted that was actually true and b) she would be now here near that skilled. So, timing the guard patrols it was.

Once the last guard disappeared, she snuck onto Alva’s porch, lockpick bag in hand, and got to work.

Several broken lockpicks, a mini-heart attack, and what felt like a bucket of sweat later, Rowan slid into Alva’s house, almost forgetting to brush the small pile of broken picks into the house after her.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Rowan calmed her shaking hands and stuttering heart by packing the lockpick pieces away in a satchel to be disposed of.

Rowan wiped the sweat from her face and neck with a cloth. Get the journal. Get out. Simple.

She bypassed the temptation of the coin littered on a table to search the main room. No luck. The journal had to be in the basement. With Alva’s coffin. Where Alva was sleeping.

I just can’t catch a break, can I? Rowan huffed.

She tested the stairs to the basement, stepping close to the wall to best avoid the boards squeaking. She snuck down the stairs, cracked open the door, and peeked inside. Alva was asleep in her coffin. Her skin was paler than Rowan remembered and had a grey-ish tinge to it. Her eyes appeared sunken in and bruised. She didn’t appear to be breathing.

Oh, fuck that’s creepy. Rowan swallowed as quietly as possible. Get the journal. Get out.

She scanned the room. Only a table and chair sat in the far-left corner and both were empty. There was only one place left to look – the coffin. Where Alva was.

Fuck’s sake. Rowan meticulously crammed the urge the scream back down her throat. She cast Muffle, hiding the spell inside her pocket, and snuck towards the coffin before her brain could catch up.

Each time a board let out the faintest squeak or squeal, Rowan froze, heart hammering in her chest and sweat falling in bullets down her face and neck.

Left. Right. Left. Right. Rowan moved so slowly it was a marvel that Alva didn’t wake up at the sound of her joints creaking.
Barely breathing, Rowan peeked into the coffin. The journal sat at Alva’s side, as if she’d been holding it before she fell asleep. Eyes constantly darting between the journal and Alva’s face, Rowan ever so slowly reached for the journal, carefully lifted it from the coffin, and then moved back towards the door, clutching the journal close to her chest. She made more noise than she should have rushing up the stairs and to the door but couldn’t find it in herself to care.

In spite of the terror and adrenaline rushing through her veins, Rowan managed to pause at the front door to peek outside. No guard.

Rowan rushed out of Alva’s house and down the road, not looking back.

Rowan had gone straight to the Jarl. Or tried to. The triplets had come bursting out of nowhere, their faces frantic and shouting that one of the caravanners couldn’t breathe.

Several hours, many healing potions, a lot of magicka, and a near surgery later, the caravanner was resting easy.

Goddamn, Rowan was lucky she knew what a severe allergic reaction looked like.

The caravanner was warned away from the snails he’d added to his stir fry; everyone could finally rest easy; and Rowan was finally off to see the Jarl.

Rowan eyed the sun’s position and quickened her pace. She wanted to be done with this vampire business before the sun went down, thank you very much.

She nodded to the guards and entered the longhouse. Jarl Ravencrone’s penetrating stare met Rowan’s. The Jarl nodded and stood, waving off the concern of her husband and daughter. She motioned for Rowan to follow her into a room off to the left of the longhouse, and Rowan did. She closed and locked the door behind her.

“You’ve returned. Your investigation is done. What have you found?”

Rowan took Alva’s journal out of her pack and handed it to Ravencrone. “See for yourself.”

Ravencrone took the journal and read through it, her face showing no emotion. When finished, she closed the journal and nodded. “So, Alva has conspired to destroy my Hold and its people. So be it. Corvid, I thank you for bringing this to my attention. Unfortunately, I have another favor I must ask of you. I understand that you owe no responsibility to me or my Hold, but I ask that you take on the task of destroying Alva and her ilk. I wish I could trust my guard to destroy her, but I have no way of knowing which of them is under Alva’s influence. You have proved yourself trustworthy and a vicious and powerful fighter. Will you take on this task for me?”

Though a part of her wanted to say no she’d had enough of vampires, she couldn’t really say that. She nodded. “I’ll kill her. And others if I find them.”

“Thank you. For your efforts, take this coin. I have another gift to impart on your, but it will not be finished for another night or two. In the meantime, ask Falion for access to the books he brought from the College. Tell him I’ve given you permission to take any of them as payment for your services. He should still be awake. His works keeps him awake far longer than I’ve advised. And do not take too harshly to his demeanor. My people still have not adjusted to him living here and have caused him quite a bit of stress.”
Rowan tucked the coin pouch away and nodded. “His house is that one next to Alva’s, right?”

“Yes. Simply knock on the door before entering. He isn’t always as aware of his surroundings as he should be.”

“Thank you. I’ll . . . remove Alva in the morning and start searching for the other vampires after that.”

“Once Alva is dead, feel free to ask the guard for any assistance you might need. They will be pleased to assist.”

With a last nod, Rowan left the room, leaving Jarl Ravencrone and the journal alone.

The sun had begun to set, so Rowan decided to leave speaking to Falion for the next day. She made her way to the inn, her steps lighter now that all she had to do was kill Alva, rather than sneak around her and risk being fucking jumped at some random moment.

Jonna greeted her when she stepped into the inn. “Haven’t seen you all day. What’ve you been up to?”

Shrugging off her pack and sitting at the bar, Rowan said, “Checked on my patients, added to my magic notes for most of the day, solved a minor crisis with one of the caravanners, that sort of thing.”

Jonna laughed and handed Rowan a plate of roasted potatoes and spiced, grilled fish with a mug of weak wine. “The guards were wondering what you were writing down. You made them nervous just scribbling in your book for a few hours.”

Shoving a forkful of fish into her mouth, Rowan hummed. “I’m surprised their reactions weren’t worse. I heard people here were really against magic, but I haven’t really encountered any of that.”

“It’s because you’re not the stereotypical ‘secretive’ mage that they all expect,” Jonna said, her tone and stare distant as her mind drifted. “If you were like that – like some people around here, then you’d definitely see more hostility.”

Rather than comment, Rowan shoved potatoes in her mouth and nodded as Jonna continued to mutter to herself about ‘damn, stubborn wizards’.

The entrance opened and closed.

The skin on the back of Rowan’s neck prickled. Her magicka buzzed along her spine.

Jonna glanced up, her expression falling in surprise. “Laelette? But we thought you left to join the Stormcloaks? What’s wrong with you? Are you sick? Wait – what are you—”

Jonna’s eyes widened in shock and horror. Rowan turned around just time to watch a Breton vampire launch herself across the room at her.

The world slowed down.

Laelette appeared suspended midair. Jonna’s shrill scream vibrated Rowan’s eardrums. Rowan’s magicka rose up like a wave inside of her as she slowly – too, too slowly – pivoted on her seat to face the threat.
And then everything went too fast all at once.

Laelette crashed into Rowan as she let out a burst of formless magicka. The force went Laelette and Rowan flying in opposite directions; Laelette hit a wall and Rowan the door to the bedroom next to the bar – after her back raked across the entire bar’s side to get there.

The air rushed from Rowan’s lungs in a whoosh upon impact. Her skull cracked solidly against the wood. Head lolling like a bobblehead and mouth gaping, Rowan tried to make sense of her surroundings. Jonna was screaming . . . about something. The world kept spinning. Rowan couldn’t focus, couldn’t move her body properly. Nothing was responding except her magicka. She latched on to it as the only sturdy part of her jelly-like body. Her magicka howled at her. No. not her magicka. Something else.

*The vampire!*

Rowan tried to snap to attention, to stand or crawl or slap herself – something to gain control again.

Clawed hands grabbed the front of Rowan’s coat and hauled her up against the wall. Her feet dangled.

Rowan attempted to speak but could only fumble over her too-large tongue and uselessly grab at the steel grip holding her.

At least her vision had finally begun to clear.

Or not.

“. . . ugly,” she somehow managed to choke out.

Really, ugly was a bit of an understatement for Laelette’s looks. Let’s just say that Dawnguard definitely had to be a part of this world because yikes.

Laenette snarled, her mouth opening wide enough for Rowan to blankly stare into the back of her throat.

Rowan didn’t even have time to think ‘of fuck’ before she was hurled across the room. She crashed head over heels into a table, her arms barely managing to come up to protect her head.

She rolled off the table inelegantly. Her legs buckled, and she collapsed on the floor, shuddering and groaning. She tried to spark a healing spell but a jolt of lighting shooting through her stopped her. Literally. Damn could Laelette toss around Sparks.

Rowan screamed. Her body jerked and thrashed. The stench of burnt flesh surrounded Rowan.

Rowan’s magicka coiled like a knot in her belly. It pressed up and up, stretching the walls she’d put in place and filling her chest and her throat until she could no longer scream. And then it reached for her.

She took the outreaching tendril without a second thought.

Magicka rushed through her veins, searing her in a way that wasn’t physical and healing any wounds in its path. Energy flooded her but not a natural kind, a sort of restless, too much energy that caused her teeth to chatter, her nails to bite into her palms despite her armor and gloves, and her brain to try and claw its way out of her skull as her entire body screamed at her to *do something* before it dissolved.
Baring her too sharp teeth, Rowan stood and let out her own inhuman scream; a sound she couldn’t even begin to describe as it reverberated off the walls and echoed in on itself until it was all she could hear.

She turned to Laelette, her stare bright and searing. She raised her arm, her hand and fingers loose; heat haze floated from her body yet all Rowan felt was the heavy weight in her core and the seething anger that had overtaken her.

She didn’t just want to kill Laelette. She wanted to eviscerate her. She wanted to make it so that Laelette wished she had never existed. She wanted to take all her fury and turn it into pain just for Laelette to feel.

So, she did.

Rather than forming her spell, she let her magicka guide the spell. The familiar waves of Sparks crackled along her arm to her palm where they concentrated. Rowan waited until the last possible moment and released.

Laelette dodged the first Lighting Storm but not the second nor the Ice Storm that followed it. She managed to break free of the frost covering her, but Rowan was already on top of her by then.

Rowan twisted her hands into Laelette’s clothing until her finger bones ground together. Laelette screeched and clawed at whatever part of Rowan she could reach. Rowan held firm, baring her teeth and shoving her weight down to hold her prey in place. She pooled her roaring magicka into her palms and, when the intensity became so much that it singed the skin of her palms, Rowan shoved the energy into Laelette.

The effect was similar but so very different than with the first vampire she used this attack on. With that vampire she filled it until it literally burst at the seams; this time, Rowan wanted something more . . . hands on.

Rowan’s magicka rushed to pool in several spots along Laelette’s body, creating lovely little handholds just for Rowan, which she took full advantage of.

Releasing one of her hands, Rowan found a spot on Laenette’s belly, splayed her hand across it, dug her fingers in, and twisted.

Laelette threw her head back and howled.

She writhed and thrashed and tried to buck Rowan off but her supernatural strength had deserted her. Her flailing limbs popped and blistered from the close proximity to Rowan’s overcharged body.

Rowan listened to her wails for several moments before forcing her hand against Laelette’s belly until the flesh gave and her hand sank into the vampire’s icy, redundant organs. She felt the flesh sizzle as she made contact with it but simply grasped a chunk and pulled.

The wad of flesh in her grip should have repulsed Rowan. But it didn’t. All she felt was sick joy.

Tossing her handful away, she shoved her other hand into a new spot. Laelette screeched and thrashed harder, but Rowan only bore down on her more, forcing her flat and prone and oh so easy to rip into.

Rowan continued like that, digging into Laelette and pulling out fleshly chunks until her enemy laid limp beneath her and she’d exhausted her fury.
Panting, Rowan sat back on her heels and stared down at the corpse impassively. Now that her rage had died down, she could see what a mess she’d made. She’d have to clean that up . . . .

Someone cleared their throat.

Dazedly, Rowan looked over her shoulder to see Captain Ivearr standing several feet away from her. A group of guards hovered at the inn’s entrance, watching Rowan cautiously; some hovered their hand over their weapons.

“Sorry for the mess,” Rowan said, her speech slurring with exhaustion.

Ivearr’s gaze slowly panned around the room. Rowan’s eyes followed his trail, finally taking in the full damage of her and Laelette’s fight.

Dents littered the various furniture that she and Laelette had both been thrown into. Blood smeared the spots Rowan suspected were hers. The corner across from the entrance was in disarray – a large and small table had been overturned; chairs were scattered, partially shattered, and even burned; and plates and dishes had been flung every which way. Not even the floor had escaped damage. A clear path had been melted into the cobbledstone floor, the pools appearing to ripple in the flickering flamelight. Rowan could track her progress from where she’d been electrocuted to Laelette’s corpse.

Oh . . . “I’ll pay for that,” she murmured, so softly she doubted Ivearr had even heard her. She sopped up the thick trail of blood from her nose, mouth, and neck with the back of her sleeve.

“I think . . .” Ivearr said slowly, staring at the corpse and chunks of flesh that only now dissolved into dust. “You need to speak to the Jarl.”

With Ivearr’s help, Rowan managed to haul herself off the floor, apologize to Jonna for the damage to the inn, and limp to the Jarl’s home. Her ankle was bruised; she didn’t remember when or how it happened, but she wouldn’t risk using magicka to heal it, not until she could give herself a thorough examination to be sure her . . . episode hadn’t caused any damage.

The entire Ravencrone family was in the main hall when Rowan and Captain Ivearr entered. The young son dozed on his elder sister’s shoulder as she stroked his hair. Idgrod sat regally on her throne, her husband at her side. Though while she appeared at ease, his expression was pinched in worry and frustration.

As Rowan and Ivearr approached the throne, Idgrod inclined her head towards them. “I see your hunt has started early, Corvid. I am told that Laelette returned to us as a vampire and attacked you inside the inn.”

Rowan nodded. “She did. My magic sort of . . . exploded. I’ll pay for the damage.”

“My true concern is if Alva has been alerted to Laelette’s death. Do you know where she is?”

“Last I saw her she was sleeping in her coffin in her basement.”

Idgrod nodded. “Captain, take a group of guards and check for Alva at her house. It appears we can’t wait until dawn to deal with her.”

“Yes, my Jarl,” Ivearr said, turning on his heel and exiting, a hand on his sword.
Idgrod motioned to a chair off to the side of the room. “Sit, Corvid. I have already sent for Falion. While his main area of study is Conjuration, he is a more than decent healer, and I know you are in no condition to heal yourself.”

Rowan walked over and plopped down in the chair on autopilot. Jarl Igrod and her husband began speaking, the husband in rushed, furious tones and Igrod in her steady, unfaltering speech. Rowan focused what little energy she had on centering herself.

Her magicka still flowed through her body, alert despite its lazy pace. It tracked the movements of every person in the building and outside of it; Rowan filtered those messages to the back of her mind as she assessed her current state. Battered, bruised, exhausted, and minorly injured but much better than expected. She could actually cast spells and not harm herself right now which was . . . basically a miracle in her mind.

She turned her attention to the stranger approaching her. Falion. Unless there was another mage in Conjuration robes living in Morthal.

Falion drew up another chair in front of Rowan, dragging it across the floor and not caring about its scrapes or squeals. He sat down heavily with a satchel in his lap.

“So,” he said, rummaging around in the satchel, “you’re the mage I’ve been hearing so much about. You’ve been causing quite a stir, you know.”

Blinking dully, Rowan said, “If what I’ve heard about you is true, so have you since you moved here.”

Falion paused, glared at her, and muttered, “Fair enough.” He pulled several items out of his satchel. “You’re all right with me looking you over? Healers make the worst patients.”

Rowan waved a hand at him. “Sure. Go ahead.”

She calmed her magicka as it reacted to Falion examining her with a healing spell. Falion felt the sharp spike in her magic attack and gave her a sharp, calculating stare but continued his assessment silently.

He sat back in his seat. “Besides minor injuries and exhaustion, you’re in perfect health.” He stood and gathered his things. “Take a stamina potion or get some rest and you’ll be fine. I’m going home.”

Rowan raised her eyebrows but didn’t speak. She’d never spent much time in Morthal during her playthroughs and forgot Falion even existed most of the time. So, he wasn’t exactly making a good first impression. Though, she wasn’t making a good impression either. Ya know, because of all the blood and violent magical outbursts.

Falion was almost knocked over when a guard burst through the door.

“Alva’s gone! Her coffin is empty!” he shouted. “Captain Ivearr is organizing the guard now!”

“So, you’re using me as bait. ‘I’ll take a stamina potion, heal myself, and should be good to go. My magicka isn’t a danger right now.’”
Idgrod nodded. “Good.” She looked back to the guard. “Tell I'vearr Corvid shall be accompanying your group.”

“Yes, my Jarl.”

With a heavy sigh, Rowan dug out a stamina potion, downed it, cast a healing spell, and was on her feet once again.

The swamp was as terrible as the first time Rowan stumbled around in it. This time though, there was a heightened sense of dread and paranoia in the air. There was no doubt among their group that Alva had the advantage in the swamp. Her supernatural senses and abilities made tracking their movements easy and avoiding them even easier. She could run them around in circles all night if she wanted.

Fortunately – or unfortunately, for Rowan at least – that wasn’t what she wanted. Not at all.

The attack came swiftly. Reanimated spiders rushed their group from nearly all sides, bursting from the darkness like the nightmares they were and spitting thick globs of poison few of their group managed to dodge.

Rowan shot a fireball on instinct, setting one spider on fire and sending it squealing and crashing into another. She summoned a frost atronach; fire might have been better against the spiders, but the frost atronachs were far more durable and could stand up to the continuous stabs of the spiders’ fangs.

With most of the guards darting everywhere to get at the spiders, Rowan designated herself as the group healer, casting spells almost before they were fully formed and healing any guards she could catch sight of – whether they looked injured or not.

Which meant she ended up on her own off to the side of the fight.

The blow to the back of Rowan’s head caught her off guard. She collapsed like a sack of rocks with barely grunt of pain.

Clawed hands grabbed her under her armpits and drug her quickly through the swamp. Rowan groaned and squirmed as best as she could in the steel grip – Alva’s grip, no doubt – but her second head wound in as many hours had left her sluggish and disoriented.

Alva came to a stop a minute or so later and dumped Rowan on a muddy bank. She shoved Rowan onto her back and kneeled over her, sneering down at her and digging her claws into her clothing to scrape her armor.

“All those plans, all that work – all for nothing, thanks to you, you insignificant blood sack,” Alva snarled. “Now, we’ll have to slaughter this town and start again elsewhere. A pity since Morthal, with its bleak skies and swamps was the perfect beginning for our domination of Skyrim.” She released Rowan and stood. “At least you’ll die knowing all these people’s deaths are your fault.”

She pulled Rowan through the mud once again. Rowan couldn’t make sense of what she was doing until water seeped into her hood. Before she could begin thrashing, Alva shoved her face into the murky swamp water.

Rowan tried to struggle. Tried to cast a fucking spell, even though Alva’s blow had scrambled her brain. Sparks lit up her hand as she reached back for some part of Alva within reach. But Alva moved an arm out of reach and jabbed her claws into an unprotected section at the back of Rowan’s neck. The sparks in Rowan’s hand sputtered and then vanished. Rowan’s connection to her magicka
slowed to a trickle, as if a dam had been placed in front of the torrent of magicka at her core.

Rowan wanted to scream but with her face underwater and her lungs already burning, that just would’ve killed her faster. She thrashed and bucked, but Alva’s strength kept her pinned. Her lungs were on fire, ready to burst and then she was gasping, choking, drowning, dying—

Alva’s weight vanished. Rowan gathered her shuddering arms underneath herself and shoved her face above the water. She choked and coughed and when that wasn’t enough, she vomited up foul water and her stomach contents. She vomited until her stomach ached, her throat burned, and her body could do nothing but shiver and quake.

Gasping and sobbing, she uneasily dragged herself out of the swamp channel. Through her blurry, disconnected vision, she could make out a large, pale shape fighting a smaller shape.

Her atronach. It must have somehow sensed her distress and followed. With her magicka dampened, Rowan couldn’t feel or command it. She was lucky it hadn’t simply dissolved when Alva had jabbed her.

Exhausted but determined, Rowan stood on shaking legs, pulled her war axe from her belt, and staggered to the fight.

This time, it was Alva who received the blow to the head. Or rather, an axe to her skull.

Alva was so preoccupied with the atronach, she didn’t notice Rowan’s approach. She didn’t think to duck as Rowan used all her remaining strength to swing her axe with both hands and bury it in the back of Alva’s skull.

Rowan’s arms dropped to her sides immediately, too weak to keep her grip on her axe, and Rowan watched Alva stagger forward a step before the atronach stabbed her through the chest with its spiked arm.

Rowan fell to her knees. She stared blankly as Alva’s corpse dissolved into ash in front of her. Her atronach lowered its arm and began to patrol the clearing. Rowan collapsed on her side, dazed and breathing heavily. The last thing she saw before blacking out was her atronach vanishing.

Rowan woke up in her bed at the inn, exhausted and feeling like she’d been run over. Her window had been blocked with a thick curtain, thank god; her head was already pounding. She couldn’t handle sunlight right now.

She braced herself on shaky arms and rolled onto her side, grimacing as her entire body protested the movement and her head spun. She froze and swallowed down the bile in her throat. When she wasn’t about to puke, she reached for the mug on the counter. Her hand shook the entire time, but she managed to drink through the helpfully placed wooden straw. Her throat was still dry even after she finished the entire mug.

Shoving the mug back onto the table, she collapsed back onto her side. Someone had stripped her down to her underwear at some point; her skin had that sticky feeling leftover from sweat. Sections of her hair were still damp, and the backs of her knees and neck and her armpits were still clammy.

Sweat budded along her hairline and spine. She wiped her face with the edge of a sheet before huffing and kicking the covers to the foot of the bed. Her body felt heavy and unresponsive.
A shock of icy fear shot her in the belly. She frantically reached for the magicka. It met her halfway and then overtook her, spreading throughout her body for damage analysis and control.

Besides the lingering aftereffects of multiple healing and stamina potions and healing magic, nothing was immediately wrong with her. Nothing that couldn’t be healed with rest and food, at least.

Her stomach roiled, and she eyed the bucket placed on the floor next to the bed, debating if it was really worth the effort to pick it up. Puking on the inn’s floor might just be the best way to sum up her stay in Morthal, after all.

The door opened, and the triplets silently entered. Monir and Shirin were speaking lowly to each other in a language didn’t recognize – something like Urdu and . . . Indonesian? Malaysian? Maybe? Definitely similar to Southeast Asian languages but not Filipino, Vietnamese, or Hindi.

Amir was the first to notice Rowan was awake. He fumbled the tray of food in his hands, nearly dropping it until, Monir steadied him.

Shirin frowned and asked Amir something, most likely what was wrong because he jerked his head toward the bed. His sisters looked at Rowan, eyes widening.

“You’re awake . . .” Shirin murmured.

If Rowan could flop down while laying on her side, she would have. “Yes. Unfortunately. What happened?”

The teenagers scrambled – well, Amir couldn’t scramble since he was holding a tray – over to the bed. Shirin and Monir helped Rowan roll over and sit up and Amir placed the tray over her lap and refilled her water mug.

“The guards found you unconscious in the swamp, half drowned and with a concussion, and there was a pile of vampire ashes next to you. People are saying you killed Alva, but no one knows for sure,” Shirin said.

Rowan sipped at her soup, closing her eyes in bliss as it warmed her chilled insides. “I killed her. She snuck up on me and gave me that concussion. She dragged me away from the group and tried to drown me. Would’ve succeeded if my atronach hadn’t gotten her off me. While she was fighting it, I put my axe in her head and my atronach stabbed her through the stomach. That’s when I blacked out.”

Shirin nodded. “The swamp water you . . . ingested made you sick. You’ve been ill for three days. Your fever only broke during the night. We weren’t sure you would wake up . . . .”

“Yeah, sounds about right,” Rowan said. “How many potions did y’all give me?”

“Two healing and two stamina over the course of the three days, only when necessary and not a whole potion at once. Kalei helped us monitor you.”

“And the other vampires? There’s a nest around here somewhere. Did the guards find it?”

“Yes,” Monir said. “All the vampires inside had been exterminated. There were a few injuries and even a minor case of vampirism beginning but it was treated and cured.”

Rowan hummed around more broth. She wiped her mouth before saying, “So, everything’s back to normal in Morthal. Perfect. Now I can stop getting mauled by vampires.”
The triplets giggled but Amir’s smile fell.

“You’re leaving soon, aren’t you?” he asked.

Rowan nodded. “Yes. Morthal was only supposed to be a short stop before I headed for Dawnstar.”

“Can’t you stay longer? We hardly know you,” Shirin said.

A burst of warmth and melancholy in Rowan’s chest startled her. She would miss these kids, despite only knowing them for a few days. “No, I can’t. I’m sorry. I was returning to complete a difficult task for someone important and I’ve been delayed long enough as it is. She probably thinks I’m dead by now.”

The triplets’ faces fell further but they nodded. “We understand,” Monir said softly.

“Is your group staying in Skyrim? Or is this just a stop on the way to somewhere else?” Rowan asked, nibbling on a cracker.

Shirin shrugged. “We’re not sure. When we left High Rock, we weren’t sure where we were going, just that we had to leave. If Xiang says we can safely settle somewhere in Skyrim, then that’s where we’ll stay.”

“Well, you can always send letters to me, especially if you decide to stay in Skyrim. Just send them to Whiterun. That’s where I stay in-between jobs.”

They perked up in unison, dark eyes bright and glittering. “Really? You wouldn’t mind?” Shirin asked hopefully.

“No, I wouldn’t. I can’t say I’ll reply quickly since I’m out on jobs a lot, but I will reply.”

Monir smiled as she siblings wiggled excitedly. “You’re going to get so many letters.”

“I look forward to it,” Rowan said, not a hint of regret coloring her tone.

Rowan led Shih towards the road leading out of Morthal and towards Dawnstar. Shih had spent nearly an hour sulking and avoiding Rowan’s attempts to saddle her, obviously annoyed and frustrated at having been cooped up in the small stable for so long. Rowan was forced to give her nearly all the apples in her pack to get her to stay still long enough to be saddled. But now they were finally leaving Morthal. Rowan could practically hear the snow crunching beneath her boots—

“Miss Corvid! Miss Corvid, wait!”

Aaaand apparently not.

Squeezing her eyes shut and counting to ten, Rowan carefully forced her expression blank and turned around to face the guard chasing after her. Shih tugged at her reins, almost forcing Rowan to stumble, and snorted irritably.

“Yes?” Rowan asked.

“Jarl Idgrod has asked to speak with you before you leave, ma’am.”

Rowan let out a slow breath. “Of course, she did.” She said nothing else as she led Shih past the
guard and towards the longhouse. She tied Shih outside the longhouse, promising not to take all day and not to take on any more quests from the Jarl.

Jarl Idgrod stood when Rowan entered and entered a room to her right. Rowan followed, closing and locking the door behind her.

“I shall not waste time on ceremony,” Idgrod said. “The Star awaits its safe return to its master, and I have delayed you enough.”

Rowan stood speechless at Idgrod’s casual mention of Azura’s Star and watched her pull a palm-sized leather bag from the pocket of her robes.

Idgrod held it out to Rowan by its strings. “The gift I mentioned. Treat it with care and only show it to those you trust most.”

Rowan took the pouch without a word. Idgrod watched her expectantly, so she opened the pouch and tipped its contents into her palm. Her heart stuttered when she saw what laid in her palm.

A necklace with a heart shaped pendant. Like, an honest to heart had been ripped out of someone’s chest, shrunk down, turned into glittering jewels, and made into a necklace. Rowan expected it to start bleeding or beating in her palm. The heart shimmered like wet blood with an unknown enchantment.

Rowan couldn’t begin to describe the emotions swirling inside her. Terror. Longing. Desperation. Joy. Sadness. Familiarity. Disgust. Love. Pity. All of them tangled together until all she knew was that she wanted to tear open her chest and shove the pendant inside where it was safe.

Idgrod hummed. Rowan closed her hands around the pendant defensively, taking a step back.

Idgrod said nothing, even as Rowan’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment. She took a book from the table behind her. “Falion said you had not been by to inquire about a book from him. I picked this one from his collection. I believe it will serve you well.”

Reluctantly, Rowan returned the necklace to the pouch and placed it inside her pocket. She took the book, eyes raking over the cover. “Detect Life – I’ve, I’ve been searching for this. Thank you.”

“Hroggar and Joltta also send their thanks,” Idgrod said. “Hroggar has few memories from his enslavement and what little he does remember is fogged. He is especially grateful to you.”

“Oh.” Rowan had forgotten about them, too. “They don’t have to . . . .”

“Thanks are given when they are deserved,” Idgrod said. She gave Rowan a firm nod. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Corvid. And thank you again and the great service you have done my Hold and my people. May your journey be a calm one.”

Rowan took that as her cue to leave. Clutching the spellbook to her chest, she scurried to the door, unlocked it, and continued out the main door. She untied Shih onehandedly and led her out of Morthal, overly conscious of the necklace’s heavy weight in her pocket.

When she was far enough away from Morthal – away from prying eyes – she took the necklace from her pocket and with shaking hands, placed it around her neck and underneath her armor so the heart laid against her skin. She jerked at the sensation of cold metal encasing warm jewels.

She stood there in the clear daylight with Shih snorting and flicking her tail, waiting, and waiting, and waiting. For what, she didn’t know but she stood still as stone, stare wide eyed and unblinking,
breathing deep and shuddering. Was she afraid? Was she thrilled? She couldn’t tell.

Probably a bit of both.

Nothing happened. Wind rustled the trees and grass. Clouds drifted across the abnormally clear sky. Birds chirped and flitted from tree to tree. Two dragonflies fought a few feet away from Rowan.

Rowan swallowed down the lump in her throat and inhaled deeply to loosen the knot in her chest. Forcing back confused tears, she mounted Shih and urged her forward, putting Morthal behind her.

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